

National Identity and Cultural Heritage: The Construction of Conservation Culture During the First Pahlavi Period

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the conservation culture that emerged during Iran's nation-building process, focusing particularly on the First Pahlavi era (1925-1941). It first briefly explores conservation efforts during the late Qajar period, emphasizing Naser al-Din Shah's initiatives in restoring civil and religious buildings, supported by the legal framework established with the 1907 Municipal Law. The paper then analyzes the fundamental transformation in conservation approaches during the First Pahlavi period, characterized by the establishment of the Society for National Heritage and the influence of Western Orientalists such as Ernst Herzfeld, André Godard, and Arthur Upham Pope. The findings reveal that this new conservation culture, guided by Persian nationalist ideology, deliberately excluded buildings from the Qajar era while prioritizing pre-Islamic heritage. Influenced by Camillo Boito's conservation principles (1883), the Antiquities Law enacted in 1930 legitimized selective conservation, leading to extensive demolitions and reshaping Iran's historical memory. The study concludes that the politically driven conservation policies of this period significantly influenced Iran's cultural heritage conservation practices.

Keywords: Qajar; First Pahlavi; Society for National Heritage; Conservation; Western Orientalists.

INTRODUCTION

In the second half of the 19th century, increasing competition among major European powers, notably the United Kingdom, France, and Russia, intensified their quest for dominance through control over strategic resources and territories (Armaoğlu, 2010). Iran, much like the declining Ottoman Empire, faced significant geopolitical pressures during this period. The Qajar state, struggling to adapt to modern production methods and infrastructure, lost its territorial integrity and became vulnerable to colonial policies from European powers and Russia, culminating in Iran's occupation by the United Kingdom and Russia in 1907. These events sparked the Constitutional Revolution, aiming to limit the authority of the Qajar shah (Abdi, 2001).

Amid this backdrop of diminished sovereignty and foreign influence, Reza Khan seized power through the 1920 coup, subsequently establishing the Pahlavi dynasty in 1925. Reza Shah sought to modernize Iran by emulating European development models and emphasized reconnecting symbolically with the nation's pre-Islamic past (Avery, 1991). Seeking to transform Iran's major cities to resemble the appearance or skyline of European cities, Reza Shah aimed to construct new roads, railways, government buildings, schools, cinemas, and museums. The adoption of the Sasanian-era language as the name of the newly established state reflected the Pahlavi dynasty's aspiration to revive Iran's pre-Islamic civilization (Deldam, 1992)¹. Additionally, efforts to

¹ The surname "Pahlavi" was assigned to Reza Khan upon the suggestion of Mohammad Ali Foroughi, one of the founders of the new government. Pahlavi refers to the language spoken in Iran during the pre-Islamic Sassanian Empire. Additionally, Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, is used as a title attributed to the heroes of ancient Iran (figures who fought against Turan). This choice not only reflects Reza Khan's desire to link his lineage to the pre-Islamic Sassanian era but also represents an effort to legitimize the modern Iranian nation-state on the basis of Persian nationalism. However, the extent to which this concept was

replace the term "Persia" with "Iran" in the international arena and the establishment of the Society for National Heritage (SNH) were central objectives of this new order². Modern Iranian historians view these strategies as the primary goals of the Pahlavi regime (Kiani, 2014; Bahrololumi, 1976).

With the founding of the SNH in 1922, foreign and Western experts were invited to Iran to guide Reza Khan's administration. Although some information was provided about excavations conducted in Iran's historical sites by Western archaeologists, this study focuses on the conservation culture adopted during the First Pahlavi period, examining the proposed justifications and the influence of both local and foreign Orientalists.

This study begins with a theoretical and conceptual discussion, establishing the analytical framework. It then examines global discourses on cultural heritage conservation to provide a broader historical context. Subsequently, the study briefly explores the Qajar state's attitudes toward historical artifacts and architectural products to investigate the roots of the conservation approach during the First Pahlavi period. Following this, the founding process of the SNH and the reasons for inviting Western orientalist are discussed. Finally, the perspectives and activities of Western experts are critically assessed concerning their impact on the Pahlavi regime's approach to historical heritage.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL DISCUSSION

Repairing or restoring buildings in cases of damage is an ancient practice. Throughout history, humans have consistently undertaken restoration efforts to address damages caused by natural events or human actions, or to adapt structures to evolving functional needs. In some instances, extensive damage or significant structural requirements necessitated the complete or partial demolition and subsequent reconstruction of buildings. Consequently, architectural interventions have inherently involved decisions impacting the authenticity and inherent values of historical structures (Brandi, 2009; Muñoz, 2012). Recognizing the risks associated with interventions, conservation theory emphasizes the importance of adhering to specific principles and procedures to preserve the integrity and continuity of historical buildings (ICOMOS, 1993)³.

Cultural heritage symbolizes a society's collective memory and identity (Welburn, Adams, & Tomlinson, 2009). Therefore, preserving cultural heritage transcends national interests, becoming a matter of global concern and moral responsibility. Indeed, each nation's heritage is an integral component of humanity's collective heritage (UNESCO, 1954). Conservation practices serve not only to protect and accurately understand a nation's historical identity but also to safeguard broader cultural values for future generations (Cloonan, 2007).

The cultural heritage that survives through the centuries highlights the significance societies place on preserving and valuing their historical legacies. Such heritage serves as a repository of past cultures, offering insights into previous societies and their values (Wirilander, 2012). Furthermore, cultural heritage often plays a crucial role in shaping contemporary cultural and social identities, acting as a resource for constructing or reconstructing collective memory and societal values (Smith, 2006). Cultural heritage is not a neutral inheritance but rather a product of selective processes shaped by political and economic imperatives (Li, 2024). Similarly, during the First Pahlavi period, heritage production in Iran was mobilized to construct a purified national identity anchored in pre-Islamic antiquity.

Within this theoretical framework, examining the development of conservation practices during Iran's nation-building process can substantially enhance the understanding of the country's historical and cultural identity. Specifically, analyzing the motivations and ideological foundations underlying the construction of conservation culture during the First Pahlavi era provides critical insights into contemporary perceptions of Iranian architecture and civilization. The subsequent sections of this study will therefore explore how global

foreign to the Iranian identity of the time is evidenced by Reza Khan's lack of understanding of the term "Pahlavi." It is even said that Reza Khan asked Ernst Herzfeld, a renowned archaeologist working in Iran at the time, about the meaning of the term, and Herzfeld reportedly explained its origins and usage to him. After ascending the throne in 1925, Reza Khan adopted the title of Reza Shah (Deldam, 1992, pp. 15–16).

² *Anjoman-e Āsār-e Mellī* (انجمن آثار ملی)

³ The term "conservation" refers to extending the lifespan of cultural heritage while, whenever possible, clarifying its artistic and historical messages without losing them (ICOMOS, 1993). "Conservation" and "restoration" are sometimes regarded as opposing concepts and at other times considered intertwined. In Latin languages such as Italian, Spanish, or French, the term conservation is generally translated as *restauro* (Italian), *restauracion* (Spanish), and *restauration* (French). Therefore, translations between these languages and English—or vice versa—are not always precise. For example, in the documents of the European Confederation of Conservator-Restorers' Organizations, the European Network for Conservation-Restoration Education, or the Institute of Conservation (ICON) in the UK and Ireland, the compound term "conservation-restoration" is commonly used in the broader sense of "conservation." Similarly, the American Institute for Conservation (AIC) uses the term "stabilization" in a more specific sense instead of "conservation" (Muñoz Viñas, 2012, p. 24).

conservation theories influenced local practices, particularly through the policies implemented by the SNH during the early Pahlavi period.

CULTURAL HERITAGE CONSERVATION APPROACHES IN THE WORLD BEFORE AND DURING THE FIRST PAHLAVI PERIOD

Examining the period from antiquity to the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution reveals that conservation awareness occasionally emerged as early as the advent of ancient civilizations. However, there are distinct differences between the understanding of conservation in the ancient era and the approaches that developed after the Enlightenment. For instance, during the Roman Empire, there was a focus on maintaining the functionality of buildings (Erder, 1971; Türkoğlu, 2002)⁴. In contrast, starting with the Renaissance, the increasing interest in ancient Greek and Roman art and architecture significantly grew with the emergence of archaeology during the Enlightenment (Erder, 1971).

From the 18th century onward, the foundations of the modern concepts of restoration and conservation were laid as a result of the dialectical process between the rationalism of the Enlightenment and the pre-Romantic and Romantic thoughts that followed (Jokilehto, 1986). Modern restoration theories consistently define principles and rules that operate independently of the restorer's approach. In other words, a restorer's competency is measured by their ability to adhere to these principles⁵. Thus, the fundamental distinction between traditional and modern approaches to restoration lies in the restorer's role. A modern restorer or conservationist's task is not merely to repair a building in the traditional sense but to preserve it based on agreed-upon principles.

Significant advances in conservation occurred in mid-19th-century France under the leadership of Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc (1814 – 1879), whose work gained recognition in academic circles. According to Viollet-le-Duc's "stylistic unity" approach, the architectural and physical value of a ruined or damaged building could be restored by reinstating the stylistic characteristics of the era in which it was constructed (Guzmán Torres, 2009; Russell, 2016)⁶. Opposing Viollet-le-Duc's perspective, figures like William Morris and John Ruskin introduced the "romantic approach," which emphasized preserving a building in its latest state (Ahunbay, 1996).

Italian theorist Camillo Boito reconciled Viollet-le-Duc's stylistic unity theory with the romantic approach, laying the foundations of modern conservation principles in the late 19th century (Yokote, 2002). In 1883, Boito outlined principles emphasizing the avoidance of demolitions and the conservation of historical integrity in interventions on architectural monuments. Highlighting the role of monuments as records of human history, Boito warned against misleading outcomes from improper interventions. Interventions should prioritize minimal actions such as consolidation and repairs, avoiding unnecessary additions or renovations. When structural or safety concerns necessitate additions, these should not harm the original form or integrity of the building. Furthermore, additions from different historical periods should be regarded as integral parts of the building and preserved unless they pose detrimental effects. Boito also stressed the importance of meticulous documentation throughout the process (Boito & Birignani, 2009).

It is possible to observe that formal international efforts regarding the conservation of cultural and historical monuments began between the two world wars. The "First International Congress of Architects and Technicians of Historic Monuments" held in Athens in 1931, with significant contributions from Gustavo Giovannoni, expanded and formalized Boito's principles (Ahunbay, 1996). The resolutions adopted during this congress reflect the advanced conservation approaches of the time. The congress emphasized the importance of reusing historical buildings to ensure their sustainability, provided such reuse respected their aesthetic and historical values. Additionally, stronger public measures were advocated to protect privately owned monuments, and the conservation of monuments alongside their surroundings, including architectural ensembles and picturesque settings, was stressed. The use of modern technology in restoration was encouraged, and measures were

⁴ During this period, substantial funds were allocated in countries such as France, Germany, England, and Austria for the discipline of archaeology, which emerged under the leadership of Johann Joachim Winckelmann, the founder of Classical Archaeology (Türkoğlu, 2002, p. 21).

⁵ However, there is a single individual who could be considered an exception in this regard: Augustus Charles Pugin, often briefly mentioned despite being the most significant and pivotal figure in the development of the Gothic Revival style in England. According to Pugin, it is essential for those restoring Catholic churches to be Catholic themselves in order to properly comprehend the essence of this religion (Jokilehto, 1986, pp. 292–293). In this sense, Pugin's view suggests that adherence to the Catholic faith could be considered a personal attribute of the restorer. Although Pugin's perspectives lack the robustness required for a theoretical framework, they are noteworthy for their potential alignment with the ideas of figures like Brandi.

⁶ This utopian understanding, although emerging after the Enlightenment, is methodologically rooted in the traditional paradigm. While the modern approach evolves and develops through practice, the traditional perspective aims at achieving an ideal or utopia. For further information, see (Russell, 2016).

recommended to reintegrate original fragments into their archaeological contexts. These principles offered a comprehensive approach, addressing the conservation of historical and cultural heritage holistically.

As a result of the conferences and meetings in Italy and Athens in 1931, the importance of conserving not only monuments but also "building groups" along with their natural and constructed surroundings was highlighted (Ahunbay, 1996, p. 18). Further steps toward the conservation of cultural heritage globally emerged after the devastations of World War II, particularly with the establishment of UNESCO and the Council of Europe. The Venice Charter, formulated at the 1964 congress in Venice, remains a cornerstone of contemporary conservation principles (Ahmad, 2006).

Since this study does not primarily focus on the historical evolution of conservation approaches, it suffices to identify the prevailing approaches during the First Pahlavi period (1926 – 1941) and examine their scope. By the time of the First Pahlavi period, nearly half a century had passed since Boito's principles were introduced, and the charters adopted in Italy and Athens in 1931 had further advanced conservation culture on an international level. These approaches advocated not only preserving individual monuments but also maintaining historical urban environments.

Understanding these international conservation developments provides a clear context for examining how similar or divergent practices emerged in Iran during the First Pahlavi period, shaped significantly by nationalist ideologies and Western influences. The subsequent sections will examine how these globally accepted conservation norms were adapted or selectively applied within the ideological framework of Persian nationalism under the SNH.

CONSERVATION CULTURE IN IRAN BEFORE THE FIRST PAHLAVI PERIOD

During the Qajar Dynasty (1794 – 1925), the repair of endowed monuments was carried out as part of the longstanding waqf tradition, which had been in practice since the Seljuk era. However, these efforts were limited to traditional repairs funded by the revenues of waqfs rather than modern conservation practices (Nazari, 2016). Beyond occasional personal initiatives by monarchs, historical monuments and buildings were not regarded as assets requiring systematic conservation. Among the Qajar kings, Naser al-Din Shah (1848-1896) stood out for his attention to historical monuments. The book *Al-Ma'asser val-Asar* records that more than one hundred monuments were restored under his supervision (Etemadossaltaneh, 1983).

Naser al-Din Shah demonstrated a respectful attitude toward monuments from dynasties preceding the Qajar period, as is evident in contemporary travel accounts⁷. His efforts extended beyond Qajar-era structures, encompassing significant pre-Qajar buildings, as clearly reflected in his personal travel accounts. For instance, during his second European tour in 1878, he expressed repeated concerns over the dilapidated conditions of historical monuments, instructing his officials to undertak

e restorations at sites such as Soltaniyeh, Oljeitu's Mausoleum, and various bridges and caravanserais:

"...While passing through Soltaniyeh... we had lunch in a garden with a dilapidated pavilion. I instructed Sipehsalar (the Prime Minister) to have it repaired [...] The tomb of [Ilkhanid ruler] Oljeitu is in ruins; I ordered Malek Ara to oversee its restoration, God willing [...] Passing through the village of Jamal Abad, I saw a few old but attractive houses built by Qolikhān Qareh Soren; however, there is an ancient caravanserai in ruins, which must be repaired by the authorities... There is a bridge over the Ghezel Ozan River with a very large central arch. The bridge is in disrepair and must be repaired by the Crown Prince [...] Passing through Qaflankuh, I saw a river flowing more vigorously than the Ghezel Ozan River. We crossed Gedik Bridge, which has twenty-four arches and is also in a dilapidated state; the Crown Prince should repair it..." (Naser al-Din Shah, 2000, pp. 8, 15-17)

Naser al-Din Shah's commitment is further illustrated by a report from his official, Malek Ara. During a visit to Soltaniyeh, the Shah entered the mausoleum of Oljeitu and reportedly stated, "It is a pity for it to crumble into ruins" before ordering the restoration of the dome. He also toured the damaged structures of Fath Ali Shah's palace and instructed that all be restored within the year, allocating four thousand tumans from the Prime Minister's budget for this purpose (Malek Ara, 1982).

Naser al-Din Shah's such efforts reflected a non-discriminatory approach to historical memory, encompassing both Qajar and pre-Qajar monuments across a wide spectrum of building typologies from sacred

⁷ It is believed that Naser al-Din Shah's awareness of the conservation of historical monuments likely developed during his first journey to the West in 1873. During this trip, Naser al-Din Shah visited Russia, Prussia, Belgium, England, France, Switzerland, Italy, Austria, and Ottoman territories. A significant portion of his travelogue is dedicated to his observations on urban planning and architectural works in the West. For detailed information, see (Naser al-Din Shah, 1983).

architecture such as mosques and mausoleums to secular and infrastructural elements like palaces, pavilions, streets, and urban squares. Unlike the ideologically selective conservation strategies of earlier Iranian dynasties and the later Pahlavi regime, his interventions suggest a pragmatic and inclusive understanding of heritage, one that prioritized continuity and functionality over identity-based exclusions (Kahraman & Gül, 2022).

Nevertheless, the lack of emphasis on modern conservation during the Qajar period was not exceptional, as the concept was still developing globally. Viollet-le-Duc's *Dictionnaire Raisonné De L'architecture Française Du XIe Au XVIe Siècle* was published in 1874, and the first international consensus on conservation was achieved in the late 19th century through Camillo Boito's efforts. British traveler George Curzon observed that, apart from royal initiatives, historical buildings were often preserved due to the personal efforts of affluent individuals rather than through systematic institutional interventions (Curzon, 1966).

Following Naser al-Din Shah's death in 1896, Qajar awareness of historical conservation declined further, exacerbated by severe economic difficulties in the early 20th century. Reflecting these challenges, the 1900 Agreement between Iran and France granted French archaeologists exclusive excavation rights, resulting in substantial losses of movable cultural artifacts to France. Approximately five thousand artifacts were reportedly transferred within three years under archaeologist J.J.M. de Morgan's supervision (Negahban, 1997; Sadigh, 1976; Shamim, 2008). Although annulled in 1927 during Reza Shah's rule due to political pressures (Mehdizadeh & Hanachee, 2016), the agreement exemplified the limited understanding and control Qajar authorities held regarding modern heritage conservation standards.

Official legislation regarding the conservation of historical monuments in Iran was first introduced in the Qajar period's final quarter with the 1907 Municipal Law (ICARC, 1907)⁸. Article two, Clause ten of the Act tasked municipalities with responsibilities such as "the conservation and repair of reading rooms, museums, mosques, madrasas, and ancient buildings; assisting the state in the construction of exhibitions related to markets and trade; promoting local crafts and commerce; and establishing a central office to regulate currency exchange and general trade" (ICARC, 1907). This legislation remained in effect until 1930, five years after the establishment of the Pahlavi state (Bayat, 1987).

Qajar-era conservation efforts, while inclusive and significant due to the initiatives of figures such as Naser al-Din Shah, lacked systematic frameworks and modern conservation principles. These shortcomings paved the way for a fundamental transformation under the Pahlavi regime, characterized by selective conservation strategies shaped by Persian nationalism and Western Orientalist influences.

CONSERVATION CULTURE IN THE FIRST PAHLAVI PERIOD

The First Pahlavi period witnessed a paradigmatic shift in Iran's heritage discourse, wherein the conservation of architectural monuments was strategically deployed as a mechanism of nation-building. Under Reza Shah's rule, the conservation of the built environment transcended technical or administrative concerns and assumed an explicitly ideological function, serving to cultivate a selective historical consciousness aligned with Persian nationalist ideals. This section analyzes the institutionalization of this ideological conservation framework through the establishment of the SNH and explores how its policies, shaped by both domestic intellectuals and Western Orientalists, prioritized pre-Islamic monuments while systematically excluding, and at times dismantling, the architectural legacy of the Qajar period.

Institutionalization of Ideological Conservation

Following the departure of Ahmad Shah, who was forced to leave the country after the 1921 coup, significant changes occurred under the rule of Reza Khan⁹.

After Reza Khan's coup, a group of Persian nationalists, who had previously engaged in political and cultural activities, established the SNH with the aim of "promoting the conservation and restoration of historical monuments, as well as fostering respect for cultural and artistic heritage" (Bahrololoumi, 1976, p. 3).

According to the third article of the SNH's charter, membership was limited to a core group of fifteen individuals (Bahrololoumi, 1976, p. 3). Upon the request of the founding members, Reza Shah was appointed as the president of the SNH in 1925 (Negahban, 1999). During the SNH's early years, important figures such as Muhammad Ali Foroughi and Keykhosrow Shahrokh played significant roles as founding members. Later, prominent individuals like Saeed Nafisi, Farajollah Aghaolghu, and Isa Sadigh joined the SNH. Many members of

⁸ *Qānun-e Baladiyeh* in Persian (قانون بلديه).

⁹ "Khan" was the title by which Reza Shah was commonly known before ascending the throne and founding the Pahlavi dynasty.

the SNH believed that Iran's backwardness was primarily due to the existence of the Qajar dynasty. One member, Ali Hanibal, stated in an interview:

"The Society for National Heritage (SNH) has a crucial role to play, and fortunately, it was founded at a critical time, coinciding with the beginning of a new era in Iran's history. The Qajar dynasty, one of the darkest periods in Iran's history, has come to an end, and a hopeful new period has begun. In this context, the SNH must undertake two main tasks: First, to eliminate the negative effects of the previous period (the Qajar period); second, to lay the foundations for reviving creativity and paving the way for this process". (Anjoman-e Asar-e Melli, 1972)

The marginalization of the Qajar dynasty has been interpreted not only as a means of legitimizing the newly established Pahlavi regime, but also as a discursive strategy aligned with the homogenizing tendencies of nation-state formation. This rhetorical framework has been associated with pressures on the intangible cultural heritage of non-Persian ethno-cultural groups, which represented a significant segment of Iran's population. Non-Persian elements were perceived as a threat to the nation-state project, and in response, non-Persian geographical place names began to be Persianized (Kiani, 2014; Kahraman, 2022; Afshar, 1930)¹⁰. This exclusionary vision of nationalism, however, did not originate in the Pahlavi era; its ideological roots can be traced back to the 19th century, when certain intellectuals began to articulate nationalist and ethnocentric ideas in response to Iran's perceived backwardness (Bagir, 2024).

In line with this effort to redefine national identity and build a "modern and strong Iran", emphasis was placed on reviving symbols associated with Zoroastrianism — the religion of the Achaemenid and Sassanian empires, often regarded by nationalists as representing the apex of Iranian imperial power (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Keikhosrow Shahrokh, a Member of the SNH, Standing beside a Chest Bearing the Symbol of the Zoroastrian God (Faravahar)

Therefore, the preservation of buildings and artifacts from Iran's pre-Islamic period emerged as a central focus of the SNH's activities. According to Article Eight of the SNH's charter, the primary goals were "to construct a museum and library in Tehran, identify and classify national heritage artifacts, create an inventory of important artifacts for the museum and library, and establish monuments and tombs to commemorate historical figures." Article Nine aimed at presenting these artifacts to the public, using them as educational materials in schools, and incorporating them into the masses through lectures. According to Article Seventeen, the invitation of Western architects and archaeologists was envisioned to achieve these objectives (Bahrololoumi, 1976, p. 18).

¹⁰ Iraj Afshar, in *Ayandeh Journal*, the ideological and intellectual core of the Iranian nation-state, explains the factors he defines as "colored threats" that pose a danger to Iran's national sovereignty as follows:

1. White Threat: A threat from the north of Iran, originating from the Russian state; this threat stems from the effects of the Red Revolution.
2. Blue Threat: A threat from the south of Iran, coming from the United Kingdom (British India).
3. Yellow Threat: A threat from Türkiye and Iran's northern "Turkic neighbors"; this threat endangers Iran's national unity.
4. Green Threat: A threat from Iran's Semitic, i.e., Arab neighbors; this also threatens national unity.
5. Black Threat: A threat arising from ignorance and lack of knowledge; this danger, which has weakened the country for centuries, can only be overcome through thought and wisdom.

According to Afshar, the white and blue threats endanger Iran's political independence, while the green and yellow threats endanger its national and racial unity (Afshar, 1930, pp. 762).

The elements deemed national heritage by the SNH were limited to certain periods of the country's history and cultural buildings. Although some post-Islamic artifacts were included in the inventory in later years, the SNH's initial focus was on architectural remnants from the pre-Islamic period. In contrast to the Western perception of Ancient Greece—often associated with artistic and philosophical achievements—Iran's pre-Islamic history was primarily represented through imperial formations and surviving architectural monuments. This reinforced the idea among Persian nationalists that the key tool for glorifying ancient Iranian history was the use of architectural remains from the ancient period (Kahraman, 2022).

As noted above, to fulfill Article Seventeen of the SNH's charter, Western Orientalists were invited to the country. In this context, the German archaeologist Ernst Herzfeld, who was the head of the German Oriental Society, was invited by the SNH to Iran to manage the Museum of Ancient Artifacts and the National Library (Grigor, 2009). Herzfeld completed his doctoral dissertation in 1907, focusing on the historical site of Pasargadae as an example of Near Eastern civilizations (Gunter & Hauser, 2005). The SNH invited Herzfeld to Iran in 1925 with the stated aim of "compiling an inventory of Iran's historical buildings and artifacts" and conducting research on these artifacts to produce publications (Bahrololoumi, 1976, pp. 4-5; Herzfeld, 1976). The founding members of the SNH initially asked Herzfeld to prepare a list of historical sites and buildings; this list, which consisted of eighty historical artifacts, was published by him in the first issue of the SNH's journal in 1925 (Bahrololoumi, 1976, p. 6).

In his first lecture at the SNH, Herzfeld described Iranian civilization as "the fundamental element of the Aryan race," and considered this civilization to be superior even to Ancient Greece, Rome, and Renaissance Italy (Kahraman, 2022). In October 1926, after approximately a year and a half of bureaucratic and diplomatic negotiations, Herzfeld was appointed for five years as the head of the National Library and the directorate of Ancient Artifacts and Archaeology and was also assigned to teach Middle Persian (Kahraman, 2022). In 1927, with the approval of the National Consultative Assembly, he was employed by the Iranian government as the first Western expert on a three-year contract with an annual salary of seven-thousand-two-hundred tumans (Masoudi, 1927)¹¹. In the same year, a report in the *Ettela'at* newspaper stated that Herzfeld's primary task was to teach "ancient history and geography" (Shafa, 1977). Herzfeld's invitation to Iran attracted the attention of French archaeologists, which led to contacts through the French Embassy in Tehran with members of the SNH and government ministers, including Abdolhossein Teymourtash. The French informed the Iranian authorities that "if the management of the Ancient Artifacts and National Library was given to a French individual for twenty years (four terms), France would waive the 1900 Agreement..." (Grigor, 2009). As a result, the Iranian government appointed French architect and archaeologist André Godard to replace Herzfeld, assigning Herzfeld to oversee and carry out excavations at Persepolis and Pasargadae (Afsar & Mousavi, 1976).

In his second lecture at the SNH in 1927, Herzfeld emphasized the significance of historical monuments in Isfahan and Persepolis and declared to the world that the term Arianam Khashtam found in one of the inscriptions from the excavations was a symbol of the Aryan Empire. In 1929, he published his reports on the Pasargadae excavations in a work titled *Bericht über die Ausgrabungen von Pasargadae 1928* and participated in the first excavations at Persepolis starting in 1931 (Herzfeld, 1976). Herzfeld's Aryanist interpretation of Iranian history is reported to have influenced the international decision approved by Minister of Culture Saeed Nafisi and ordered by Reza Shah to change the country's name from Persia to Iran in 1934. (Sadigh, 1973, p. 236). In 1931, his report on the Persepolis excavations left a positive impression on the Pahlavi government, and the continuation of the excavations was ensured with the participation of German, American, and Iranian groups (Moghtader, 1956). As a result of these excavations, two ancient plaques named "Simin and Zerrin" were described by Reza Shah as "the deed of Iran" (Moghtader, 1956; Dehkordi, 2006)¹².

Arthur Upham Pope, an American scholar, stands out as another orientalist who made significant contributions to the development of the conservationist approach during the first Pahlavi period. After graduating from Harvard University's philosophy department, Pope entered the University of California, Berkeley, as an associate professor of philosophy from 1911 to 1917, where he taught courses in Greek philosophy. Shortly thereafter, he met Foy Apoxen Hearst, a collector of Eastern carpets. Following this meeting, Pope began presenting works to aesthetic students and started publishing scientific articles and conducting research on

¹¹ The *tuman* is used alongside the official currency of Iran, the rial. One *tuman* is equivalent to ten rials.

¹² However, the events that developed in Herzfeld's favor would be interrupted after three years. Until 1934, Herzfeld, who conducted archaeological work in Iran, was found by the Ministry of Education to have gifted some of the stone reliefs from Persepolis to the Swedish prince who visited Iran that year, without obtaining permission from the Pahlavi administration. Furthermore, it is also known that Herzfeld illegally smuggled many movable and immovable artifacts abroad (Dehkordi, 2006, pp. 81-92). Upon the report of these activities, Herzfeld was expelled from Iran in 1935 (Afsar & Mousavi, 1976, p. 109).

Iranian art and archaeology (O'Kane, 2016; Sadigh, 1974). Pope's primary mission in being invited to Iran was to document historical buildings and sites and create archival records from them. In his first lecture at the SNH in 1925, titled *The Past and Future of Iranian Art*, Pope emphasized, in a highly emphatic and idealized tone, the global influence of Iranian art:

"Chinese and Japanese arts were influenced by Iranian art in ancient times. Iran owes much to China in the areas of enamelwork, painting, pottery, and textiles. The architecture and painting of Northern India were shaped by the aesthetic understanding of Iranian artists. During the Seljuk period, Anatolia reached great heights in art, and most of the masters behind this rise were Iranians. Many of the arts attributed to the Turks are actually of Iranian origin... Iranian art reached European shores, leading to the emergence of new styles. Today, there is no other country in the world with as much artistic heritage as Iran. For this reason, Iran deserves admiration and praise. Achieving such a high level of art is never a minor achievement" (Bahrololoumi, 1976, p. 11). According to Pope, "All art movements worldwide, from Japan and China to Rome, have been nourished by Iranian art" (Pope & Ackerman, 1938; Pope, 1971). Pope did not stop at these statements and also claimed that Syria, Turkey, Egypt, and Afghanistan were filled with the products of "Iranian Civilization" (Pope, 1971). He argued that Iranian architecture had undergone an uninterrupted development process for six thousand years from its inception. Pope emphasized the presence of ancient models (plans, designs, and elements) in Iranian architecture, suggesting that they were never forgotten and were consistently repeated throughout the historical process of Iranian architecture, even after centuries. Similarly, some symbols and decorative elements in Iranian architecture showed continuity and repetition throughout its historical development. According to Pope, Iranian architecture gained a distinct and recognizable form over the centuries; this form included simple, large structural types enriched with decorations and colors (Pope, 2011).

However, Pope's claims did not clarify what the signs, features, and key defining elements of "Iranian Civilization" were. On the one hand, Pope offered an idealized portrayal of ancient Iranian architecture and civilization, while on the other hand, he made negative statements regarding Qajar architecture. According to him, Iranian art was "tasteless" during the reign of the Qajar shahs in the 19th century and had been corrupted due to increasing contact with Western culture (Pope, 1971). His statements can be interpreted as discursively supporting the marginalization of Qajar architecture during the Pahlavi period.

Pope acknowledged that his claims played an important role in establishing art schools and museums in Iran (Pope, 1971). His fame largely stems from the international congresses and exhibitions on Iranian art and archaeology that he organized. Following the exhibitions on Iranian art, many books and source works were published (Heidari, 2011; Rizvi, 2007)¹³. Pope's twelve-volume work *The Study of Iranian Art from Prehistoric Times to the Present*, along with the international exhibitions and conferences he organized to promote Iranian art, and his founding of the Iran-America Association in 1928, can be considered significant contributions to the promotion of Iranian art and the articulation of national identity discourses. Indeed, even today, reproductions of these discourses can be found in global architecture and art history literature related to Iran¹⁴.

Another Orientalist who left a significant impact on the formation of the conservation culture during the first Pahlavi period was André Godard. André Godard, a French architect and archaeologist who graduated from the Beaux-Arts, came to Iran in 1928 under a new assignment from the French state while working in Afghanistan, with an annual salary of twelve thousand tumans. Godard is well known for his four-volume work *Athar-e Iran*, in which he discusses Iranian art and architecture from the Achaemenid period to the 19th century (Godard, 1992a, 1992b)¹⁵. This work is considered a primary source in the history of Iranian architecture writing today. After arriving in Iran in 1928, Godard assumed the directorship of the Antiquities and Archaeology Administration,

¹³ Through Pope's initiative, research on the influence of Iranian art on other cultures, with various countries around the world holding collections of Iranian artworks, brought together many orientalists. Concurrently with these congresses, a major exhibition of Iranian Art was held at Burlington House in London under the title "General Exhibition of Iranian Fine Arts" and in February of the same year, Pope's photographic collection was exhibited at the Royal Institute of British Architects (Rizvi, 2007, p. 50). As a result of the second congress, significant developments occurred, such as the founding of the International Association for Iranian Art and Archaeology in the UK (Heidari, 2011, p. 108). Additionally, Pope created a model of one-third the size of the large door of the Shah Mosque in Isfahan, transported it by road to London, and exhibited it at the Royal Academy (Rizvi, 2007, p. 50).

¹⁴ However, despite Pope's success in giving Iranian art and architecture national and international appeal, some scholars argue that he was not sufficiently sensitive to the conservation of the country's cultural heritage. Pope, together with the prime minister of the time, Mohammad Ali Foroughi, and his son Mohsen Foroughi, is reported to have exploited the powers granted by his membership in the SNH to illegally transfer historical artifacts and manuscripts of Iran, which are said to number in the hundreds of thousands, to various museums around the world between 1925 and 1941 (Kiani, 2014, pp. 60-61).

¹⁵ For detailed information on Godard's work *Athar-e Iran*, which he prepared between 1938 and 1949, see (Godard, 1992a, 1992b).

established the Archaeology Journal¹⁶, and became the head of the Faculty of Fine Arts in Tehran, taking on significant responsibilities (Kiani, 2014).

In 1931, fifty-six artifacts were registered by André Godard, and in 1932, the list published by the SNH included a total of two hundred and forty-seven historical artifacts, eighty-two of which belonged to the pre-Islamic period (Avery, 1965). This list suggests a strong emphasis on pre-Islamic artifacts in the early conservation priorities of the SNH.

As the general director of the Antiquities and Archaeology Administration and the Museums Organization, Godard began supervising the restoration of some historical buildings of the period. Notable buildings involved in Godard's restoration projects include Shah Mosque, Isfahan Grand Mosque, Ali Qapu Palace, Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque, Sheikh Safi al-Din Complex, Khaju Bridge, Allahverdi Khan Bridge, Ashraf Palace, and Chehel Sotoun, among other important buildings (Sadigh, 1974; Grigor, 2005)¹⁷.

During this period, with the proposal of Isa Sadigh, industrial buildings from the Qajar period were also included under the Antiquities Law (Sadigh, 1974)¹⁸. However, similar to Herzfeld, Godard has been criticized for his limited response to the destruction of historical monuments during this period. He did not publicly oppose or intervene in the destruction of historical buildings carried out during public works in Tehran, Tabriz, and other major cities (Negahban, 1997).

Selective Conservation and the Elimination of the Qajar Legacy

After the establishment of the SNH, the first step in the conservation of historical buildings and sites was the regulation of the Antiquities Law. Reflecting the influence of Persian nationalists in the SNH and the involvement of French orientalist André Godard, the law appeared to overlook Qajar period buildings, which constituted a significant portion of Iran's 19th-century architectural landscape. The Antiquities Law, consisting of twenty articles, was adopted by the *National Consultative Assembly* on November 3, 1930. The contents of Articles one to six dealt with provisions related to historical buildings and architectural remains. In these six articles, the state's powers and responsibilities for the conservation of immovable cultural heritage were defined, including procedures for identifying, preserving, and repairing historical buildings, and it was prohibited to alter private property without the state's control and permission. Moreover, penalties were stipulated for those who damaged these heritage items (ICARC, 1930)¹⁹.

It can be said that the contents of the law were influenced by the principles of Camillo Boito from 1883 and Gustav Giovannoni's 1913 publication *Vecchie città ed edilizia nuova* (Giovannoni & Ventura, 1995; Rhoden, 2017; Zucconi, 2014).²⁰ However, since the law was enacted one year before the 1931 Athens Conference, it did not include the principle that the environment surrounding the protected buildings should also be taken into account. As mentioned above, the first six articles of the Antiquities Law defined the scope of immovable tangible cultural heritage. According to the first article, "All artistic works, buildings, and spaces built on Iranian territory until the end of the Zandiyeh Dynasty, whether movable or immovable," were considered as national heritage of Iran and were "under the preservation and supervision of the state." According to the second article, "The state must submit works deserving of inclusion in the national heritage list to the Ministry of Education, Endowments, and Industry (Maaref, Owqaf va Sanaye-e Mostazrafeh) for approval and registration."²¹ These articles suggest that

¹⁶ Nashriye-i Bāstānshenāsi in Persian.

¹⁷ Between 1934 and 1944, the activities of the SNH were halted for a decade due to the Second World War and political uncertainties. During this period, many of the SNH's members either had to leave Iran or passed away. Reza Khan was also exiled to South Africa. Following these events, in 1944, André Godard submitted his resignation and expressed his desire to leave Iran. However, the French government suggested other archaeologists to replace Godard and persuaded him to reconsider his decision. As a result, with the reactivation of the SNH in 1944, Godard returned to his position (Grigor, 2005, p. 345).

¹⁸ In Persian, it is referred to as *Qanun-e Atiqat* (قانون عتیقات).

¹⁹ The content from Article Seven to Article Twenty pertains to movable cultural heritage, specifically archaeological finds and ancient artifacts. It outlines the rules for the identification, registration, sale, and transfer of movable cultural heritage. The protection of movable objects in private ownership, their sales, and the state's priority right in these transactions are addressed. Additionally, the regulations regarding illegal excavations and trafficking are established, specifying penalties for such offenses. The distinction between scientific and commercial excavations is made, and there are provisions for the limitation of commercial excavations.

²⁰ For detailed information on Giovannoni's conservation principles, see (Giovannoni, 1995; Rhoden, 2017; Zucconi, 2014).

²¹ The scope and content of the Antiquities Law regarding immovable heritage are outlined in the first six articles. Articles 3-6 are translated into English as follows:

Article 3: The inclusion of an artifact in the national heritage list is subject to the written permission of the Ministry of Education. However, for artifacts in private ownership, the property owner must first be notified, and the inclusion will be finalized after evaluating the objections raised by the owner. According to this law, the obligations related to national heritage will be the responsibility of the property owner once the registration is finalized.

Article 4: Any person who owns or notices the existence of an immovable property that could be classified as national heritage

the first Pahlavi administration adopted a selective framework in the identification, registration, and preservation of immovable cultural assets.

Although the criteria for "works deserving inclusion in the national heritage list" are not clear in the article, based on Reza Shah and his circle's aversion to the Qajar state, it was anticipated that only buildings from the period before the Qajar dynasty would be included in this list (Bahrololoumi, 1976, p. 16). However, rather than simply omitting Qajar period artifacts from official registration, the Pahlavi state has been reported to have authorized or permitted their destruction—often without clear justification or protective measures. While some demolitions were attributed to infrastructural developments, a significant portion of these actions has been interpreted as ideologically motivated. (Niar, 2019). It can be said that most of these demolitions occurred illegally before the Antiquities Law came into force. While some sources point to 1932 as the starting point for the demolitions (Banimasoud, 2015), recent research shows that these demolitions began in 1928 (Kahraman, 2022). The *Bus Transportation Bill*²², which passed through the National Consultative Assembly in 1926, confirms that these demolitions were indeed finalized in 1928. This law foresaw the demolition of many buildings obstructing the construction of bus routes. For example, a news item in the *Ettela'at* newspaper, dated December 12, 1928, reads: "Buildings around Sepah Street's Expansion Project Were Demolished" (Kahraman, 2022).²³

Eyewitness accounts have provided insight into the scale of urban destruction carried out in Tehran in the name of urban transformation until 1937. Taj-olmoluk Ayramlou, the third wife of Reza Shah, described these demolitions:

"The area of Ark Square began from the entrance of Ark Bazaar and extended through Baharestan Square up to the Kamran Mirza Complex. After ascending to the throne, Reza (Shah) ordered the demolition of all these buildings and palaces, instructing instead the construction of the Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Finance buildings, along with several other new structures. North of Baharestan Square, there were palace complexes commissioned by Fath-Ali Shah. There was also an extensive garden (park) stretching from the entrance of Baharestan Square to the Shemiran Gate and Tehran's northern moat. Reza (Shah) ordered all of these to be demolished as well" (Khosrowdad, 2001).

Ayramlou further explained the motivations behind these actions: "I constantly argued and fought with Reza to prevent the demolition of these beautiful buildings. But Reza would say: Everything that reminds us of the Qajar dynasty must be destroyed to erase their memory" (Khosrowdad, 2001, p. 164).

Yahya Doulatabadi, a nationalist member of the Pahlavi parliament, also described these demolitions as ruthless, noting in his memoirs that anything associated with the Qajars was obliterated overnight (Doulatabadi, 1984). Karim Buzarjomehri, then Mayor of Tehran, ordered red flags to be placed in the evenings on houses and shops slated for demolition to inform residents. Houses were demolished without even allowing residents sufficient time to collect their belongings (Maki, 1982).

Despite the negative image constructed by the Pahlavi regime regarding the Qajar period, even Western Orientalists expressed sorrow at these demolitions (Hedayat, 1965). Some victims petitioned Firouzabadi, a member of parliament, to intervene. On February 5, 1929, Firouzabadi raised the issue in parliament, demanding compensation for those affected: "...the damages suffered by the victims must be compensated. From the moment a red flag is placed on a house, mourning begins for its residents!" (Masoudi, 1929).

Among the architects educated abroad who returned to Iran, the Armenian architect Vartan Hovanessian graduated from École Spéciale d'Architecture in Paris in 1935 and began designing buildings later recognized as Memari-e Jadid (New Architecture). Hovanessian expressed his views on the older urban fabric in *Architect Journal*: "Imagining people condemned to death in crooked streets filled with vermin and filth leaves no room for gratitude to those who built them. How many talents are wasted here before they can flourish? The Iranian generation is doomed to vanish in these streets" (Hovanessian, 1946). Within the framework of authoritarian modernization, the elimination of the old urban fabric was viewed as a necessary step toward establishing a new

under this law must inform the nearest state institution. If the competent authorities confirm that the property is a national heritage artifact, it will be registered in the national heritage list.

Article 5: The owner of a property listed as a national heritage item may retain ownership rights, but they cannot prevent the state from performing necessary actions for the conservation of the artifact. The costs incurred by the state for conservation measures will not be demanded from the property owner, and these actions will not affect the owner's property rights.

Article 6: The following actions are prohibited, and offenders will be subject to a fine ranging from fifty to one thousand tumans, and compensation may be demanded for the damage caused to the artifacts:

- a) Damaging, destroying, covering, painting, or drawing patterns on national heritage artifacts.
- b) Carrying out actions near national heritage artifacts that shake or alter their structure or appearance.
- c) Acquiring and selling materials from the national heritage list without state permission.

²² *Lāyehe-ye Otobusrānī* in Persian.

²³ For detailed information on demolitions, see (Kahraman, 2022, pp. 189-193; Niar, 2019).

civic and architectural identity. Hovanessian viewed the destruction carried out by Reza Shah's administration as analogous to the *Kashf-e Hijab Law* banning women's veils: "Those who remember those days know that this city's buildings were like women covered in black veils, surrounded by monotonous straw walls, connected to the outside only through ugly, solitary doors... not a single window from living rooms opened to the outside..." (Banimasoud, 2015, p. 194).

The Persian nationalist vision endorsed by Pahlavi cultural policymakers has been interpreted as contributing to the marginalization of non-Persian elements in the historical narrative and to selective demolition practices targeting the Qajar architectural heritage. This process of selective urban transformation became most visible in Tehran, where the city walls and its twelve historical gates—structures that had remained largely intact since the reign of Mozaffar ad-Din Shah—were targeted for destruction beginning in 1928, signaling the onset of aggressive urban interventions. This wave of demolition extended beyond the capital, affecting other major cities such as Tabriz, Shiraz, Hamadan, and Mashhad, where palaces, garden pavilions, city walls, gates, neighborhoods, squares, and governmental buildings were razed (Maki, 1982).

Shaped by a nationalist discourse prioritizing a pre-Islamic Persian identity, most of the demolished structures dated from the reign of Naser al-Din Shah (1848–1907) and subsequent Qajar rulers, and were primarily secular in nature—comprising public buildings, administrative palaces, and ceremonial pavilions rather than religious sites (Niar, 2019). According to contemporary sources, approximately two thousand buildings and urban ensembles were destroyed during this period because they were perceived as visual reminders of the Qajar dynasty (Abrahamian, 2010; Banimasoud, 2015; Zoka, 1970; Ghobadian, 2015). Although full documentation of these demolitions remains incomplete, prominent examples include the city walls and the twelve historic gates of Tehran, among them: Yousof Abad, Dowlat, Shemiran, Dowshan Tapeh, Dolab, Khorasan, Abd al-Azim, Ghar, Khani Abad, Gomrok, Qazvin, and Baghsah (Kiani, 2014; Figure 2).



Figure 2. The Mashgh Square Gate (on the left) and the Bâb-3 Homayoun Square and Gate (on the right) were Demolished During the First Pahlavi Period

In addition to these gates, the square gates within the city were also demolished. Although most of the destroyed works bear the traces of European Neoclassicism and particularly French Baroque style, they also contained elements specific to Qajar architecture.

CONCLUSION

The historical trajectory of conservation culture in Iran reveals a distinct transformation from traditional, waqf-based maintenance during the Qajar period to an ideologically driven framework under the First Pahlavi regime. While Nasir al-Din Shah's initiatives reflected a more inclusive and non-discriminatory approach to architectural heritage, the cultural policies of the Pahlavi state—heavily influenced by Persian nationalism, institutionalized through the SNH, and supported by Western Orientalists—prioritized the pre-Islamic past while marginalizing the architectural legacy of the Qajar dynasty.

The 1930 Antiquities Law, although inspired by European conservation thought, notably Camillo Boito's principles, was implemented with a selective vision that served the nationalist agenda of the Pahlavi regime. This ideological framing led to the exclusion—and often destruction—of 19th-century Qajar architecture under the banner of modernization and urban development. The instrumentalization of cultural heritage thus became a means of rewriting national identity through a purified historical narrative.

The legacies of this selective conservation policy continue to shape Iran's cultural heritage discourse today. The privileging of certain historical periods over others raises enduring questions about whose past is preserved and represented in national memory. As modern Iran grapples with issues of urban heritage, cultural pluralism,

and postcolonial identity, understanding the political roots of its conservation culture remains vital.

This study contributes to emerging discussions on the entanglement of heritage and ideology, particularly in authoritarian nationalist contexts where historical narratives are reshaped to serve state-building agendas. Future research might further explore how such selective narratives influence present-day heritage management in Iran and beyond, and how more inclusive and critical approaches can be formulated in response.

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