

Maryam MORADI* (Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran, Iran)

Sara ALILOO** (University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran)

Importance of Diakonoff's Research in Recognition of the Median Period in Iran

<https://doi.org/10.34739/his.2021.10.08>

Abstract: *The history of the Median period written by Igor Mikhailovich Diakonoff (published in 1956) was translated to Persian by Karim Keshavarz in 1345 Solar year. This book was the product of profound and insightful research of this author that had been done by the request of Azerbaijan Science Academy in that time and its importance at the time of its publication and translation was immense as there had been no single book or other research publication directly covering this period in the Persian literature before. The available historical or archeological information on this period was only limited to the notes of Greek historians and some new western resources. Although those sources were valuable, they could not fill the vacant place of rigidly and accurately written resources for other researchers of this period because they were not based on direct data i.e. scripts, tablets and other archaeological data found during relevant excavations. The difference between Diakonoff's research and other resources is that he first gives comprehensive information concerning resources from this period, then fully assesses them, and additionally describes the geographical and historical aspects. This makes Diakonoff's Median book an exceptionally accurate resource in this regard and therefore even after several decades it still remains so important in Iranology and cognition of Iranians. In fact, one can see the immense impact of Diakonoff's research on the field of the Median history since the translation time until the present time. It has always been one of the main sources cited in historical, linguistic, ethnological, archaeological and interdisciplinary studies by Iranian researchers.*

Key words: historical studies; Iranology; Ancient period; Igor Diakonoff; Median

Introduction

The expansionist politics of Russia from the kingdom of Peter the Great (1682-1725) faced new dimensions as the central government's basis went strong and rigid and made the Russian Tsar eager to know the East more and more. The very first attempts to study Asia were made in s period. Studies of Iran by Russians were

* ORCID iD 0000-0002-6652-227X. m.moradi@atu.ac.ir; Assistant Professor, Faculty of Persian Literature and Foreign Languages, Department of Russian Language and Literature.

** ORCID iD 0000-0002-2333-0796. saraaliloo64@yahoo.com; Faculty of Literature and Humanities.

undertaken after the first martial action between Iran and Russia. The Iranology center of Kazan University in Russia started its work in 1804. Teaching the Persian language started in 1811 at Moscow University and in 1819 in St Petersburg (Leningrad) University.¹ After the victory of the communist October revolution of 1917 in Russia, the leaders of the revolution developed special interest in oriental studies as Kuznetsova and Kulagina call Lenin the spiritual father of the scientific union of Russia's Orientalists.² The eastern studies had political, diplomatic and informational aspects in Moscow and historical, linguistic and scientific character in Leningrad. The institutes of the republic conducted research in various areas but the main orientation of most of the researchers concerned local matters and the history and culture of the neighbouring countries.³ The Orientalresearch, and especially Iranology, had two inspiration sources in Russia that have continued to be relevant up to date. One of them was the achievements of orientalists from the Tsarist period and the other one was related to the political goals of soviets who focused on the issue of which phase of Marxian social evolution has the Iranian community has reached and on whether, in the end, they are ready to accept the socialism revolution or not.⁴

In other words, as communists say, for a socialist revolution to happen in a community, that community must pass through communist evolution phases i.e. slavery, feudalism, capitalism. They disregarded the fact that in order to explain human sciences one cannot use general rules and theories and each community and civilization has travelled a particular way in its social evolution due to the regional conditions which it was formed in and cultural and human characteristics of those who have made it.⁵

The soviet researchers have given wrong and formulaic answers to these fundamental questions due to their strong connection with politics of the soviet government and attachment to the firm ideology of the ruling communist party in that country – whether forced or by will.⁶ The soviet historians also tried to match the mentioned three stages to Iran's historical periods but they ignored the differences in cultural, humanistic and even geographical conditions of Iran in comparison to the western (European) communities. Each of the soviet historians focused on periods of Iran's history based on Marxist Leninist methodology. The first community formed in Iran was the slaveholder community which was formed in the 6th century B.C., the primary feudal community formed during the 3rd and 5th century A.C and the advanced feudal community formed in the 10th A.C century.⁷

In other words the Median and Achaemenid periods were seen as the beginning of the slavery phase, the Arascian period was interpreted as the advanced slavery and degenerative phase and the Sasanian period was the phase of formation and domination of feudalism in soviet researchers and historians' opinion.⁸

¹ REZA, 1992: 217.

² KUZNETSOVA & KULAGINA, 1961: 21.

³ ENTEKHABI, 2016.

⁴ ATKIN, 1992: 306, 309.

⁵ ALIBABAIE, 2012: 34.

⁶ ENTEKHABI, 2016.

⁷ PETRUSHEVSKY, 1980: 34.

⁸ KHONJI, 1979: 33-34.

Diakonoff, who was in fact brought up in Leningradism, focused his research on the Median history's beginning and roots using historian, ancient and linguistic receipts in the *History of Media from the earliest times until the end of the 4th century BCE* [Istoriya Midii ot drevneishikh vremen do kontsa 4 v. do n.e.] book.⁹ However, one must admit that Diakonoff made his best attempt to avoid suspicious deductions and theories. He was somehow very successful in this regard and could keep the Median history research clean from communist ideology. One can understand this fact by comparing this book to the studies of other soviet researchers done in reference to other historical periods.

Discussion and assessment

Diakonoff's time

Like other human sciences the Russian orientalism faced deep variations with domination of bolshevists in 1917. The domination of new ideology was not so easily established in universities. A small group of masters and intellectuals, for example Nicholas Marr, accepted the regime's ideology fast and achieved important scholar positions. Some chose emmigration, but most of them finally slowly and unwillingly, and some only seemingly, acquiesced to the Marxist education bolsheviks were more eager to those aspects of eastern studies that motivated the eastern tired, oppressed and colonized workers to fight with the West.¹⁰ The soviet regime who never accepted the independence of universities and researchers started the suppression of scientists from the very beginning to break any kind of resistance. Diakonoff has explained the situation of soviet time (the time he lived in) very well and classified it in the eighth phase of the phases he presented in *The Paths of History* and explained it as follows: since 1924 the dominant system in the Soviet Union made a new broad rank of party and government bureaucrats by reviving the capitalism in its most brutal and primary forms and by widely using works of slaves in concentration camps that their number would have reached twenty million ones in some cases. The characteristics of this government was as follows: a totalitarian governance and a dictator on the head, mixing the party organization with government system, full-scale secrecy system, fearful governance, slaughter and suppression (the number of killed people until 1956 was up to sixty million ones), brutal exploitation system, changing farmers into new serfs in the Kolkhozi system (commune system).¹¹

History theories

With regard to historical research done within the recent two centuries, there dominate two common theories: one represented by western historians (West Europe and America) and the other one associated with Marx's historical theory and his disciples.

⁹ DIAKONOFF, 1956.

¹⁰ ENTEKHABI, 2016.

¹¹ DIAKONOFF, 1999: 271-275.

In western European history research tradition there are several classifications, but somehow similar. One of the well-known classifications of human history is the one into pre-industrial and agricultural (pre-urban, primary urban), industrial and post-industrial periods. Another distinguishes such stages as primary, ancient, dark ages, mediaeval and new ages (modern and post-modern). Also many theories about lawfulness of history have been presented, the most famous one being the theory of Arnold Toynbee based on emergence, promotion, decline and collapse of civilizations.

On the other side, the historical Marxist theory classifies the process of history in five linear stages including the commune periods of primary, slavery, feudalism, capitalism and socialism. The proponents of this theory believed in inner dynamism of history process which described the running force and motivation and passing from one stage to another on the basic of conflict between the productive forces and production relations based on a production method.

This theory made tons of intellectuals and researchers excited for nearly a century and only after the collapse of soviets was it doubted seriously. As a result many thinkers looked for a more satisfying answer. In *The Paths of History* Diakonoff tried to give an answer to these questions and fallacies by dividing the history process into eight stages including: primary, primary commune, primary ancient or commune, post ancient or emperor, mediaeval, stable autocratic or post mediaeval, capitalism and post-capitalism. Despite Marx's theory that described human history as a result of basic conflicts between productive forces and production relations, according to Diakonoff it is the human creating intuition that shows up in two bases of thinking and technology and dominates lawfully in social-psychological and socioeconomic aspects.¹²

The History of Media book

The Median period is one of the most important historical periods of Iran because the Aryan folks were able to successfully build a government for the first time in today's west areas in Iran. This government constituted the basis for formation and progress of Achaemenid Empire and transferred many of governance, social, religious rules and generally the civilization principles to another branch of Iranians. There is not much information about this government due to the lack of historical documents, especially ancient and Iranian resources. This is the reason why there are hardly any significant publications on the Median period.¹³

The method that human science researchers and particularly soviet historians followed is called 'Theological' method today and it means that the researchers used documents and historical data to prove and accept the Marxist-Leninist ideology of governors and the answer was generally clear already.

Meanwhile, upon request of the history branch of the Soviet Azerbaijan Science Academy of Culture Igor Mikhailovich Diakonoff (1915-1999) agreed to write the *History of Media* book. He described the reason of this request in the first pages of his book: the purpose of this publication is not to clarify very important questions about the source of creation and formation of Azerbaijan people and the publisher who

¹² DIAKONOFF, 1999: 1-9.

¹³ MEHRAFARIN, 2017: 81.

is an expert in history and vocabulary of ancient east field, is never ready and righteous to discuss in this regard. This book [the *History of Media*] is only and only written about the Median government ... Exclusively about its history since the ancient days until the formation of the 'Atropatene' Median government and its branching and decomposition from what is called the lower Median or the great Median that has no connection to the history of Azerbaijan at all.¹⁴

According to soviet historians and researchers this period was in fact the beginning of slavery. In ancient history studies section the researchers did not have problems in studying the ancient Greek and Roman history for they had lots of receipts. However, there were few receipts and documents for assessment and matching the ancient Iran period with the suggestion of Marxist-Leninists and thus the researchers were not able to draw reasonable conclusions on the basis of available documents. Igor Diakonoff faced serious difficulties in this regard as he could not unambiguously assign the Median and Achaemenid society as slaveholders by referring to those documents. Therefore he stated that there were too few documents and proofs from the Median period to clearly assess the history of that period. He further added that in such situations the historian should avoid definite statements and just present possible hypothesis. However, he also said that this lack of documents can be neglected by accurate and exact Marxist (Communist) theories made by soviet researchers. Therefore the lack of documents could not make a barrier for the researcher to give accurate results about this period. Diakonoff concluded that he was aware of the fact that one could give a different opinion about many aspects of Median history due to severe lack of resources, or one-sidedness of few available, which quite naturally could lead to conflicts in dating and thus ample room for guesses and speculations, making the Median period very difficult for interpretation. However, the author wished to stop conjecture and assumption and wherever possible made his hypothesis on reliable and unambiguous documents, always stressing that many of his proposals were based on guess and assumption.¹⁵ He faced massive difficulties and poverty on texts and resources for presenting and relieving the Median's socioeconomic history progress. However he thinks that the scientific theories are a proper support for a researcher. The time and situation coincident with the slavery society and the first steps that mentioned society made towards development was too much assessed by the soviet's scientists that they can specify the currency and way of development and the progress of each period separately as soon as they reach any kind of documents and texts and indirect points and etc if they're nearly with truth.¹⁶ This book starts with a word from author about writing it and the difficulties the writer faced during writing the book, his opinion about the Median history, transcription of historical names and how he used the resources in ancient languages and archaeological receipts. He continues with introducing the resources about the Median history and their classifications as the author tries to assess and criticize them and clarify their strengths and weaknesses. Perhaps this part of the book can be the most important part of it as he classifies all resources since past until the of writing (1956) and collects them in seven chapters. Chapter one: the primary era in Median land;

¹⁴ DIAKONOFF, 2011: 1-2.

¹⁵ DIAKONOFF, 2011: 3.

¹⁶ DIAKONOFF, 2011: 4.

chapter two: the emergence of slavery organization in Median land; chapter three: Mannaeans and the kingdom of Scythians or Sakae; chapter four: the appearance of the Great Median kingdom and fall of Assyria; chapter five: society and government of the Median kingdom; chapter six: beliefs and culture of the Median kingdom; chapter seven: Median under governance of Achaemenid empire.

Critique of the book

There are some critiques about this book like naming the Median society as slaveholders because not only there are not too many precise documents in this regard but the existing documents show that the Medians were a free and non-slaveholder society to some extent. For example, Diakonoff does not point to the liberation of the Assyrian prisoners and slaves by the Median army after conquering the Ninevah in 12 B.C. as described by Diodorus Sicily¹⁷ as the reason for the lack of slaves and a slaveholding system in the Median period, but, as his research was conducted in line with Marxist theories and in that framework, he believed that this matter was due to the evolution of system and the slavery foundations or poor role of slaves in society and economy and also the slavery products being undeveloped.

By evaluation and interpretation of the historical receipts and documents referring to the Median construction and socioeconomic system, Diakonoff concludes that the primary slaveholding system was dominant in this period. Therefore, generalizing these results and using this method, he calls the dominant system and socioeconomic construction in the next period i.e. the Achaemenid period, the continuance of the previous one. Neglecting many proven matters in documents and evidence found in the barbacan of Persepolis that clearly mentions the structured, advanced administration system and fee payments observing the rights of workers, he writes with complete certainty: we are witnessing a slavery period without a doubt.¹⁸

The mud tablets in Elamite cuneiform found in the barbacan of Persepolis have made many researchers conclude that there was an advanced administration and economic system and structure in Achaemenid period. They have studied and analyzed these findings to show there was no slavery system in this period and have referred to the above mentioned tablets for proof. According to these tablets, the workers in Persepolis had sufficient payment and income. Many of these tablets show a satisfying situation and somehow comparable to present regulations for workers income. For instance, there were even some orders for maternity leave and also advantages for families and nutrition help for workers who had lower income. Heidmarie Koch, the writer of the book *Es kündigt Dareios der Königuses*, uses the phrase 'social security' to describe and discuss the benefits and advantages of workers mentioned on these tablets interestingly, these tablets reveal that in the Achaemenid system even the minor children were included under the protective social services. As Heidmarie Koch further writes, workers' payments were defined by a classification of a disciplined system referring to dexterity and age, mothers could use leave with pay, maternity pay and also child benefit advantages, the payment of workers who had lower income was compensated with some special rations so that they could live easier,

¹⁷ Diodorus Sicily, 2003: 142.

¹⁸ DIAKONOFF, 2011.

the payment for hard work and illness was paid, the rights of men and women were equal and women had the choice for part-time jobs so that they could be able to do their duties at home for their families. Such a social security system and progressive behaviour that Achaemenid tablets prove may seem unbelievable for the 6th century B.C. and as Koch further stresses needed a deep perception and infinite introspection.¹⁹

However, affected by Marxist theories, Diakonoff ignored many of the writings on these tablets and only drew a conclusion that these tablets are documents that show an advanced social-economical slavery system and structure. He wrote that there might be some families of free societies among Kurtas (farmer groups or farmers) who were attracted to the tradition of Bighar (group work, social work), but he thought that without doubt the main people of Kurtas were slaves.²⁰

In this regard Mohammad Ali Khonji writes: finding only some slaves among the whole kingdom of some governments is not enough to call a social-economical system a slaveholder one and one must not ignore the existence of other parts of this structure. Discussing a slaveholder structure in ancient Iran, one should also show the lines of slaveholders in Ecbatana, Susa and Istakhr as were in Athens Acropole or Roman Forum. Otherwise the meaning of a structure formed by some parts that connect to each other to achieve a goal may be misunderstood.²¹

Affected by Marxist theories, Diakonoff sees the collapse of the Median government as a result of domestic conflicts as well: the flow of wealth into the Median kingdom made all the domestic conflicts of the Median slaveholding system more intense and accelerated the overthrow of that kingdom.²² Diakonoff examines the conditions of the Achaemenids and states that the domestic and foreign reasons made the collapse of Achaemenid by Alexander. He believed that the failure of Iranian under the Greek invasion was due to the Greeks' more advanced system of slavery that allowed them to have better army to wage a war on Iranian army that were forced and brought to war (same 406-407).

Despite some of the flaws of Diakonoff's *History of Media* book, one must also consider the positive and worthy aspects of his research. Disregarding some of his prejudices and bias and taking into account the scant historical sources in the form of tablets and scripts, archaeological documents and writings of the historians and Greek geographers referring to this period, Diakonoff's work is one of the best and most complete studies on the Median history.²³ Many decades after its publication, it's still one of the first grade resources for this period nowadays.

Impact of the book on researchers dealing with the same period

There are many books written about the Medians and the Achaemenids because their history is complicated due to the constraints of time and space. There are not as many documents about the situation and living and habits of the [Median] and Achaemenid Kings as there are about Assyrian and Babylonian Kings and the most oft-

¹⁹ KOCH, 1999: 34.

²⁰ DIAKONOFF, 2011: 304.

²¹ KHONJI, 1979: 43-44.

²² DIAKONOFF, 2011: 380.

²³ KHONJI, 1979: 2.

quoted documents are the notes of Herodotus and Thucydides.²⁴ These sources, however, are full of mistakes and historical confusions and thus seem to be unbelievable texts.²⁵ Therefore most of western researches have preferred to discuss the artistic aspects of history of this period.

Due to the lack of reliable resources, one must admit that writing *History of Media* must have been a very difficult and complicated task. Until the middle years of the previous century the Median history's situation was like the other ancient eastern countries and there was little information about the mentioned territory and its neighbours except some myths and partial information of Greek authors. However, over the last hundred years historical researchers have become richer in high volumes of documents, scripts, receipts and tablets related to the history of Babylonia, Assyria and other countries of the Middle East. There are thousands of written documents and archaeological receipts found in the surveys of the archaeologists in cities of Mesopotamia, Anatolia, Iran and etc.²⁶ Despite the research done on the Median territory by American, French, British and Canadian archaeologists in locations of Hesar hill in Damghan, Silk of Kashan, Gian hill next to Nahavand, Goy hill next to Urumia, Gowdin Hill next to Kangavar, Babajan close to Nourabad and Noushijan next to Malayer, the assessment of the Median history on the basis of these findings progresses slowly and that time is still referred to as the dark period.

The most important stages of the old Median history-since the beginning until formation and rankings in the Median society and until establishment of the Great Median Empire were clarified by using and help of documents and texts from written works. The information found this way is very scant and can just give comprehensive martial history about some periods. The detailed information about this period must be derived from other languages Sumerian, Assyrian, Akkadian, Urartian, and ancient Persian written in different times.

As mentioned above, resources for the Median history are fragmentary and scattered and do not provide direct and first level information about history and culture of this period. Also, these texts were mostly written by the competitors and enemies of the Medians. Since there is no script or text detected about this period, this period of Iranian history remains to a large extent unknown.

Before the translation of the *History of Media*, the knowledge of Iranian researchers in Iran's history literature relied on the ancient Iran history book of Pirnia and also the notes of Nöldeke and Herzfeld, as well as writings and articles of European Orientalists about this period. The resources of these texts were derived from evaluation of the texts from *Holy book* and Greek writers and historians and geographers and were in some cases myths or provided contradictory information. In most cases the information out of these texts was incomplete too. After translation of this book by Mr. Karim Keshavarz in 1966 a new horizon appeared in Iran history and provided researchers with many of the names that were not in the Greek texts and previous historians' texts such as geographical names, names of people and even the Median emperors.

²⁴ CULICAN, 1965: 12.

²⁵ DIAKONOFF, 1968: 75.

²⁶ DIAKONOFF, 2011: 11-12.

The method used by the writer in writing of this book i.e. the assessment of written resources, linguistics, archaeological and geographical resources evaluations, were new and rare to Iranian researchers. Thus, it soon has become noteworthy and often taken into consideration. Though the methodology was criticized and many published books and papers criticized its theological methodology, even though these critiques were justified and correct, this book has always been studied by researchers. Its shortcomings only motivated following reserchers to study the texts about the Median history more carefully and deeper as this book became one of the main resources for the Median history researchers. Analyzing many books written about the Median history so far, one can find the impact and footprint of this book on the texts and researches and theories that are like Diakonoff's in this research.

The *Ancient Iran History (Aryans and Medians)* of Ardeshir Khodadadian²⁷ can be mentioned from those books, however there are just two direct references to the *History of Media* and no other direct use of this book in it, but the methodological impact of Diakonoff is clearly seen in use of resources and other documents to describe and understand this period. The footprints of this book is seen in, Rashid Yasemi's book, *The Kurdsih and its breed and history continuity*, which is one of the most famous books written about kurdology. In addition to the mentioned books, there are some other books written about ancient nations that used this book as reference: *Arran since Ancient until the Mogul time*,²⁸ *Ancient folks in Caucasus, Northern Caucasus, Mesopotamia and the Fertile Crescent*,²⁹ *Ancient folks in Central Asia and Iranian Plateau*.³⁰ This book has been one of the main resources for books written about the archaeology of the Median period so far such as the collective teaching books of archaeology and the art of the Median, Achaemenid, Arsacidian and Sasanian periods,³¹ the Median history's archaeological point of view; the Median archaeology³² and several books about cognition of the records of ancient history of western and northwestern provinces of Iran. Also the books written about ancient Iran history specially the Median period parts of them referred to the Median history as a main reference and source. Furthermore in many articles published in historical and archaeological magazines regarding the periods of the Kassites, the Median and other ancient Iranian nations, plentiful references to Diakonoff's research have been made, for example articles of Behzadi,³³ Zarrinkoub,³⁴ Jalilian & Alinia,³⁵ Mollazadeh & Taheri Dehkordi,³⁶ and Malekzadeh.³⁷

In addition to the impact of the *History of Media* on historical and archaeological books, the impact of it on other branches of science such as ethnology,

²⁷ KHODADADIAN, 1997.

²⁸ REZA, 2001.

²⁹ BEHZADI, 2005.

³⁰ BEHZADI, 1994.

³¹ SARFARAZ & FIROUZMANDI, 1994.

³² MOLLAZADEH, 2014.

³³ BEHZADI, 1990.

³⁴ ZARRINKOUB, 2008.

³⁵ JALILIAN & ALINIA, 2012.

³⁶ MOLLAZADEH & TAHERI DEHKORDI, 2015.

³⁷ MALEKZADEH 1995; 1997; 2001; 2002; 2003; 2005.

sociology and historical linguistics is clear, however more detailed discussion of them lies beyond the scope of this article.

Conclusion

The *History of Media* is a book that must be studied and assessed in the light of situations, ground and time of when its author lived and therefore for its proper understanding one must take into account all the obligations and difficulties Diakonoff had to face in order to write it. The authors of this article have made an attempt to briefly present all these aspects. Diakonoff gave answers to many questions and his reasons about his theories and opinions in past by writing *The Paths of History* book later. But the critiques on this book do not make its scientific and research values less worthy. The translation of the *History of Media* has been not only a main source for Iranian students and researchers in history, linguistics and other human science fields, but it also has a deep and great impact on their research methodologies, especially in the wide use of interdisciplinary sciences in history that was a new and rare subject in Iran's history researching in its time and is in the present time and made a generation of Iranologists (historians, archaeologists, linguists and other researchers in this regard) familiar to new and various subjects that had not been noticed before its translation.

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To cite this article: Moradi, M., Aliloo, S. (2021). Importance of Diakonoff's Research in Recognition of the Median Period in Iran. *Historia i Świat* 10, 195-205, DOI: 10.34739/his.2021.10.08



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