

Original Research Article**Representations of National Identity in Cultural Heritage
(Iran from the First to Fifth Centuries AH)***

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Abstract

This article examines the representation of Iranian national identity in cultural heritage from the first to fifth centuries AH, with a particular focus on the roots, mechanisms, and historical continuity of archaic (pre-Islamic) nationalism in Iran. The study aims to explain how Iranian national identity was formed and reproduced through culture, myths, language, and symbols, and to clarify the role of cultural heritage in consolidating this identity in opposition to the “Arab Other.” The research adopts Michel Foucault’s discourse analytic approach to uncover the underlying configurations of knowledge, power, and subjectivity in their historical context and to trace the structure and persistence of cultural nationalism. In parallel, an ethnosymbolist perspective is employed to conceptualize the contribution of symbols, myths, and rituals to the formation and stabilization of this nationalist discourse. The findings demonstrate that Iranian national identity cannot be reduced to a byproduct of modern state building or Western influence but emerges from a long-term, cumulative process embedded in the cultural memory and historical experience of Iran. Texts such as Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh*, together with Islamic period textiles and other artistic and cultural artefacts, function as key media for rearticulating ancient myths and histories and for reinforcing collective memory. The analysis suggests that archaic Iranian nationalism is deeply rooted in historical tradition and collective memory and is characterized by a predominantly cultural, spiritual, and symbolic orientation that is continuously reproduced through artistic and cultural creativity. Overall, the article underscores the value of a historical cultural lens on Iranian nationalism and highlights the central role of cultural heritage in shaping and transmitting national self-consciousness.

Keywords: *Iranian Archaic Nationalism, Iranian National Identity, Iranian Cultural Heritage, Ethnosymbolism, First to Fifth Centuries AH.*

Introduction

Nationalism, as a multifaceted and dynamic phenomenon, has played a constitutive role in the historical, social, and cultural transformations of modern societies. In modern

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political and intellectual discourses, it is central not only to processes of nation-building and state-building, but also to the formation of collective identity and the structuring of historical memory. Within the theoretical literature, a basic distinction is often drawn between two ideal typical forms of nationalism: ethnic or cultural nationalism, which grounds the nation in shared language, history, religion, and culture and tends to treat it as a natural and inherited community; and civic nationalism, which is based on

will, consent, and a shared commitment to political institutions, and understands the nation as the product of conscious civic participation (Miller, 1995, 22). The intellectual roots of cultural nationalism are commonly traced to Johann Gottfried Herder, who regarded common language and culture as the foundation of national unity, whereas civic nationalism, whose classic locus is the French Revolution, defines the nation not as an inherited community but as the outcome of the collective will of citizens (Kristeva, 2023, 15).

From this perspective, the distinction between “objective” and “subjective” approaches to nationalism becomes analytically significant. While some theorists emphasize territorial and linguistic unity as the basic criteria of nationhood, others, such as Renan et al. (2011), assign primacy to “a sense of belonging” and “shared historical memory” in the constitution of the nation (Connor, 1994, 212; Tyrell, 1996, 243). In this latter view, collective self-awareness marks the threshold between ethnicity and nation; without such awareness, a community remains an ethnic group rather than a nation. It is precisely on this basis that Smith (2004, 15) identifies the “sense of belonging to the nation” as the core of nationalism and stresses the role of collective myths, memories, and symbols in sustaining it.

In the Western theoretical canon, civic nationalism is often presented as the more “ethical” and inclusive variant, while ethnic or cultural nationalism is frequently associated with exclusivist and exclusionary tendencies. Yet nationalism, in itself, is neither inherently positive nor inherently negative; rather, as a Janus-faced phenomenon, its effects depend on specific historical and social configurations. As Mirzaei (2021) argues, nationalism possesses a dual potential and may, under certain conditions, serve as a vehicle for emancipation and modernization, while in other contexts it can foster exclusion, conflict, and authoritarianism. In a similar vein, Ashraf (2013) conceptualizes nationalism as a double-edged force that carries both regenerative and destructive possibilities, depending on how it is articulated in relation to power, culture, and social cleavages.

With regard to Iranian nationalism, the literature—both Iranian and non-Iranian—tends to coalesce around two broad interpretive orientations. A first group of scholars treats Iranian nationalism as a relatively recent and largely Western-inspired phenomenon that emerged in response to military defeats (notably the Iran-Russia wars), colonial pressures, and the diffusion of modern political concepts (Davari Ardakani, 2021, 80; Navaseri, 2021). A second group situates the roots of Iranian nationalism in a much longer historical trajectory, arguing that its formative elements can be traced back to the aftermath of the Sasanian collapse and the period of Arab domination; in this reading, although Iran experienced political defeat, it resisted at the cultural level and, through the Persian language, mythological repertoires, and cultural traditions, reconstructed its identity and, by the fourth century AH, achieved a form of proto national self consciousness (Ashraf, 2013, 82-83). On this basis, archaic or pre-modern nationalism in Iran is understood as having deep-seated historical roots, with “Iranian ness” conceived as the product of a shared attachment to historic territories and participation in a common cultural, mythic, and historical legacy (Davaran, 2025, 11).

Nioli (2013, 13-14), for example, conceives the very idea of “Iran” as the outcome of a long-term historical process linking Zoroastrian religious traditions, the Sasanian imperial institution, and the experiences of Iranian ethno-cultural groups, a process that gradually crystallized into a more coherent civilizational identity. Ashraf (2013) similarly distinguishes between a broader, *longue durée* “historical identity” rooted in the cultural and religious traditions of the Iranian world, and a specifically “national identity” that takes shape in the modern era through confrontation with modernity and colonialism. Building on this, Tavakoli Targhi (2018) proposes a critical re-reading of Iranian history that rejects Eurocentric genealogies and instead conceptualizes “historical Iran” as a discursive reconstruction of the ancient Iranian past within modern intellectual and political projects. In a mediating position, Ahmadi (2003) suggests that, while nations and sentiments of belonging draw on older cultural

and historical legacies, nationalism in its modern sense remains a relatively recent phenomenon. From yet another angle, Hajiyani (2009, 151) emphasizes that Iran's national identity has been reinforced by the durability of its territory, the preservation of its borders, political continuity, and a rich, shared literary, cultural, and artistic heritage. Within a historical, philosophical framework, Tabatabaei (2005) goes further and contends that any serious inquiry into modern political thought in Iran is doomed to failure if it neglects the civilizational and conceptual foundations of that thought. In his view, understanding the modern concepts of nation and state in Iran requires a return to the broader Iranian civilizational horizon—a civilizational field that, he argues, emerged roughly twenty-five centuries ago and that Hegel famously described as the site of the first “state” in world history. Such reflections reinforce the guiding assumption of the present study: that Iranian cultural nationalism cannot be reduced to a purely modern or imported construct, but should be seen as the historical continuation of an indigenous political and cultural experience that has been mediated and reactivated through cultural heritage and collective memory.

Against this backdrop, the central problem of the present research arises from a concern to grasp the “cultural roots of Iranian nationalism” and to elucidate the mechanisms through which it is represented in cultural heritage. In this perspective, Iranian nationalism is approached not merely as a modern or externally imposed phenomenon, but as a long-term cultural response to Arab political and linguistic domination, articulated as a discourse of resistance and self-assertion. This identity discourse is inscribed in multiple layers of cultural heritage—from the Persian language and epic literature to ritual practices and symbolic repertoires—and, through the reimagining of ancient Iranian grandeur, consolidates “Iranian ness” vis-à-vis the “Arab Other.”

Accordingly, the significance of this study lies in uncovering the historical continuity of archaic nationalism from the early Islamic centuries to the fifth century AH. This continuity, maintained through historical memory and cultural resistance, contributed to the formation of an Iranian self-awareness grounded in heritage and in

symbolic boundaries drawn against the Arab Other. Analyzing this process can deepen our understanding of the cultural roots of contemporary identity conflicts in Iran and demonstrate that the “return to ancient Iran” is not simply a modern political project, but a historical cultural phenomenon emerging from specific constellations of power and cultural reaction. In this regard, Foucault's discourse analytic framework provides a suitable lens for examining the genealogies of archaic nationalism within the fields of cultural heritage, institutions, texts, and cultural memory.

Building on this approach, the present article seeks to bridge the gap between modern theories of nationalism and the cultural-historical foundations of Iranian national identity. The core research question is how Iran's cultural heritage from the first to the fifth centuries AH became a privileged site for the reproduction of archaic nationalist discourse and for the consolidation of Iranian identity in opposition to the Arab Other.

Research Questions

- 1) Which components of archaic nationalist discourse can be identified in Iran's cultural heritage from the first to the fifth centuries AH?
- 2) How, and under what historical and social conditions, has cultural nationalist discourse been formed and reproduced within the field of cultural heritage?
- 3) To what extent can archaic nationalism be interpreted as a form of cultural resistance to the Arab Other in the cultural heritage of Iranians?

Hypotheses

- 1) From the first to the fifth centuries AH, the discourse of archaic nationalism in Iran manifests itself through identifiable symbolic, mythic, linguistic, and ritual elements within cultural heritage, which reflect and reinforce Iranian national self-consciousness.
- 2) This discourse has been shaped and continuously reproduced within the field of cultural heritage, under the influence of specific historical, social, and cultural conditions in each period.

3) Beyond reproducing national identity, archaic nationalism functions as a mode of cultural resistance and can be interpreted, in the context of Iranian cultural heritage, as a discursive response to the Arab Other.

According to Spuler (1970, 416), after the Arab conquest of Iran, Iranians clung to their ancient culture so tenaciously that Arabs in Persia were compelled to observe Iranian customs. Arabs who refused to participate in local festivals were not permitted to stay; only those who willingly joined in performing Iranian rituals and in jointly celebrating national and religious feasts such as Nowruz and Mehrgan were accepted.

Research Method

This study employs Michel Foucault's discourse analytic approach to examine the emergence and continuity of archaic nationalism in Iran. In contrast to linear and causal readings of history, the archaeological method investigates the hidden layers of knowledge production and identity formation within specific historical configurations. Archaic nationalism is thus conceptualized as a discourse which, through historical texts, myths, the Persian language, and other cultural elements, reconstructs the image of pre-Islamic Iran as an "authentic" identity and sets it in opposition to Arab Islamic domination.

The temporal scope of the research extends from the first to the fifth centuries AH. The analysis is conducted on three interrelated levels: a historical discursive level that traces the emergence of this discourse; a cultural heritage level that focuses on the role of texts and symbols; and a theoretical level that mobilizes ethnosymbolist theory to analyze the genealogy of Iranian identity. In Foucault's view, in each historical period, specific cultural practices delimit what can become an object of inquiry, and archaeological discourse analysis takes these discursive practices themselves as its primary object of study (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 2021, 184–219).

Theoretical Framework

Nationalism is one of the most complex and multidimensional concepts in political science and

sociology. It has been treated not only as a political ideology but also as a foundational process in the formation of identity and the construction of nations. Within the theoretical literature on nationalism, four major discourses can be distinguished: primordialism, modernism, ethnosymbolism, and postmodernism. In the present study, and for reasons of brevity, only the first three approaches are examined, while explicitly setting aside postmodern perspectives.

Primordialist discourse maintains that national identity is an ancient and intrinsic phenomenon that predates the rise of modern states and is transmitted from generation to generation through shared language, race, religion, and traditions (Navaseri, 2021, 23). In this view, nations are natural and historical realities that exist independently of modern state structures and that national identity constitutes a stable core of human communities. Smith likewise underlines that organic nationalism conceives of nations as natural and cultural entities that have always existed (Smith, 2015, 283).

By contrast, the modernist discourse regards nationalism as a distinctly modern phenomenon arising from the economic, political, and social conditions of modernity. From this perspective, nations are the outcome of processes such as industrialization, state bureaucratization, mass education, and the expansion of modern media. Gellner (2021, 16–17) argues that nationalism makes sense only in an industrial society and is closely linked to social mobility, literacy, and the need for cultural homogeneity. Hylland Eriksen (2019, 180) similarly emphasizes that nations are modern formations that emerge through industrialization and the disembedding of individuals from traditional structures. In this view, nationalism is not the product of ancient history, but rather a construct of modern elites and institutions.

Primordialists, therefore, treat national identity as ancient and essential, whereas modernists see it as a modern construct shaped by social and political imperatives. The primordialist approach tends to underplay historical and social transformations, while modernism, in turn, downplays the cultural continuities and genealogies of nations. For the analysis of societies with deep civilizational histories

such as Iran, it is thus necessary to attend simultaneously to both long-term historical traditions and modern structural transformations.

It is precisely at this juncture that the ethnosymbolist approach emerges as an attempt to transcend and mediate between the dichotomy of traditionalism and modernism. Born out of dissatisfaction with the limitations of both preceding views, ethnosymbolism stresses the importance of long-term historical processes, cultural elements, and symbolic resources in the formation of nations. Ethnosymbolist scholars such as Smith, Armstrong, and Hutchinson argue that the modernist definition of the nation is overly narrow and Eurocentric, since it reduces the nation to a late and specifically European phenomenon. Gellner (2021), despite being a key modernist, implicitly acknowledges this weakness when he contends that the “real transformation” of the world begins only in the late eighteenth century and that earlier history has limited analytical value. From an ethnosymbolist standpoint, however, such historical short-sightedness obscures cultural continuities and pre-modern contexts of nation formation (Smith, 2022, 36–37; 2004, 132).

Within this context, Smith occupies a particularly prominent position. Contrary to modernists who locate the emergence of nations in the eighteenth century, he traces their genealogies back to older ethnic communities and to long-term historical processes. In his view, cultural components such as language, myth, ritual, and shared memories play a constitutive role in the formation of ethnic identity. Modern nations, in this reading, are reflections and continuations of pre-existing ethnies whose identity elements have been reinterpreted and rearticulated (Smith, 2004, 147). Political modernity certainly reshapes and institutionalizes these identities, but it is symbolic and cultural elements that provide the primary foundations of national identity. Hence, Smith insists that without attention to ethnic roots, the process of nation-building cannot be adequately understood (Smith, 2022, 13).

Ethnosymbolists, unlike primordialists who treat nations as timeless and fixed, emphasize historical continuity and reinterpretation. At the same time, in contrast to modernists,

they do not regard nations as mere constructs of social structures; rather, they foreground beliefs, memories, emotions, and cultural symbols as key to the cohesion and endurance of nations. As Miller (1995) notes, a nation “is constituted through shared beliefs and reciprocal commitments, and is distinguished from other communities by its own particular public culture” (Smith, 2004, 23–24). This definition indicates that nations must be analyzed not only in terms of objective facts, but also within the horizon of collective beliefs and sentiments. In this framework, cultural elements such as language, myths, rituals, art, historical memories, and shared values form a symbolic heritage through which national identity is reproduced over time. Ethnic elites and intellectuals, by selectively re-reading and re-signifying these elements, contribute to the recreation of national identity in different historical periods; by distinguishing between “authentic” and “foreign” elements, they instrumentalize the past in ways that foster cohesion and mobilization in the present. Although this process is ideological, it possesses a considerable capacity to generate national enthusiasm, sacrifice, and solidarity on a broad scale (ibid., 84–87).

The ethnosymbolist discourse, with its focus on cultural heritage, provides a particularly powerful lens for analyzing nationalism. It conceives of nations as the outcome of cultural, historical, and symbolic processes that not only represent the past but also reinterpret it in order to endow the present and the future with meaning. From this perspective, nationalism is a cultural project that internalizes national identity through memory, myth, language, and art. This makes ethnosymbolism especially useful for examining national identity in societies with rich civilizational legacies such as Iran. By bridging the divide between tradition and modernity, ethnosymbolists highlight the importance of cultural elements, historical memory, myths, and symbols. Nations, in their view, do not simply emerge from modern processes; rather, they are rooted in historical ethnies whose identities are reconstructed within the context of modernity. This approach equips researchers with conceptual tools to analyze cultural continuities and the reinterpretation of the past (Smith, 2015, 283).

• Iranian textiles, historical memory, and cultural identity

Ferdowsi, the great epic poet of Iran, attributes the origins of spinning, weaving, and garment making to the legendary Pishdadian dynasty in the *Shahnameh*. Although this account belongs to the realm of national myth, historical and archaeological evidence confirms the deep antiquity of textile production in Iran, suggesting that weaving dates back roughly eight thousand years and that Iranians were among the first peoples to manufacture cloth (Baker, 2006, 7). The earliest archaeological traces of weaving in Iran have been discovered at Sen Gabi in Kurdistan, dating to the fifth millennium BCE, while excavations at Marlik and Arjan e Behbahan have yielded finely patterned textile fragments from the second and first millennia BCE. Today preserved in the National Museum of Iran, these finds indicate that the art of weaving has persisted from prehistoric times to the present, constantly adapting to the cultural and social conditions of each period (Ruhifar, 2001, 3–4). From the outset, textile production in Iran was not merely a utilitarian craft, but also a medium for thought and myth. Many of the motifs found on early Islamic textiles, especially from the fourth century AH, are directly inspired by Iranian mythological themes (*ibid.*, 18). The persistence of these motifs points to a deep cultural continuity and underscores the symbolic role of textiles in transmitting spiritual heritage. Historical studies by Shayestehfar and Mousavi Lor (2003, 22) likewise suggest that the art of weaving in Iran is at least five and a half millennia old and that it has passed through periods of remarkable brilliance and florescence. During the Seljuk era, in parallel with the flourishing of other arts, the textile industry reached a peak of refinement: the fabrics of this period are distinguished by their chromatic variety, technical delicacy, and precision of design, and, while innovative, they clearly continue Sasanian traditions in a new and highly ornamental idiom (Monsi Sorkheh & Hosseinzadeh Qeshlaqi, 2019, 13; Ruhifar, 2001, 6). In this way, weaving in Iran has functioned not only as an efficient industry but also as a cultural and identity bearing field, in which the creative spirit and

historical memory of Iranians have been preserved in warp and weft over the centuries.

From an ethnosymbolist perspective, cultural motifs and symbols are bearers of deep meanings and values that represent collective identity through images, signs, and myths. In Iranian art, symbols such as the cypress, lion, deer, and ram are far more than decorative devices; they encode core beliefs and cultural aspirations. The cypress in particular, which in ancient Iranian culture stands for life, resilience, and immortality, embodies the profound connection between Iranians and nature and expresses the desire for a good and enduring life (Kouhzad, 2010, 81). The lion, often combined with the sun and used throughout the Islamic period as an emblem of power, kingship, and royal glory, can be read, from an ethnosymbolist angle, as an expression of efforts to preserve political and cultural identity in the post Islamic era (Dadvar, 2014, 10). This symbolic continuity reflects a form of cultural resistance to external transformations and a persistent insistence on linkage with a pre Islamic past. Likewise, animal motifs such as deer and ram, which in ancient Iran symbolized royal bravery and victory, continue to evoke similar meanings in the Islamic period, signaling the survival of older value systems within new cultural forms (Dadvar & Mansouri, 2006, 94; Dadvar, 2014, 13).

In ethnosymbolist terms, the persistence of Sasanian motifs and patterns within Islamic art is a powerful indicator of cultural resistance and the ongoing reproduction of national identity. These motifs have functioned as a shared symbolic language that has sustained collective identity across historical ruptures (Farbood & Fathi, 2009, 42–43). Floral and zoomorphic symbols in Iranian art are thus not merely ornamental; they carry messages that re-enact the community's identity, values, and historical experience, and they operate as instruments for preserving historical memory and reinforcing a sense of belonging in the face of cultural change.

Research indicates that ancient Iranian myths were employed not only in visual arts and artefacts, but also extensively in the corpus of Iranian textiles. Studies in this field suggest that textile production in Iran has consistently

functioned as more than a purely utilitarian craft and has instead operated as a symbolic arena reflecting Iranian beliefs, identity, and culture. From the early civilizations of Sialk and Susa through the Elamite, Parthian, and Sasanian periods, symbolic motifs occupied a central place in the visual arts, and the reliefs of Persepolis and other monumental sites bear witness to the fundamental role of such symbols in representing Iranian culture. Among these periods, the Sasanian era stands out as the apex of textile art, a time in which weaving embodies a condensation of earlier artistic traditions, with its most striking distinction manifested in the richness and sophistication of ornamental motifs (Namjou & Forouzani, 2013, 21). Sasanian silk textiles, adorned with mythological creatures such as the Simurgh, dragon, lion, gazelle, and winged figures, visualize core symbols of Iranian power, religion, and culture. These textiles were not only markers of splendor and luxury at court and among the elite, but—through trade and even the Crusades—also reached Europe, where they exerted a significant influence. In Burckhardt (2006, 64)’s words, “symbol is the language of the soul”, and from this standpoint, Sasanian textiles can be interpreted as a visual language of Iranian culture and identity.

Accordingly, Iranian textiles in both pre-Islamic and early Islamic periods possessed not merely aesthetic functions, but also served as carriers of Iran’s historical and cultural memory. In what follows, an examination of selected historical textiles provides evidence that the symbolic repertoire developed in the Sasanian period persisted and was rearticulated in Iranian weavings of the first centuries of Islam. In Fig. 1 a, a Sasanian prince appears in a hunting scene accompanied by symbols such as a dragon, Simurgh, and winged figures emerging from a plant and assisting him; animal motifs like the lion and gazelle allude to Sasanian and Achaemenid traditions of royal symbolism. In Fig. 1 b, a textile with geometric, human, animal, and vegetal motifs is depicted, in which royal garments and Sasanian crowns are combined with images such as elephants and a central lion flanking the tree of life. Fig. 1 b shows a mounted horseman within

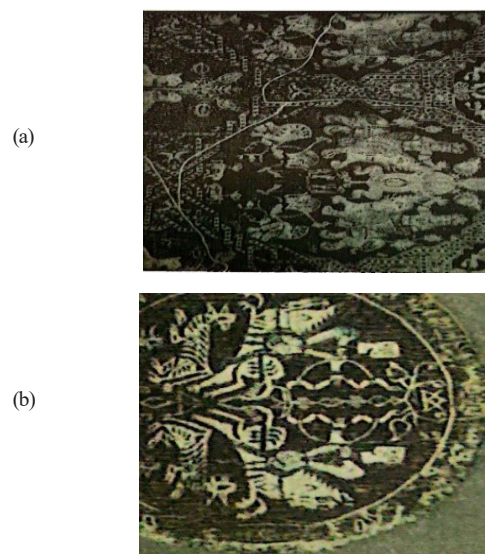


Fig. 1. Reflection of Sasanian symbols in Iranian textiles of the first and second Islamic centuries. Source: Hosseinzadeh Qeshlaqi, 2019, 21-25.

a circular medallion framed by vegetal patterns, and the rider’s attire clearly reflects Sasanian artistic influence (Monsi Sorkheh & Hosseinzadeh Qeshlaqi, 2019, 21–25). Fig. 2 a is a silk textile woven in Iran in the first–second centuries AH, now preserved in the Church of St. Ursula in Cologne. It portrays a Sasanian prince engaged in the hunt, surrounded by a dragon, Simurgh, and winged figures around the sacred haoma plant. The symmetrical composition and the presence of winged mythical beings strongly echo Sasanian symbolic conventions (*ibid.*, 18). Fig. 2 b, a silk textile from the third century AH, depicts a lion hunt scene enclosed within a circular medallion filled with vegetal and ornamental motifs, directly derived from Sasanian traditions in which the lion functions as an emblem of royal power and sovereignty (*ibid.*, 23).

The ethnosymbolist framework offers a powerful lens for analyzing these historical Iranian textiles, insofar as it treats symbols, myths, and collective memories as foundational elements in the formation and persistence of cultural identity. Within this perspective, the continued use of Sasanian motifs in the first centuries AH does not signify mere survival, but rather a process of selective adaptation and recombination, through which these symbols acquire new nuances while contributing to the ongoing reproduction of Iranian cultural identity across

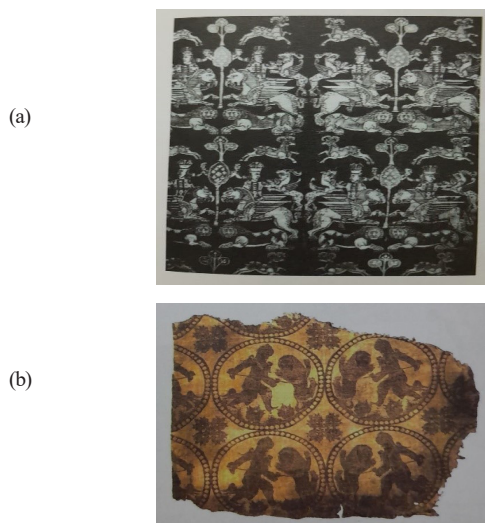


Fig. 2. Reflection of Sasanian symbols in textiles of the first and second Islamic centuries. Source: Hosseinzadeh Qeshlaqi, 2019, 23

historical ruptures. Iranian textiles thus appear not simply as artistic or industrial products, but as symbolic texts in which aesthetic forms, mythic beliefs, and historical memory are tightly interwoven. In this sense, Iranian fabrics can be understood as a visual language of Iranian culture—a language that, through its signs and symbols, represents the continuity of Iranian identity in the face of political, religious, and cultural transformations.

- Post-sasanian ceramics and the continuity of the symbolic language of ethnic self-awareness

Pottery in post-Sasanian Iran, alongside other forms of applied art, played a significant role in the continuation of pre-Islamic Iranian cultural symbols. Due to its presence in everyday life, unlike courtly arts, it provides a more direct reflection of collective memory and ethnic self-consciousness, contributing to the transmission of cultural meanings within the informal sphere of society. An examination of pottery from the early Islamic centuries up to the fifth century AH indicates that many fundamental symbols of ancient Iran, despite political and religious transformations, continued to exist in newly adapted visual forms. This continuity demonstrates the dynamism of cultural memory and its ability to adapt to new contexts through material culture and everyday life.

In the visual examples, the cypress tree motif on a ceramic bowl (Fig. 3 a) symbolizes immortality, resilience, and

cultural continuity (Grube, 2005, 231). The blossoming tree on a ceramic vessel (Fig. 3 b) represents fertility, renewal, and a cyclical view of time (ibid., 131). The lion-shaped handles of a vessel (Fig. 3 c) reflect symbols of power, authority, and protection rooted in Sasanian tradition (ibid., 242). The deer motif on a ceramic jug from Kashan (Fig. 3 d) signifies nobility, divine glory (*farr*), and a connection to the sacred realm (ibid., 260).

Overall, post-Sasanian pottery functioned as a cultural medium through which a network of ancient meanings was preserved in everyday life, contributing to the continuity of Iranian identity during the Islamic period.

• Linguistic heritage of Iran after the Sasanians and the *Shahnameh*

One of the most enduring expressions of cultural continuity in Iranian history is the preservation of indigenous language, rituals, and intellectual structures in periods of profound political transformation. In the Sasanian era, the Pahlavi language functioned not only as an instrument of administration and government, but also as a carrier of the cultural, philosophical, and historical concepts of Iranian civilization. With the Arab conquest and the establishment of the Islamic Caliphate—particularly under the Umayyads—deliberate efforts were made to marginalize Iranian culture. Nevertheless, Iranians, drawing on religious and cultural institutions—especially fire temples and sacred centers such as Ādhar-Farnbagh in Kāreyān, Fars—mounted a cultural resistance, and Zoroastrian clergy, as guardians of collective memory, transmitted Iranian language and rituals to subsequent generations (Affi, 2004, 16). In this historical context, Davarān argues that although the Arab invasion led to the collapse of the Sasanian political order and the weakening of formal Zoroastrian institutions, it did not entail a complete cultural rupture. He explains that, following this political defeat, some Zoroastrians abandoned their ancestral religion and others engaged in armed resistance against the conquerors; yet the main locus of resistance was not the military arena, but the domain of culture. Crucially, many Iranians who embraced Islam, contrary to common assumptions, did not sever themselves from their ancient heritage; instead,



Fig. 3. Examples of symbolic motifs in Iranian ceramics of the early Islamic centuries. Source: Grube, 2005, 231–260.

they sought to preserve and reproduce their language, rituals, and cultural traditions. According to Davarān, it was precisely this cultural richness and the deep roots of Iranian intellectual traditions that enabled Iranians, despite their subordinate political status, to play a pivotal role in shaping Islamic civilization (Davarān, 2025, 209). Thus, the political defeat of Iranians in the first Islamic century did not result in cultural silence; rather, Iranian culture, as a historical resource, provided the ground for the continuity of identity and for cultural resistance.

With the rise of local dynasties, the revival of the Persian language and Iranian culture assumed a more systematic form. The Tahirids in Khorasan and the Saffarids in Sistan were among the first polities to pay particular attention to the restoration of Persian and the strengthening of a sense of national identity (Mousavi & Gholipour, 2011, 30–35). The decisive turning point in this cultural movement came under the Samanids, a dynasty that, through extensive patronage of Persian poetry and prose, created the conditions for the florescence of Iranian civilization (Spuler, 1970, 142). The Samanid court became a major center for poets, writers, and thinkers such as Rudaki, Shahid Balkhi, Rābi‘a-ye Qozdāri, Farabi, and Ibn Sina. Ministers of this period, including Jayhani and Bal‘ami, played a foundational role in the dissemination of Persian by supporting writing, translation, and historiography (Dahmardeh, 2005, 75). Safa (1992, 366) describes the fourth Islamic century as the zenith of Iranian epic making, an era in which the Samanids, by valorizing national and mythological narratives, paved the way for masterpieces such as the *Shahnameh*. Poets such as Mas‘udi-ye Marvazi, Daqiqi, and Ferdowsi, in dialogue with the intellectual heritage of this period, re created the

Iranian spirit in the medium of the Persian language. Out of this movement emerged the Khorasani style, which, by drawing on myths and national narratives, contributed to the reproduction of Iranian cultural and historical memory (Vashghani Farahani & Paraver, 2016, 209–210). Later, with the rise of the Seljuks, Persian spread throughout much of the Islamic world and became the official administrative and literary language across vast regions of the eastern Islamic lands (Sharifzadeh, 2013, 9).

In parallel with these developments, efforts such as the translation of Iranian texts into Arabic by intellectuals like Ibn al Muqaffa‘ played a significant role in transmitting Iranian cultural concepts into the broader Islamic milieu (Pirhayati, 2008, 114). Furthermore, Muslim authors of Iranian origin, whether consciously or unconsciously, reflected Zoroastrian traditions and Iranian cultural notions in their works (Shaked, 2002, 176). This process reached its height in the third and fourth Islamic centuries and culminated in the composition of Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh* as a symbol of the consolidation of Iranian national and linguistic identity—a process which, as Tarfadari (2023, 156) notes, forged a lasting link between Iranian thought, ritual, and literature that continued into the Safavid era.

Alongside these currents, the *Shu‘ubiyya* movement also played a significant role in strengthening the Persian language and rearticulating Iranian cultural identity. During the Umayyad Caliphate, when Arab ethnic supremacy over non Arabs had been institutionalized in political and cultural structures, an intellectual and literary reaction emerged among Iranians that later came to be known as *Shu‘ubiyya*. Initially, this movement, drawing on Qur’anic teachings about human equality, sought to defend the

parity of Arabs and non Arabs on religious grounds; over time, however, it evolved beyond egalitarian claims into a cultural identity movement dedicated to restoring the dignity of Iranian civilization in the face of Arab domination. Promoters of Shu‘ubiyya, by contrasting the grandeur of ancient Iranian civilization with the tribal lifestyle of the Arabs, emphasized Iranian cultural superiority, a view that found clear expression in the realm of poetry and literature. In this context, the verses of Ebrahim b. Mamshādh Esfahāni is a vivid reflection of Shu‘ubi sentiment. With a heroic tone imbued with national pride, he declares: “I am the descendant of the noble offspring of Jamshid, and today the lot and inheritance of the kings of Iran has fallen to me... I revive their glory, which had been lost and forgotten over time; therefore tell the Arabs to return to their own land, to eat lizards and graze their flocks, for I, with the sword and the point of my pen, shall sit upon the throne of the kings of Iran” (Ashraf, 2013, 88). In his analysis of this phenomenon, Ahmad Ashraf interprets Shu‘ubiyya as an expression of ethnic pride and the rebirth of Iranian cultural identity, reading it as a form of “early proto nationalism” within the Islamic context (ibid., 88–89).

In sum, the durability of Iranian culture and language was the outcome of a gradual and multidimensional process that began with the religious and cultural resistance of Zoroastrians in the early Islamic centuries and reached its apogee with literary and political revival under local dynasties, especially the Samanids. This trajectory was not merely an effort to preserve language or traditions; it constituted a conscious redefinition of Iranian identity within the broader framework of Islamic civilization. At the same time, the Shu‘ubiyya movement, as a clear manifestation of Iranian cultural self-awareness, played an important role in shaping this identity by drawing on Iran’s mythological, historical, and religious heritage and thereby paving the way for a kind of pre-modern “cultural nationalism.” Thus, the continuity of Iranian language and thought in the form of poetry, literature, and intellectual production was not simply a means of survival, but a new configuration of national self-consciousness which, in opposition to Arab supremacy, laid the foundations of post-Islamic Iranian culture.

• **Shahnameh: The foundational myth and manifestation of national spirit in Iran’s cultural nationalism discourse**

The linkage between ancient Iranian history and post-Sasanian Iranian identity demonstrates the cultural resilience and pride Iranians have long taken in their ancestral heritage. Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh*, as a monumental literary achievement, has played a vital role in preserving and perpetuating the cultural elements of ancient Iran, ensuring the persistence of this historical continuity within the Iranian consciousness. From the standpoint of ethnosymbolists, epic and literary works are not merely texts of artistic value but foundational structures in national identity formation. Nations, in this view, are not the products of modern political institutions but of shared narratives, symbols, and collective memories that have endured through time (Smith, 2004, 30).

At the heart of *Shahnameh*, the re-creation of heroes, myths, and national tales serves a symbolic function. Figures such as Rostam or emblems like the *Derafsh-e Kaviani* embody the cultural ideals of resistance, justice, independence, and patriotism. These myths have been ingrained in the cultural subconscious, providing channels through which society organizes and expresses its historical pains and humiliations (Masoumi, 2008, 12). This process reflects what ethnosymbolists describe as the “reinterpretation of cultural elements in response to the psychological and social needs of successive generations” (Smith, 2004, 110). From a cultural perspective, *Shahnameh* is a response to the collapse of an ancient civilization’s grandeur. As Sattari (2008, 190) observes, the imagined fall of ancient Iran following the Arab invasion produced a kind of historical mourning within the Iranian collective unconscious, and *Shahnameh* emerged as a symbolic restoration of that lost glory. By invoking Sasanian grandeur, Ferdowsi revived the notions of legitimate kingship and *farr-e izadi* (divine glory)—concepts so symbolically potent that even the Abbasid caliphs were influenced by them, imitating aspects of Sasanian ceremonial traditions in their own court rituals. Within this framework, *Shahnameh* simultaneously narrates history

and reconstructs memory—the memory a nation holds of itself and continuously reimagines.

A central tenet of the ethnosymbolist approach is the concept of cultural continuity across time. From this viewpoint, *Shahnameh* can be seen as a mediating link joining pre-Islamic and post-Islamic Iranian identity. As Sattari (*ibid.*, 197) notes, although the civilization of ancient Iran seemed to have fallen, its essence—like fire beneath ashes—remained alive within the cultural unconscious, reemerging through epic works such as *Shahnameh*. Thus, *Shahnameh* is not merely a relic of the past but an active cultural endeavor toward reconstructing national identity after rupture. According to Anthony D. Smith, nations are not exclusively modern formations but evolve from communities deeply rooted in historical and mythological foundations. He argues that foundational myths, collective memories, and cultural symbols constitute the principal mechanisms through which national identity is sustained and reproduced (Smith, 2004, 110). In this light, Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* may be regarded as one of the “foundational myths” underlying the formation and endurance of Iranian identity.

• Continuity in Iran through the mirror of counsel and Persian literature

Shahnameh narrates the mythical and historical trajectory of Iran, from the emergence of the earliest monarchs to the fall of the Sasanian state, concluding with the defeat of the Iranians by the Arabs—a closure that might initially suggest a profound rupture in the continuity of Iran's historical and cultural identity. However, as Davaran emphasizes, such a perception of “complete discontinuity” is inconsistent with historical reality, as Iranians, even after the political collapse of the Sasanian system, successfully preserved and prolonged the fundamental elements of their enduring language, tradition, and culture.

According to Davaran (2025, 1), one of the key mechanisms ensuring this cultural continuity was the literary tradition of *andarz* (counsel), which originated in the pre-Islamic period and persisted under Islam in the form of the literary genre known as *adab*. He asserts that the literature of *andarz* and the Islamic genre of *adab* represent

a longstanding convergence between religion and literature in Iranian culture, and that many Islamic texts, despite their religious content, were directly influenced by the structural and conceptual patterns of *andarz*.

Essentially, *andarz* is an ethical and practical wisdom literature that formed the most extensive literary genre of the Sasanian period, grounded in the Zoroastrian principle of “choosing good over evil.” Davaran (*ibid.*, 174) even traces its origins to the inscriptions of Darius I, where ideas of truth and falsehood, right and wrong, wisdom and anger are emphasized. *Andarz* literature comprised a collection of maxims, edicts, moral advice, instructions, and proverbs attributed either to mythical sages such as Oushnar or Jamshid of the *Avesta*, or to Sasanian kings and wise men. Often composed in the form of testamentary discourse addressed to princes or courtiers, these writings served to guide people in religious, political, and everyday affairs, thus deeply embedding themselves in the oral traditions of Iranian culture.

With the advent of the Islamic era, the genre of *adab* acquired a dual character, reflecting both Iranian and Islamic cultural elements. Nevertheless, the structural and thematic continuity between *andarz* and *adab* allowed many pre-Islamic moral and behavioral models to be revived within a new framework. Figures such as Ardashir, Khosrow Anushirvan, and Bozorgmehr—central to *andarz* literature—retained their prominence in Islamic *adab* works, serving as cultural intermediaries between the ancient Iranian legacy and Islamic literature (*ibid.*, 258).

In light of the foregoing, the *andarz* tradition—as the most far-reaching moral and didactic literary form of the Sasanian era—functioned as a vessel for Iran's foundational ethical and cultural symbols. By reproducing moral teachings, admonitions, and behavioral exemplars, this tradition safeguarded and regenerated pre-Islamic values within the Islamic context, thus ensuring the continuity and preservation of Iran's collective identity.

• Foundational Rituals in Iran's Cultural Memory

As Iran's foremost national festival, Nowruz holds a distinctive mythological and historical position. In *Shahnameh*, Ferdowsi attributes its foundation to Jamshid,

the king who, upon attaining *farr-e kayani* (divine glory), proclaimed the first day of spring as a celebration of victory and cosmic renewal (Afifi, 2004, 488). Archaeological evidence from Persepolis suggests that representatives of various nations under Achaemenid rule may have presented gifts in the Hall of a Hundred Columns during this time, underscoring Nowruz's link with the political and cultural unity of ancient Iran (Esmaeilpour, 2008, 102–103).

The Sur or Suri festival, celebrated five days before Nowruz, was one of the major pre-Nowruz rituals and involved the lighting of fires and the cleansing of the environment. In Zoroastrian belief, fire symbolizes truth and purity, and its veneration signifies reverence for light and life rather than worship (Afifi, 2004, 404–405; Esmaeilpour, 2008, 106). Many Iranian rituals and festivals during the Islamic period thus retain their Zoroastrian foundations: though the names of Zarathustra or Ahura Mazda may have vanished, the structures and functions of these customs have persisted. The contemporary Charshanbe-Suri—the “Festival of Fire” preceding Nowruz—is a transformed continuation of the ancient Zoroastrian *Hamaspahmaedaya* ritual, illustrating how Iran's cultural layers have endured beyond religious and political transformations (Davaran, 2025, 249).

Continuing the annual ritual cycle, the thirteenth day of Farvardin, known as *Sizdah Bedar* and dedicated to the rain deity, serves as an occasion to return to nature and celebrate the earth's renewal. People would gather outdoors, rejoicing while invoking rain and fertility for the land (Niknam, 2000, 42). Additionally, the *Yalda* night ceremony—the longest night of the year, marking the end of Azar—honors the triumph of light over darkness. Iranians traditionally gather together, reciting poetry and enjoying fruits such as pomegranates and watermelons to greet the growing daylight (*ibid.*, 89).

According to Spuler (1970, 416), after the Arab conquest of Iran, Iranians clung to their ancient culture so tenaciously that Arabs in Persia were compelled to observe Iranian customs. Arabs who refused to participate

in local festivals were not permitted to stay; only those who willingly joined in performing Iranian rituals and in jointly celebrating national and religious feasts such as Nowruz and *Mehrgan* were accepted.

These elements not only anchor a nation's collective memory within historical narratives but also, through ritual reproduction and symbolic renewal, establish enduring connections among generations. In Iranian culture, ceremonies such as Nowruz, *Gahanbars*, the Festival of Fire, and the *Haft-Sin* setting are recognized as the principal pillars of cultural continuity across history. These traditions—rooted in ancient Iranian civilization—have survived despite religious and political transformations to this day (Afifi, 2004; Esmaeilpour, 2008; Niknam, 2000). Symbols, as reflections of shared and distinctive collective experiences and values, encompass signs, hymns, festivals, rituals, coded languages, and sacred sites that play an essential role in preserving and evoking a community's cultural identity (Smith, 2015, 344–364).

Discussion

From the perspective of ethnosymbolist theory, analyzing the evolution of nationalist movements in Iran requires transcending the simplistic dichotomy of tradition versus modernity. This approach argues that processes of identity formation and nation-building must be examined within a deeper historical and cultural framework—one in which symbols, myths, and cultural continuities play a foundational role in the formation and endurance of national identity. Within this framework, ethnosymbolism, as a new theoretical horizon, provides the possibility of a deeper reading of the internal mechanisms through which nations take shape. It emphasizes the necessity of recognizing long-term historical continuities, the centrality of cultural elements, and the functional significance of symbols in the reproduction of national identity.

Given Iran's unique historical and cultural background, this approach allows Iranian nationalism to be understood not as a mere reflection of global influences or as a manifestation of modernity, but as a phenomenon deeply rooted in the cultural and historical texture of the land

itself. Accordingly, Iranian national identity is not merely the product of modern political and social structures, but is grounded in the ancient beliefs, collective memories, myths, and language of the Iranian people. This discourse emerged in response to linguistic, religious, and political domination following the fall of the Sasanian Empire and gradually evolved into a lasting intellectual and cultural tradition. From this perspective, Iranian nationalism is less an imitation of Western models than a creative resonance with global transformations—one that retains its discursive and cultural independence despite external influences.

Invoking Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities," one may also argue that national discourse in Iran, like that of other societies, underwent a process of collective imaginative construction. However, its fundamental distinction from European counterparts lies in the deep interconnection between this collective imagination and premodern, religious, mythological, and linguistic elements. This distinction can also be explained through the Foucauldian framework of discourse, in which Iranian nationalism is not seen as a transient reaction to modernity or colonialism, but as a historical discourse sedimented within complex layers of power and knowledge. Thus, Iranian nationalism should be regarded as an ancient and multilayered process within the cultural and historical memory—a process that, amidst continuities and ruptures, reproduces a distinctive and self-sustaining identity.

Ethnosymbolist theory, supported by historical evidence, confirms that Iranians possess a national spirit that has endured through their myths, symbols, and cultural heritage. The ongoing tradition of *Shahnameh* composition and the vitality of mythic narratives in the Islamic period attest to this enduring and active national spirit. This view aligns with the ideas of thinkers such as Herder and Hegel, who considered the nation to be a living and dynamic organism nourished by an unconscious force known as the "national spirit." This force manifests itself through a shared language, collective rituals, and historical memory, which contribute to the continuity of national identity even without the explicit awareness of individual

members (Renan et al., 2011, 100; Kristeva, 2023, 52). For Renan et al. (2011, 47-48), the nation arises from collective possession of memories and a shared will to live together in the present. He emphasizes history, ancestral sacrifice, and shared glories as social capital vital to the formation of nations. On this basis, nations such as the Iranians, Greeks, Jews, and Chinese exemplify enduring ethnic communities that, despite historical transformations, have continually reproduced the fundamental elements of their identities (Smith, 2015, 362). Hence, the nation is not merely a construct of modern political will but the outcome of historical and cultural continuities deeply rooted in collective memory, myth, and traditional institutions.

Following these theoretical premises, Iranian national identity results from a historical and cultural process shaped and continually reproduced through symbols, myths, language, and collective memory. One of the most prominent manifestations of this process can be observed in the cultural revival of Iran during the early Islamic centuries, particularly under the Samanids—a period during which the patronage of Persian language and epic literature reinforced and reconstituted national identity. Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, as a foundational and myth-making symbol, revitalized the collective memory of Iranians, preserved the Persian language, and represented a symbolic form of cultural resistance against foreign domination.

Likewise, the literary tradition of *andarz*—the most extensive moral and wisdom-oriented genre of the Sasanian era—played a pivotal role in reproducing the values and identity-based teachings of Iranian culture. By preserving its moral advice, admonitions, and behavioral paradigms, this tradition managed to reproduce substantial aspects of pre-Islamic ethics and culture even during the Islamic period. Thus, it functioned as an effective mechanism for ensuring the continuity and safeguarding of the collective Iranian identity.

Within the framework of ethnosymbolist theory, visual symbols in Iranian art are not merely aesthetic expressions but reflections of collective memory and ethnic identity. In the artworks of the early Islamic

centuries, motifs such as the cypress, lion, and deer embodied concepts of life, power, and cultural continuity and signified a form of symbolic resistance against historical transformations. The examination of Iranian textiles from this period reveals the persistence of Sasanian roots, which subsequently served as models for Islamic art and other cultural traditions (Sheikhi, 2024, 166). In this sense, textile art—with its symbolic designs and use of authentic fibers—became a medium for transmitting Iran’s cultural heritage (Gholamrezaei, 2015, 9). As Coop (2011, 150, 190) emphasizes, myths and symbols serve as instruments for representing collective order and defining identity boundaries—a dynamic clearly reflected in Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh* through the reimagining of national myths to reinforce Iranian identity.

Conclusion

An examination of the discourse of neo-antiquarian nationalism in Iran demonstrates that this discourse was neither a product of the Qajar period nor merely an outcome of European modernity. Rather, it possesses deep and continuous roots in Iran’s cultural history, extending from the post-Arab conquest era to the present. Unlike its Western counterparts, which often rest on ethnic or racial foundations, Iranian national identity is cultural, historical, and spiritual in essence—reproduced through the enduring medium of language, myths, rituals, and indigenous symbols. At the same time, throughout its evolution, this discourse has exhibited conceptual resonance with European models of nationalism without ever fully conforming to them.

Following the political collapse of the Sasanian Empire, a broad cultural resistance emerged, embodied in the reinterpretation of myths, the revival of the Persian language, the celebration of national rituals such as Nowruz, and the creation of foundational literary works such as Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh*. This cultural resistance—rooted in Iran’s moral and mystical traditions—constitutes a form of cultural nationalism that envisions Iranian identity as transcending territorial and material attachments, redefining national identity through an organic linkage between past and present.

From the perspective of ethnosymbolist theory, national identity is not solely the result of political or economic factors; rather, it takes shape and endures within the matrix of symbols, myths, traditions, and historical memories. The Iranian manifestation of this theoretical model lies in the symbols and myths that have sustained historical memory and, during times of crisis, served as instruments of cultural resistance and collective cohesion.

The findings of this study indicate that Iranian national identity during the first to fifth centuries of the Islamic era emerged from a continuous historical process grounded in Iranian culture and society. Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh*, Islamic-period textiles, and other artistic works exemplify the reproduction of this national discourse—each through the re-creation of myths, heroes, and ancient history, reconstructing the collective memory and representing cultural and symbolic resistance against foreign domination. Similarly, the *andarz* or “wisdom literature” tradition—the most extensive moral and ethical genre of the Sasanian period—played a key role in reproducing Iranian identity-based values and teachings. By preserving moral advice, ethical exhortations, and behavioral paradigms, this tradition managed to reproduce significant elements of pre-Islamic ethics and cultural patterns within the Islamic era, thereby serving as an effective mechanism for the continuity and safeguarding of Iran’s collective identity. These results correspond with the findings of scholars, confirming that antiquarian nationalism in Iran is rooted in historical tradition and collective memory rather than merely reflecting Western modernity or external influence. In conclusion, Iranian national identity can be understood as the outcome of historical continuity, symbolic capacity, and cultural creativity. Artistic and cultural representations have played a central role in consolidating and transmitting this identity across generations. These findings underscore the significance of adopting a historical-cultural perspective toward Iranian nationalism and highlight the decisive role of cultural heritage in shaping national self-consciousness.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests in conducting this research.

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