

A Cylinder with Many Sides

By Pamela Karimi

For much of its history, Iran has been known for preserving primarily its word-based history (oral or written), rather than its material culture. Material things have often been subject to both accidental and intentional damage. Indeed, the history of Iran is filled with instances of destruction and obliteration of its tangible past. And these eradications were not always consequences of Islamic iconoclasm and aniconism. Consider how the creation of modern nation-states coincided with the simultaneous celebration of some monuments and the deliberate destruction of others. Scores of rulers have destroyed the arts and monuments of their predecessors: Reza Shah in the start of his reign smashed the elaborate Qajar gateways of Tehran and the notorious Ayatollah Sadeq Khalkhali destroyed the magnificent tomb tower of Reza Shah himself at the outset of the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

This urge to destroy or suppress indicates the important role tangible objects play in the formation of Iran's identity. Even those material things that have survived are sometimes subject to inaccurate appraisals. For example, the Cyrus Cylinder—a small barrel-shaped baked clay object containing cuneiform text about the founder of the Persian Achaemenid Empire, Cyrus the Great, and his conquest of Babylon in 539 BC—was described by the Shah of Iran as 'the first declaration of human rights'. However, while, as Neil MacGregor, the current director of the British Museum, has aptly remarked, the cylinder's message reveals how Cyrus might have

attempted to gently run a society with people of different ethnicities and religious backgrounds, to associate the cylinder with the modern concept of human rights is inaccurate. Indeed, according to the widely accepted translation of the cylinder's text by the British scholar Irving Finkel, rather than highlighting the power and agency of the common man, the text focuses on an appraisal of Cyrus's abilities as a king.

Tangible remains from Iran's past have also been subject to favoritism. Take, for example, how little discussion of Darya-ye Noor is happening in Iranian public venues. One of the largest cut diamonds in the world, weighing an estimated 182 carats, Darya-ye Noor ('Sea of light' in Persian) fell into the hands of Iranians following the 1739 Nader Shah's invasion of northern India. Cyrus was credited by biblical sources as the patron and deliverer of the Jews and Nader Shah and his army were responsible for killing thousands of people in the battle of Karnal in Delhi. Thus while the Cyrus Cylinder, is allegedly a symbol of human rights, the latter is a symbol of imperial and colonial ambitions of Iranians.

What is at stake in removing tangible objects from the collective imagination of a nation? Why is there a tendency to communicate history through a selected number of its tangible remains rather than others? Can ancient monuments and relics *act* autonomously? Are they *actants* or non-human sources of action (in Bruno Latour's sense of the term)? If so, in what ways are they part of our lives and social networks and how should we make sense of them in both material and semantic ways?

Deliberating aloud about Iran's identity through a single tangible object is at the heart of *7 Sides of a Cylinder*, an experimental film in seven segments conceived and produced by artist, writer, and former executive director of the Iran Heritage Foundation Haleh Anvari. The film brings together the voices of different Iranian and non-Iranian scholars, artists, and laymen who reflect

on the meaning of the cylinder. Anvari's approach is on a par with some of today's most advanced curatorial strategies in showcasing and unfolding historical objects. A prime example is the treatment of Magna Carta at the current 800th anniversary commemorative exhibition at the British Library (March-September 2015). Rather than simply glorifying how the document gave authority to ordinary people (which is so frequently assumed), ample emphasis is placed on how the document focused primarily on the rights of 'free men'—in particular barons, thus excluding serfs and other unfree labor. Similarly, Anvari's strategy urges us to ponder how we might better understand, display, and discuss Iran's history through historical objects.

The film includes unedited voices of ordinary Iranians in Sara Khaki's segment and honest and uncensored academic assessments in Narges Bajgholi's piece. While Khaki's young Iranian protagonists imply uncertainty about the significance of the cylinder within Iran's collective memory and imagination, the academic voices in Bajgholi's segment clarify the imprecise associations of the modern concept of human rights with the text of the cylinder. Other voices in Arash Saedinia's segment attest to the existing overrated portrayal of the cylinder, harking back to the late Shah's exclusive interpretation. And yet Saedinia's segment of the film also informs us about the extent to which the cylinder has become an icon of kitsch among the diasporic Iranian community in Los Angeles. In their segments, Aggi Ebrahimi Bazzaa and Hamid Reza Ahmadi place the cylinder into the global perception of Iran since the 1979 revolution. The two directors disclose two kinds of myths about Iran: one of its allegedly magnificent ancient times and the other of its not so glorious recent past. Maryam Kashani's segment is a poetic tribute to ethics of governing or principles for which Cyrus is purportedly admired. Last, Amirali Navaee gives us a beautiful slice of Iranian cinema, by placing the viewer in an indeterminate state, where we do not know what to make of the cylinder in light of Iranians' identity crisis in the age

of nuclear controversy and economic sanctions. Thus, each filmmaker evaluates the cylinder in a unique way while allowing ample room for varying interpretations: some are optimistic and confident, others are adversarial and pessimistic, and the remainder is tentative and unsure. There are, indeed, many sides to the Cyrus cylinder, even more than the seven views acknowledged in the title of the film.

7 Sides of a Cylinder implies that if we Iranians are to become more informed citizens and better appreciate our identity by remembering and keeping alive the most prominent objects and ideas of our past, we must admit that art and cinema provide a wide range of facts and feelings about that past. Indeed, *7 Sides of a Cylinder* promises a different kind of dream than those commonly held and shared.