

CENTRE FOR HISTORY AND ECONOMICS

Iranian Digital Resources

1) National Archives and Archives of the Foreign Ministry

The two biggest and most modern national archives of Iran are the National Archives (<http://www.nlai.ir>) and the Archives of the Foreign Ministry in Tehran. The latter one is based next to the Foreign Ministry's Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS) in Northern Tehran. Both archives have made almost all documents available electronically. Thus, the visitor can search not only for files, but also for single documents, within the archive's electronic databases. In many cases even the content of the documents is available electronically. The databases are in Persian only and not accessible via the Internet.

The obvious problem of this system is that documents which are not registered electronically can hardly be detected by the visitor. Another problem is accessibility. Since the database can only be used from computers in the archives, researchers have to get access to the archives in Tehran. In addition to the formalities of obtaining research or student visas, foreigners also have to apply formally for access to the archives. Students have to submit a reference letter from their supervisors. In the past foreigners sometimes have had problems when entering the archive with the Islamic security guards, who are positioned at the entrance of all public buildings in Iran. The academic staff of the archives, however, is usually very helpful and friendly.

2) Asnad Digital Archive Project (www.asnad.org)

Recently, an electronic database of Persian documents from Iran and Central Asia up to the twentieth century has been set up on the Internet. The Asnad Digital Archive Project was initiated by Christoph Werner and Bianca Devos at the Department for Islamic Studies at the University of Freiburg (Germany) and has now moved to Philips-Universität Marburg, Centre for Near- and Middle Eastern Studies (CNMS). It is funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). The official mission of the project is facilitating access to the growing number of available Persian historical deeds and documents, both published and unpublished. It should theoretically allow work on archival material, with the help of incorporated facsimiles, without recourse to travelling to the original - often remote - place of publication or storage. The Database includes "public" and "private" documents: royal decrees and orders, official correspondence, and shari'a court documents, such as contracts of sale and lease, waqf deeds, marriage contracts, and court orders. It also serves as a bibliographic reference tool, being a continually updated repertoire of published historical documents.

The absence of a sufficient and relevant quantity of archival sources on the medieval and early modern periods of Iran and other areas of the Persian cultural sphere has

been lamented for a long time. While the situation is still in no way comparable to other fields of historical research, whether one looks at Europe or other regions of the Islamic World, such as those under Ottoman rule, the last decades have shown that much more documents have survived than hitherto surmised. A large number of archival materials from all periods and regions continues to be published and more and more private and public collections are now accessible.

Much of this material, however, is difficult to locate and, if published, often dispersed haphazardly over a large number of journals and monographs. Thus, it is difficult to get a concrete idea of what kind of primary sources, both published and unpublished, are actually available. Archives might be accessible only for a limited time or with much effort, while material continues to be shifted between various institutions and a vast number of documents is still held in private collections. Earlier attempts to provide digests and repertoires of published documents have suffered from the fact that they are soon outdated and, once printed, cannot be amended easily. In most instances, they focused either on a certain type of documents or dealt with only one region or period. Furthermore, one still had to locate and obtain the journals and monographs in which the documents were originally published.

The aim of the ASNAD project is to alleviate difficulties in primary access to archives and collections and to make the increasing number of published documents more easily obtainable. It creates a virtual archive of Persian documents that is easily accessible and offers concise search options for documents of a particular period or region, or those involving a specific person, topic or location. Of central concern is the inclusion of facsimiles and reproductions with high resolution that allows work on archival material without recourse to the original. Provided they are available, critical editions are incorporated as downloadable PDF-files. Digital text editions, however, are not envisaged at present.

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