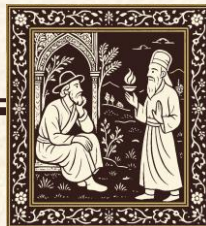


Journeys and Encounters

The History of the Zoroastrian of Iran and Its Challenges



Funded by the
European Union
GAP-101204827

Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Institute of Iranian Studies – Zoroastrian Studies Seminar Series

9 January, 2026



T R A V E L S

The project TRAVELS

- Main aim: history of the Zoroastrian community of Iran between the late eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century
- The project is under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions Global Postdoctoral Fellowships
- Main institution
- Institutions involved:



SAPIENZA
UNIVERSITÀ DI ROMA



UNIVERSITY OF
TORONTO



SOAS
University of London



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The subject of the project

History of the Zoroastrian community in Iran from a sociopolitical and cultural perspective across **three** distinct **contexts**:

- 1 — *intra-zoroastrian relations*: within the community and between Iranian and Indian *behdins*
- 2 — *inter-regional relations*: between the Zoroastrian community and the Iranian / Persianate setting
- 3 — *extra-regional relations*: between the Zoroastrian and the non-Asian cultures, i.e., Europeans





Why 1773 and 1854? – Zoroastrian Studies

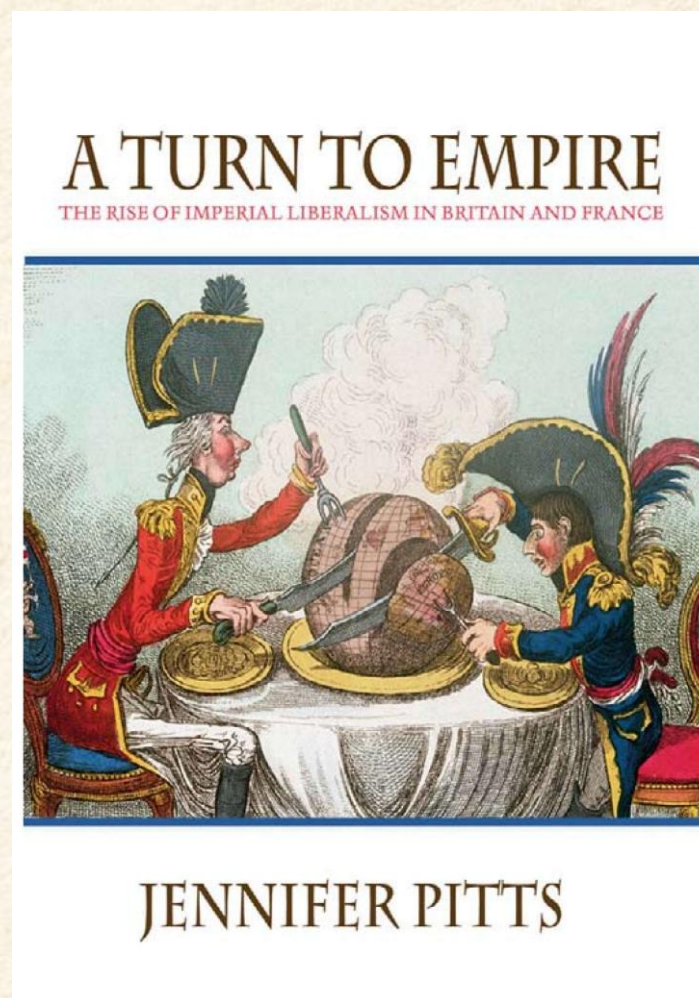
- Zoroastrian population in Iran: from 250,000 (early 18th c.) to 9,000 (mid-19th c.)
- Cessation of official correspondence between the Iranian and Indian *behdins* after the *Ithoter Revāyat* (1773)
- Establishment of the first Iranian Zoroastrian *anjomans* by Hataria in Yazd and Kerman (1854), modelled after the Parsi *panchayat*
- These roughly 80 years have been decisive for the Zoroastrians, yet they also constitute a period of profound silence in the sources





Why 1773 and 1854? – Asian and European Studies

- 1790–1830: a turning point in imperial administration and relations with other Asian states (Malcolm, Elphinstone, and Munro)
- The period between the mid-18th and mid-19th centuries was a time of transformation within the Parsi community, marked by the rise of the laity and Europeanisation





Objectives of the project

- Reconstruct a dark chapter in the Zoroastrian history
- Situate Zoroastrians within regional and national contexts
- Use the community as the guiding thread to narrate eighty years of global transformation



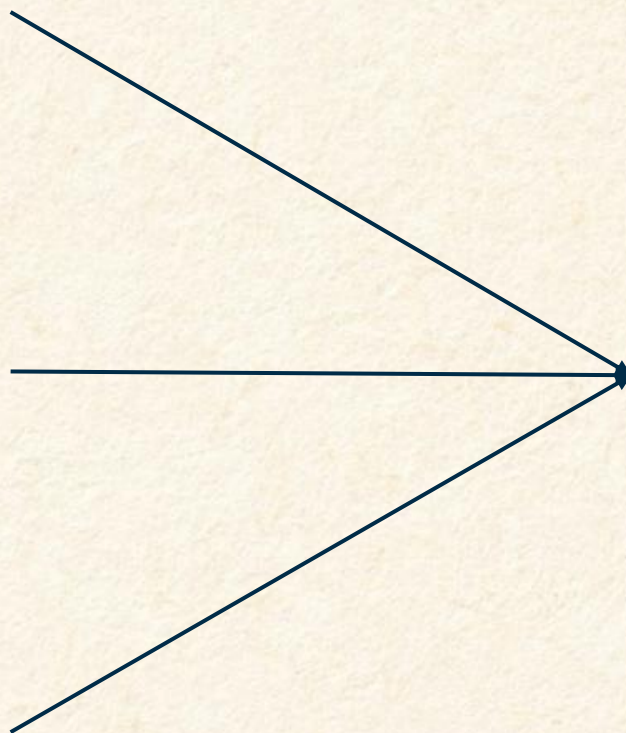


The principal challenge — imbalance between local and external sources

Lack of Iranian
Zoroastrian literature:
only a small handful of
texts

Cessation of contacts
between Iranian and
Indian *behdins*.

Growing presence of
European in Iraan with
frequent contacts with
the Zoroastrians



**90% of the sources
are European**



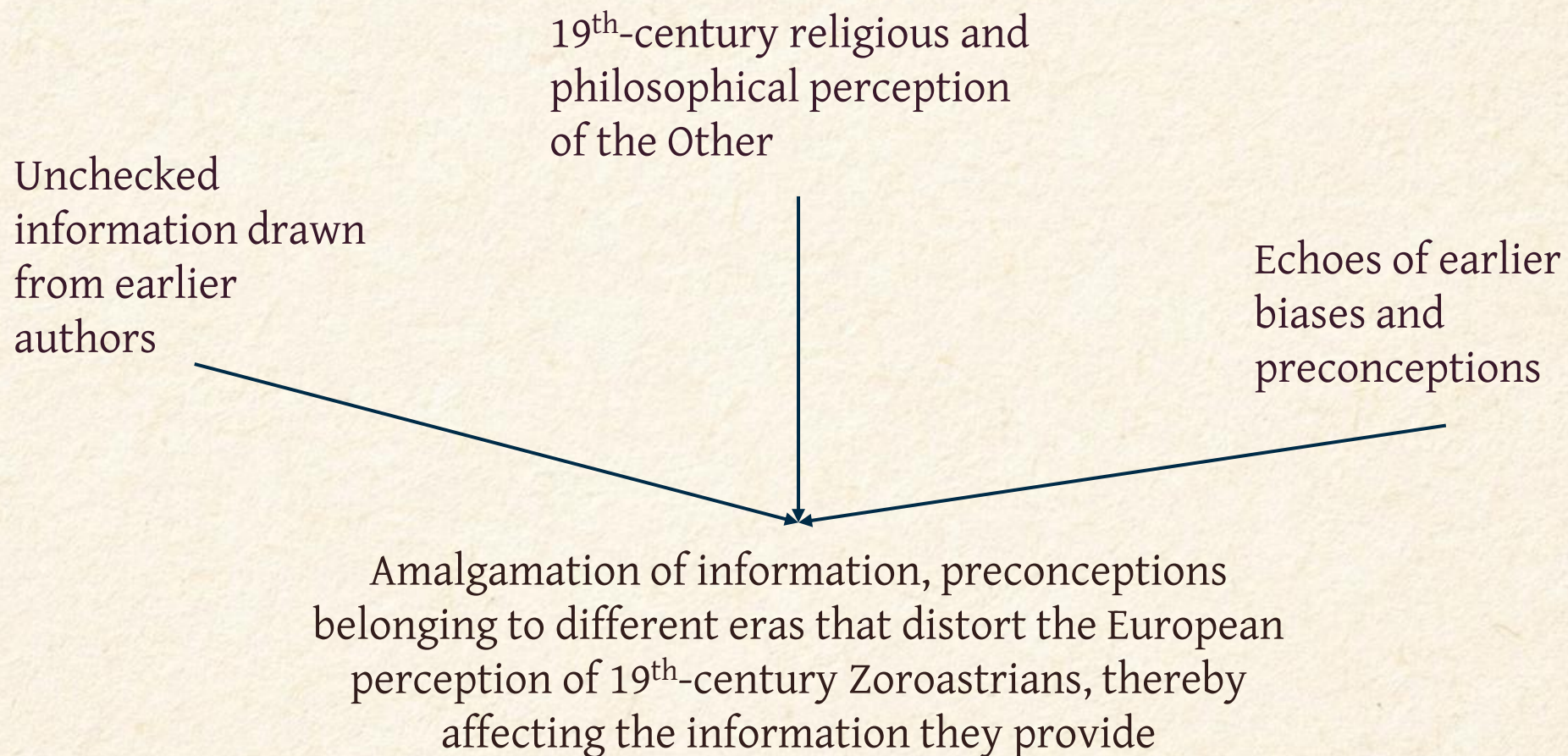
What information do the European sources provide?

- General observations: number of Zoroastrian families, geographical distributions, Zoroastrian society (for instance, Buckingham, Kinneir, Malcolm)
- Details of Zoroastrian life, such as customs, religious practices, and social conditions. Their situation is often compared with that of the ancient past, which is regarded as glorious. By some – such as Porter – the present condition is perceived as a consequence of their moral decline.
- Comparison between the Iranian and Indian *behdins*
- First-hand experiences with individual Zoroastrians, which lend a personal dimension absent from more general accounts





Amalgamation of ideas and preconceptions

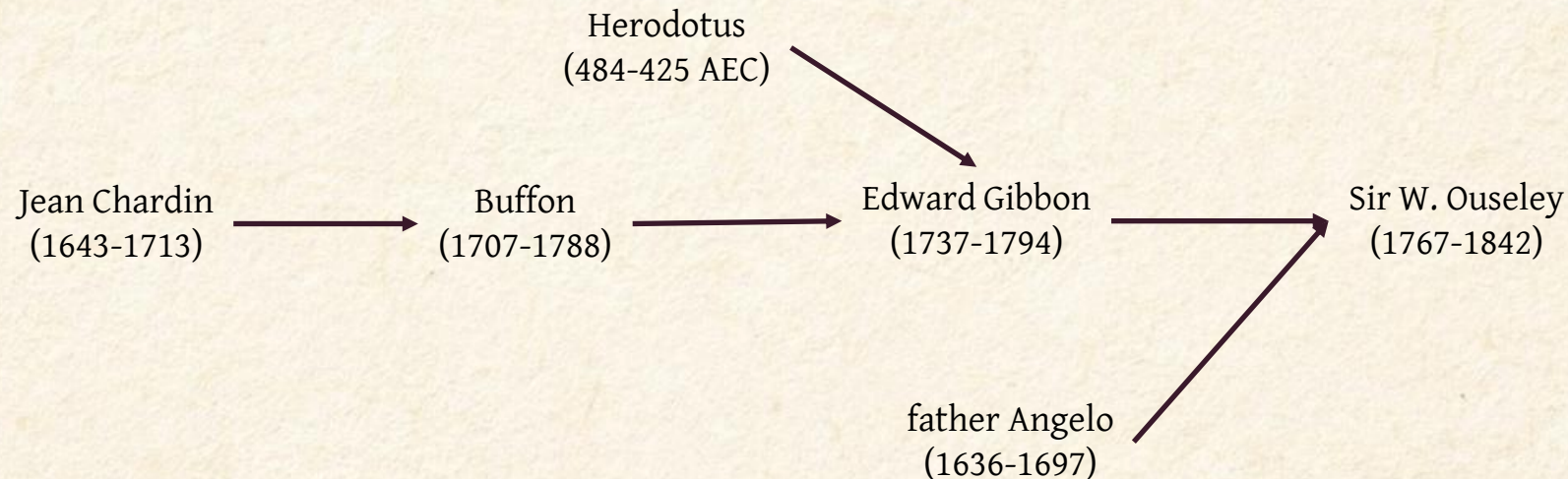




A Case of Amalgamation: Ouseley's rebuttal to aesthetic misperception of Zoroastrians

In his account of his journey to Iran, Ouseley defends the Zoroastrians against two contemporary accusations – idolatry and the more peculiar charge of aesthetic devaluation.

In his rebuttal, Ouseley cites several sources revealing an amalgamation of ideas and preconceptions from different periods.





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How should these issues be dealt with?



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Fragmentation & Contextualisation

+

Counterbalance



Fragmentation / Contextualisation

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- Contextualisation of each author according to their philosophical and religious thought, as well as within the political debate of their time
- Consider Orientalists and Orientalism as a complex, multifaceted, and evolving phenomenon



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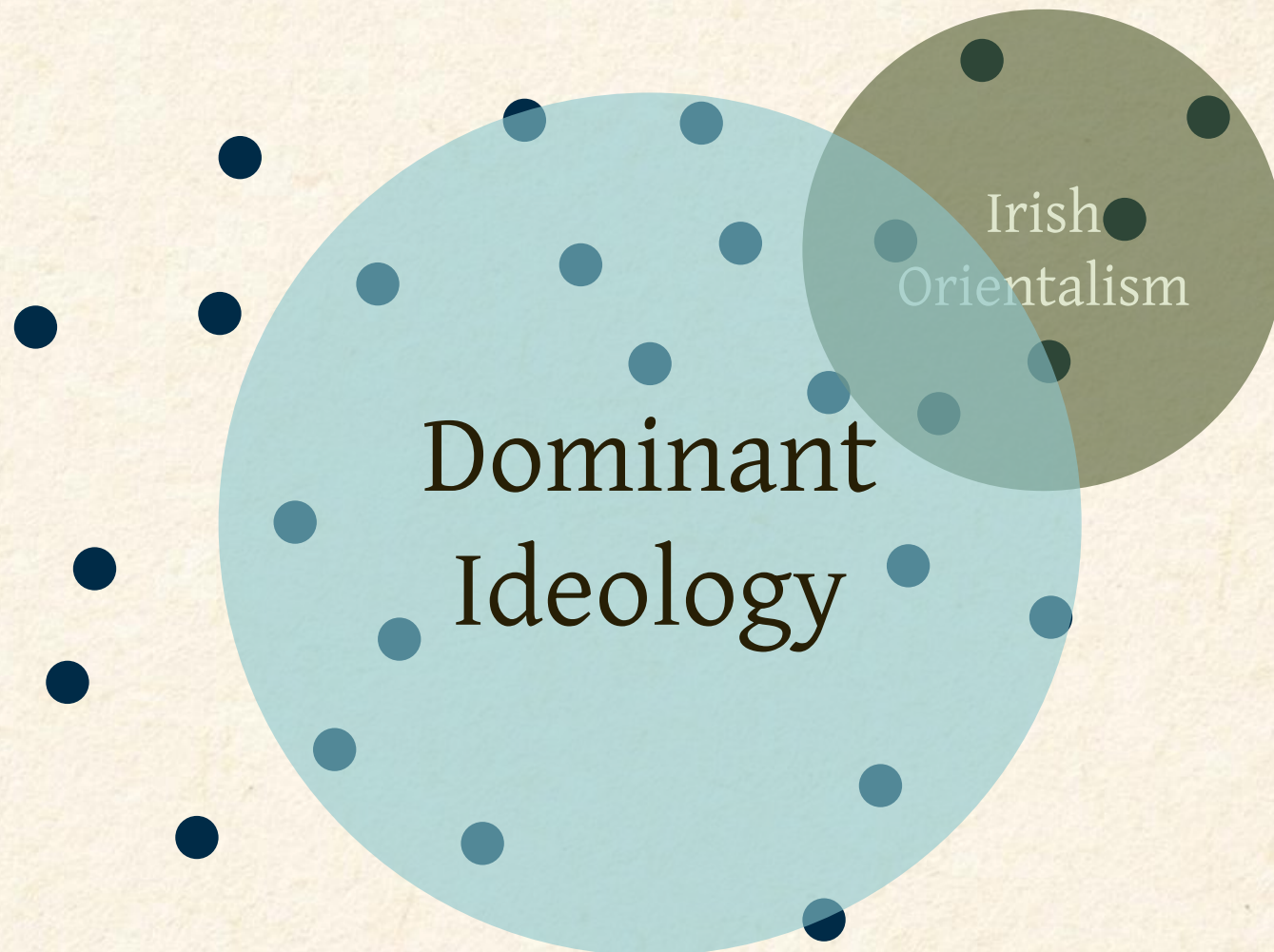
Fragmentation / Contextualisation

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James Silk
Buckingham

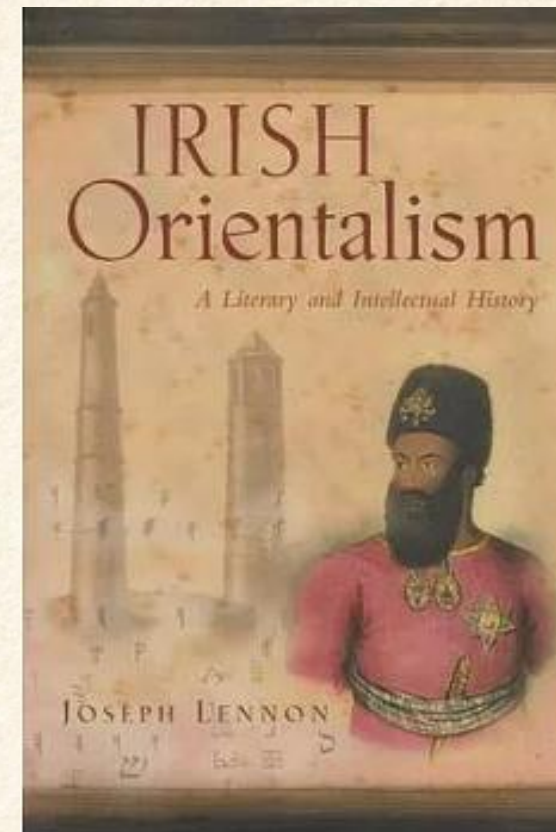
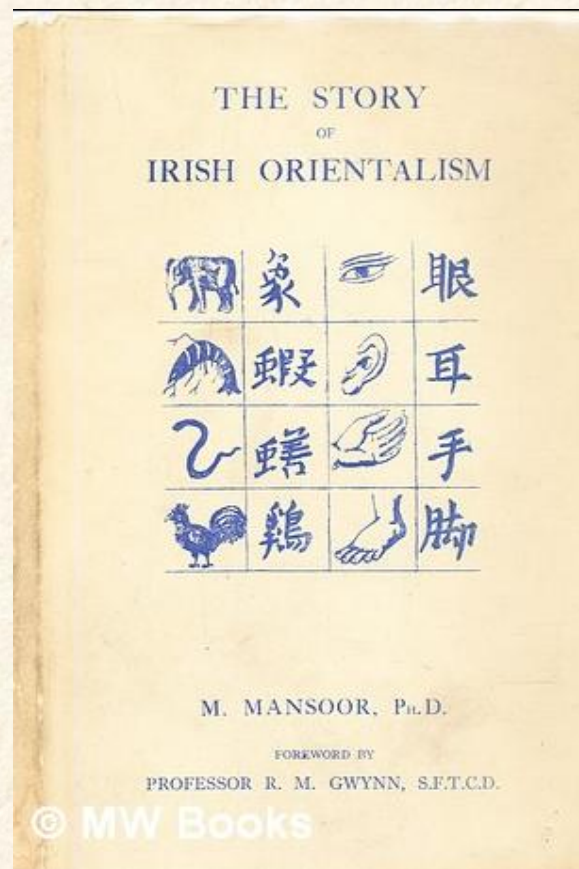
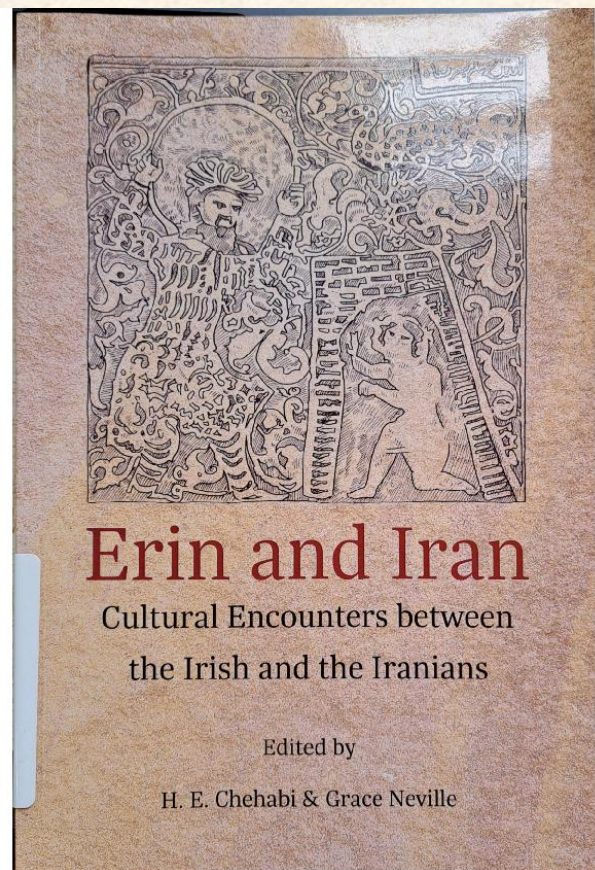


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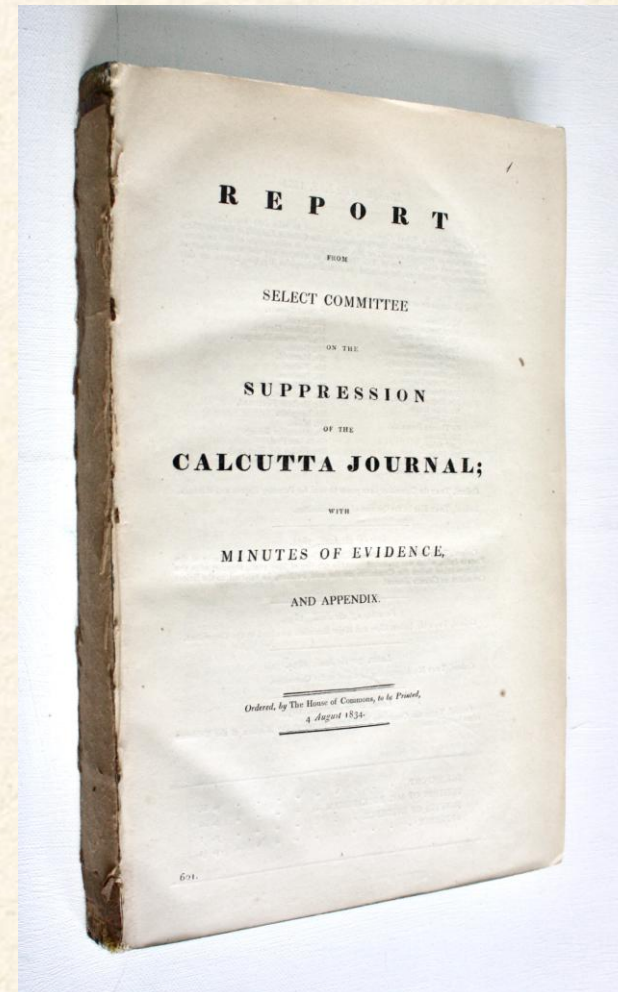
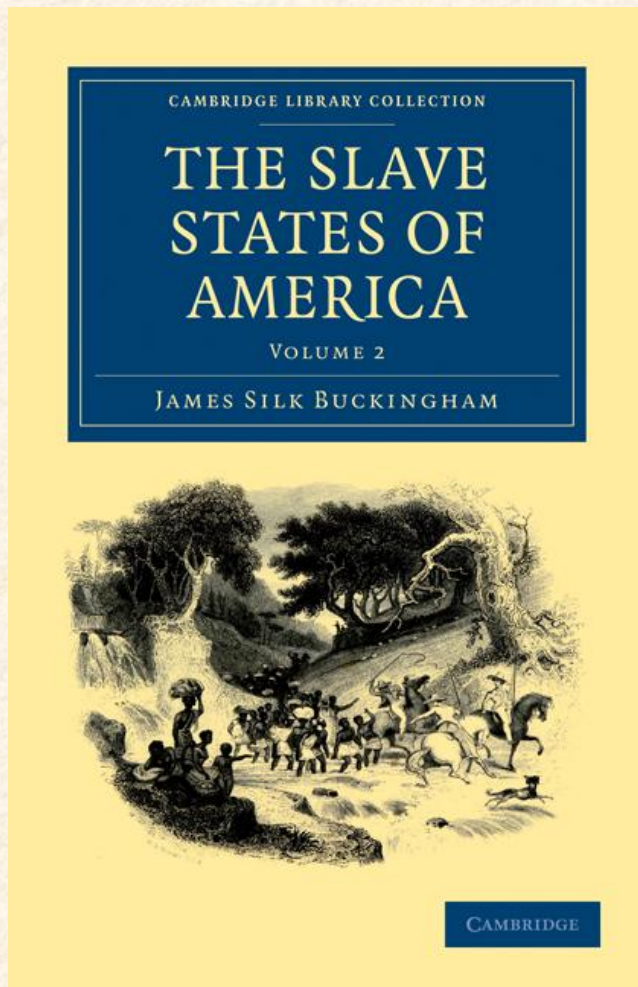
Irish Orientalism





James Silk Buckingham

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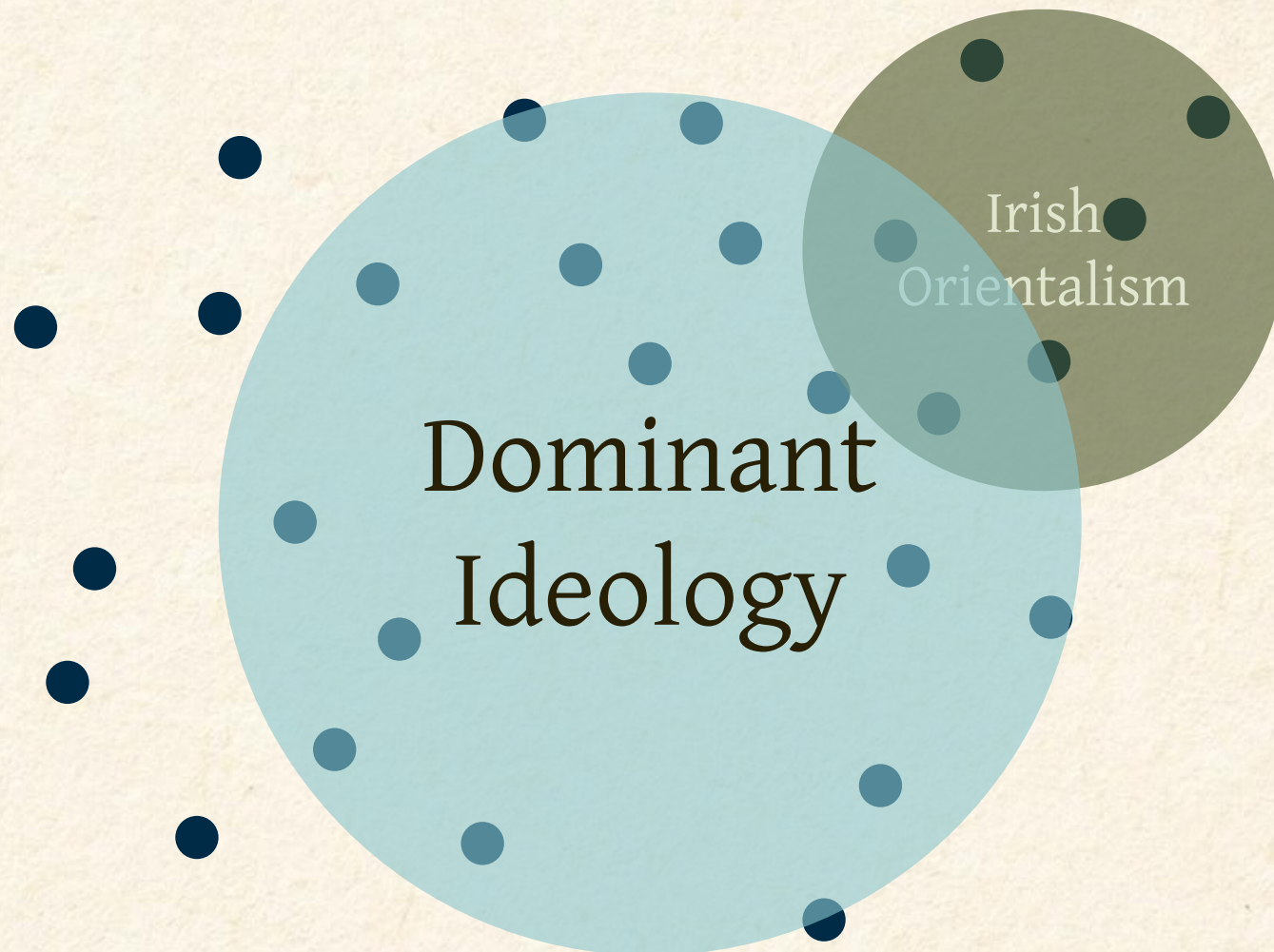
Fragmentation / Contextualisation

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James Silk
Buckingham



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Occidentalism

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The accounts written by Europeans nonetheless incorporate material derived from **Zoroastrian/Iranian informants**, who played a central role in determining both *what* was reported and *how* it was conveyed.

The *what* and the *how* depended to a large extent on how these informants perceived the Europeans; it is therefore senseless to regard such accounts as unilateral.





Occidentalisms

T R A V E L S

1. — *Parsi perceptions* towards Europeans and Iranians
 - A. Conservative
 - B. Reformist
1. — *Iranian perceptions* towards Europeans and Zoroastrians
2. — *Iranian Zoroastrian perceptions* towards Europeans and Iranians



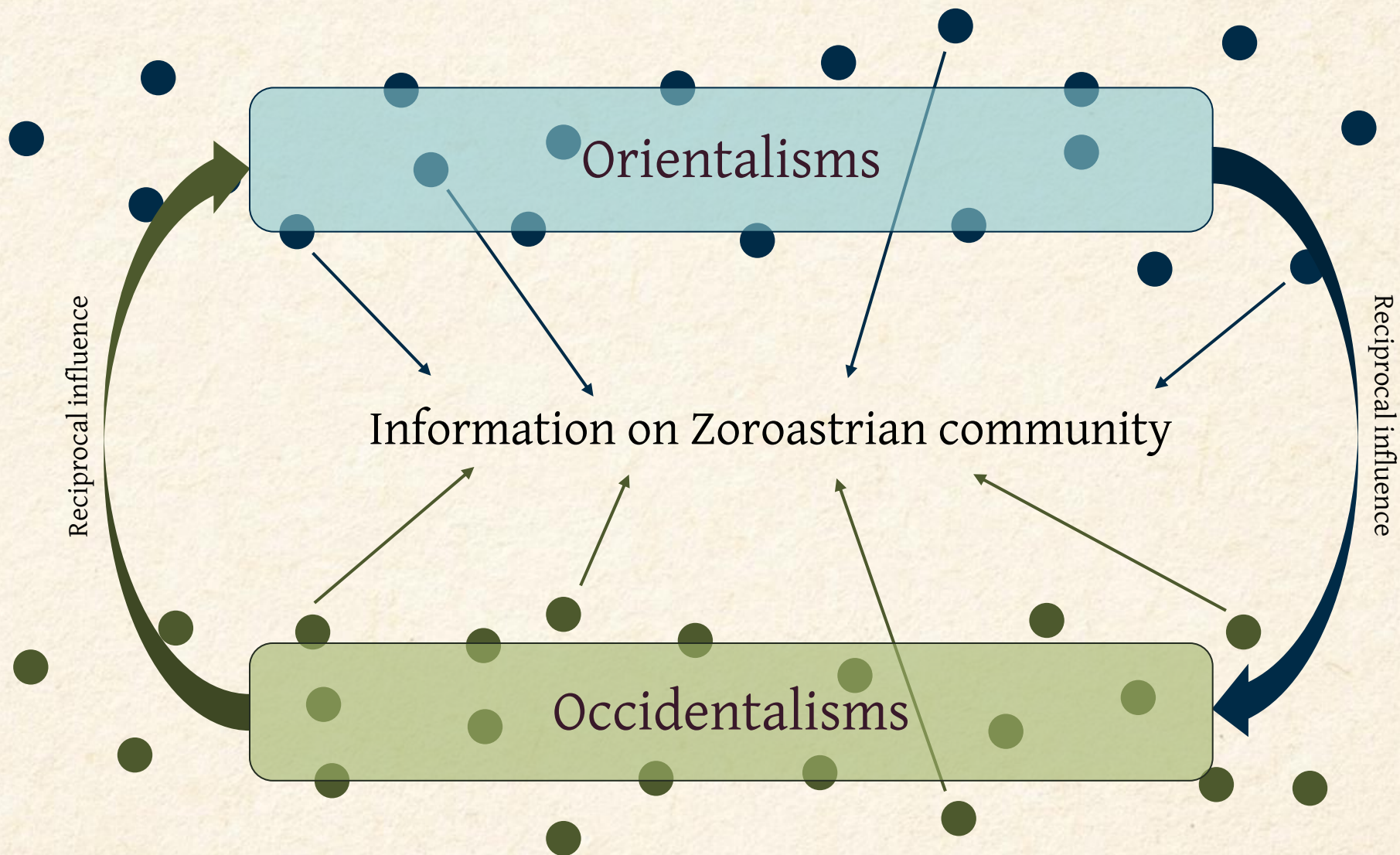


Occidentalisms and Orientalisms

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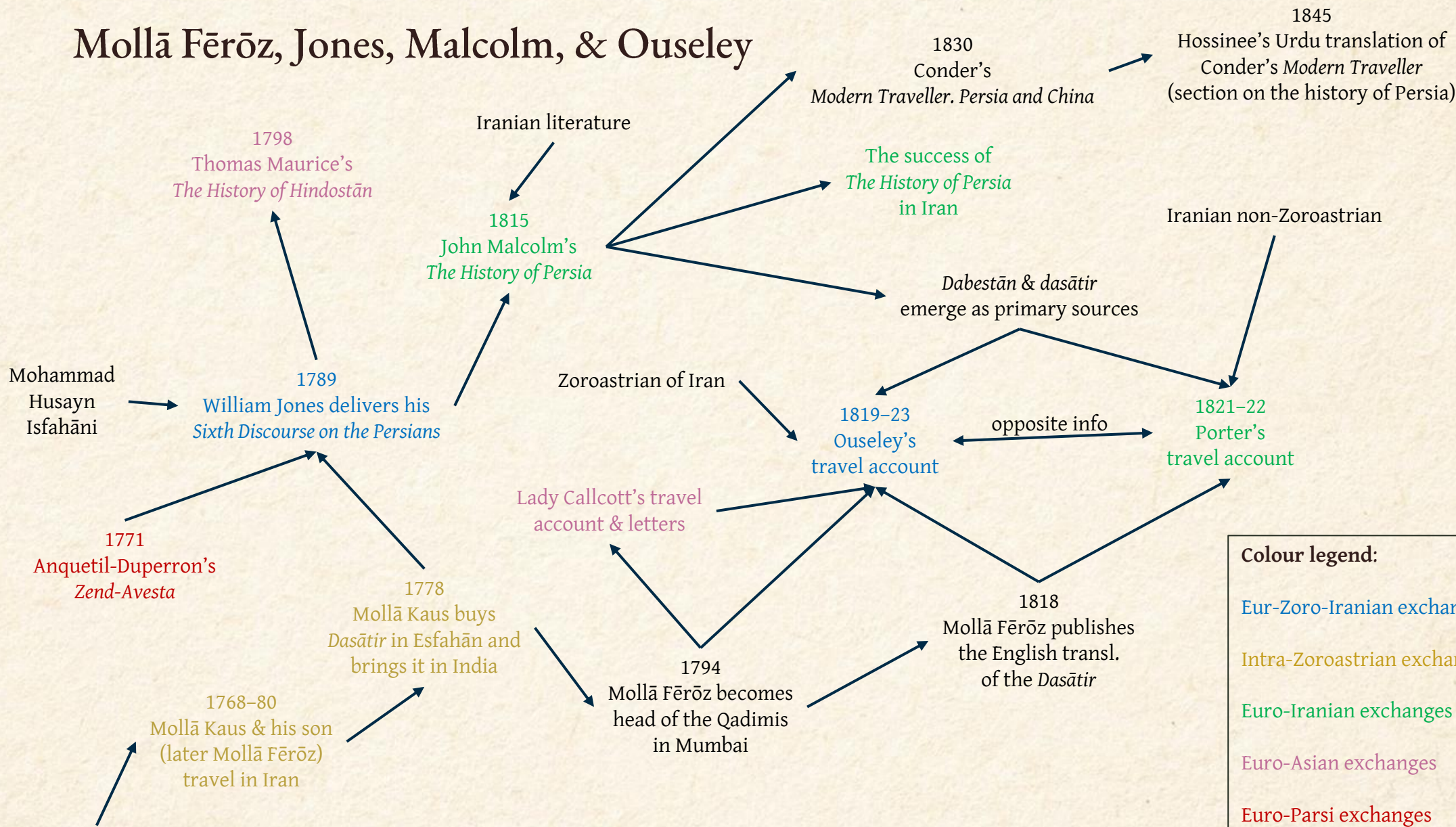


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Mollā Fērōz, Jones, Malcolm, & Ouseley





Counterbalance

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The fragmentation helps to contextualise the European sources appropriately and to emphasise the Asian elements.

However, this is not sufficient to counterbalance the European sources; for this reason, over the course of these three years, several measures are planned to bring to light as many Zoroastrian sources as possible.

Some of these measures are already underway, but many will be undertaken over the next 32 months.



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Actions

- Extend the research to include Zoroastrian and Iranian sources up to around 1930, carefully distinguishing events or facts that occurred before or after 1854.
- Extend the research to include 18th- and 19th-century Zoroastrian travel literature – Gujarati, Persian, and English – to better understand their perspective
- Integrate modern Zoroastrian historiography with its traditional Western counterpart.
- Visit Iranian and Indian archives and private collections to uncover unpublished material.





T R A V E L S

Conclusions

- Main goal: throughout this methodology, the project TRAVELS primarily aims to reconstruct the history of the Zoroastrian community in Iran and situate it within global history
- The Zoroastrians serve as the central theme for the period spanning the last decade of the 18th century to the mid-19th century, with Zoroastrianism itself acting as the narrator of this history.
- Highlight the Zoroastrian and Asian contributions as informants and their influential impact in shaping the European mindset.



Thank you for your kind attention!

Eagna agus Comhar!



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