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Nationalist Readings of the Buyid Dynasty

In many ways, the advent of the Buyid empire in Iran and Mesopotamia marks the end of one era of Islamic history and the beginning of another. Although the 'Abbasid caliphate continued to exist, and even regained a measure of its old authority at times, it was to be forever eclipsed by the domination of these Iranian warrior-kings and their successors, the Saljuqs and the Mongols. This turning-point in Islamic history has been either hailed by historians as the reemergence of national, ethnic culture over the homogeneous veneer of caliphal rule or bewailed as the death-knell of the classical Islamic state, one that could never be revived, only emulated and fondly preserved in memory as the 'golden age of Islam.'

As the harbingers of this new era, the Buyids rarely escape distortion in hindsight; they take on a symbolic role that represents something greater than their actual rule could ever accomplish. As the first non-Arab dynasty of kings in the Islamic heartland, and furthermore as the first Iranian empire since the Muslim conquest of Sassanid Persia, it is easy to see their rule in nationalistic terms: a "resurgence of the Persian national consciousness"¹ that had apparently lain dormant under the 'Abbasids. Other historians point to the Buyids' roots in the humble peasantry of Daylam and their reputation for coarseness and brutality to brush them aside as the first of the many barbarian tribes to pillage and subjugate the lands of the caliphate in the medieval Islamic era. This difference of opinion, with its enormous range of interpretation, may in fact point to a modern intellectual conflict that has colored Western scholarship of Iran for many centuries. The Buyids have come to represent the collision of two venerable, yet highly distinct, cultural traditions: the ancient model of Persian kingship against the newly established *Dar al-Islam*, a fundamentally religious model of the state.

While struggles between Persian and Arab have taken place since time immemorial, it is not until the last century that Europeans attributed them to a 'nationalist' form of tension. Although nationalism reached its peak in Europe in the decades leading up to the Second World War, it has continued to influence Western historians of other world regions. In addition, the secularist governments of Egypt, Syria, Jordan, and Iran were all breathing new life into the ideology as they struggled to define themselves in the post-colonial world (for example, acclaiming the Persian poet Firdowsi the "father of Iranian literature" even though he undoubtedly had no concept of Iran as the nation-state the Shah envisioned it to be). Ancient rivalries were recast as nationalist struggles, the 'Iranian' against the 'Arab' against the 'Turk.' This reinterpretation of history is quite evident in the following four essays on the short-lived Buyid empire, and the theme of nationalism, whether implied or explicitly mentioned, is instrumental in their evaluation.

¹ Wilfred Madelung, "The Assumption of the Title of Shahanshah by the Buyids and "The Reign of the Daylam (*Dawlat al-Daylam*)," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 28 (1969): 84.

The *Cambridge History of Iran* is a good starting-point in this exploration. As a collection of essays put together by an esteemed academic institution, these articles do not deviate too far from the standard historical narrative and cannot serve as any one person's ideological weapon. In Chapter 7, under H. Busse's article "Iran under the Buyids," ethnic self-awareness plays an important role. Busse repeatedly mentions the distinct Iranian nature of the dynasty, and is even willing to color its reign with hints to the Iranian monarchical past: "Thus for the first time in Islamic history this area was released from the centralized control of Baghdad and united under the rule of an Iranian dynasty."² By putting the caliph in a position of no or very little political power and keeping it that way through the implementation of dynastic rule, the Buyids mark the end of the age of the caliphate as a political force and set the precedent for indigenous dynasties to assert their power through the authority of Islam.

Having brought our minds to the connection between the Buyids and the pre-Islamic Persian past, Busse then adds a layer of complexity by stressing the rather primitive militarism of the new monarchs. Despite the fact that they are very much like the Achaemenids and Sassanids in that they are an Iranian dynasty with a secure hold on the traditional provinces of the Iranian plateau and Mesopotamia, he warns us that they are little more than a "military dictatorship,"³ held together by the fragile bonds of kinship and feudal authority. As the majority of their time was spent fighting rival cousins or rebellious army officials, or maintaining power once they were victorious, the Buyids are not depicted as having a strong ideological drive to restore any kind of Persian 'classical civilization' to the area. Much of the building they undertook was of a practical nature – either economic, with dams, canals, and irrigation projects that increased the revenue they needed for the all-important task of paying their soldiers, or religious, in the form of mosques and religious edifices for the sensible purpose of establishing legitimacy amongst the populace. The Buyids of Busse's imagination are hard-headed, practical, irreligious, and military-minded. They do not seem to bear that distinguished mark of the love of learning for its own sake; it was merely an important tool that could bring them stability and honor if properly cultivated.

On the subject of the great waxing of literary achievement that took place under the Buyid kings, Busse is appropriately ambiguous. While he asserts that this flowering was essentially Arab-Islamic, not Persian,⁴ he later on says that the Buyids reverted "to the conscious awareness of their Iranian heritage" and embarked upon "the deliberate transformation of its Arabic-Islamic culture into a culture specifically Iranian."⁵ These are not necessarily contradictory statements. Essentially, the Buyids were culturally indifferent, or at least disunited. As their empire consisted of a confederation of many smaller kingdoms, there could be no cultural consistency. Whereas one particular king or vizier might cultivate Arabic poetry and writing, another in a different part of the realm might be partial to Persian. It is true that under Buyid rule, Persian was raised to the level of Arabic as a literary language, but this is not an innovation of that time, as their eastern predecessors, the Samanids and Saffarids, were also known for their patronization of

2 H. Busse, "Iran under the Buyids," Chapter 7 in *Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. IV (1968): 250.

3 Busse, 251.

4 Busse, 286.

5 Busse, 295.

Persian authors and poets.

The matter of succession is not a key issue in the *Cambridge History*. While other accounts are quick to describe the entire nature of Buyid politics as chaotic and untenable, Busse prefers to deem the problem of succession as a “defect” in the Buyid scheme.⁶ He presents us with a fairly cut-and-dry story in which a single, dominant figure ‘rules,’ or at least can be made to represent, the empire as a whole. Upon his death, the sons and generals fight it out until another leading figure emerges. In this way, one can easily pinpoint the key figures of the Buyid dynasty and lay them out in order of succession and dates of their reigns that would be befit any college textbook. Other accounts, we shall see, view Buyid government as a messier affair, and leave one with the impression that the empire was run by a band of power-hungry, squabbling warlords. The *Cambridge History*, in its stability and sense of order, complements the author’s image of the Buyids as a relatively united, militarily oriented group of people.

The complex relationship between the Arab caliph and the Persian amir, in Busse’s view, is strong evidence for two competing national identities at work. Although his power was severely curbed, the caliph was by no means a complete puppet of his new overlords. This was true because the new Buyid monarchs, while not motivated by religious zeal like their contemporaries the Fatimids in Egypt, were nonetheless a Shi’a group and they greatly needed the formality of caliphal investiture to present themselves as the legitimate governors of the *Dar al-Islam* in the eyes of their subjects in Baghdad. The investiture of the caliphate was also a powerful asset to challenge the legitimacy of other Islamic kingdoms, such as the Fatimids and the Samanids.⁷ The caliph, for his part, needed the Buyid presence in the capital to some extent, for without their protection his office itself was likely doomed. This web of mutual dependency and hostility gave rise to frequent bouts of sophisticated political maneuvering between the two leaders. The first Buyid king in Iraq, Mu’izz al-Dawla, drew pre-Islamic kingly authority to himself with the evocative title *Shahanshah*,⁸ and ‘Adud al-Dawla cleverly attached a jewel to his hair so that, in his investiture ceremony, he made it seem as if the caliph was crowning him.⁹ The caliph, for his part, could bargain with the Buyids by refusing to offer heavily symbolic titles such as *Taj al-Dawla* (“the crown of the empire,” an epithet that falls uncomfortably close to a description of God) and to act as an arbiter between rival Buyid princes.¹⁰ In his analysis of these scenes, Busse seems convinced that there is an intentionality at work which can be traced to an effort to reassert Persian national identity over the caliphate. This is critically distinct from attempting to revive the Persian past – Mardavij, the Buyids’ predecessor in Tabaristan, seems to have been consumed by a zealous and megalomaniac desire to depose the ‘Abbasid caliphate and restore the glory of ancient Pars, an ambition that only earned him enmity on all sides as an “unbeliever”¹¹ and led to his murder. ‘Adud and his relatives were aware of themselves as Iranians, but also understood that any ‘Iranian revolution’ must take a modern form within the framework of Islam and with the official blessing

6 Busse, 289.

7 Busse, 217.

8 Busse, 275.

9 Busse, 276.

10 Busse, 292.

11 Busse, 277.

of the leader of the community, the caliph.

We thus have an account of Buyid kingship as a calculated and deliberate fusion of two traditions of authority: the Iranian monarch and the Arab-Islamic caliph, serving the role of a spiritual leader in this scheme. Although this fusion was never quite successful, it is indicative of a kind of ideological principle behind the Buyid rulers. In Busse's mind, they cannot be seen as mere warrior-peasants thrust onto the world stage without an inkling of how to conduct themselves in the midst of such refined and sophisticated surroundings. They moved upon Baghdad with a deliberate plan to reestablish the Iranian state within this new Islamic framework, and this meant appropriating Islam into their own court culture so that it no longer reflected the creed of the occupier but could be an authentic vehicle of Iranian religious expression. This allowed for the Iranization of royal court life – the introduction of Persian monarchical rituals in an Islamic context, the resumption of ancient Persian titles, and the rise of Persian as a literary, court, and scientific language. This, then, can be seen as the moderate view of the significance of Buyid rule. The Buyids, while themselves rather crass in their origins and behavior, understood both the power of incorporating the forms of traditional Persian representation as a way to establish unconditional authority over their empire and the importance of presenting these motifs and symbols within the new context of Islam.

The *Buwayhid Dynasty of Baghdad*, by M. Kabir, is an altogether different portrayal of the Buyids in terms of their cultural and political consciousness. From the beginning, the Buyid brothers are not much more than impoverished adventurers, “possessed only of the traditions of a predatory horde,”¹² making their way in the world through their military skill without a whit of education or acculturation to their name. Not a word is devoted to any kind of premeditated plan as far as the initial conquests are concerned. The Buyid empire was forged out of opportunism, ambition, and luck, without any concept of the ‘restoration of classical Persia’ as an ideological expedite. Kabir's history, which is long and detailed, then narrates the passing of years with a certain detachment, as if he is describing a pattern familiar to us all, the rise and fall of barbarian kingdoms that perpetually afflict the great centers of civilization. King after king battles with rival princes, rebellious generals, devious viziers, and stubborn caliphs in a cyclical narrative that reinforces the permanence of Kabir's fundamental principle: that the Buyids did not form a ‘nationalized’ state of any sort, but, like their Turkish and Mongol successors, were merely a tribe of simple-minded soldiers, who could be wily and clever at times, but lacked the leadership and sense of direction to establish anything meaningful.

Let us look at the way Kabir portrays many of the important figures of Buyid rule to illustrate this attitude. In his summary of Bakhtiyar ‘Izz al-Dawla, he has this to say: “[Bakhtiyar] had none of the qualities requisite in a royal personage . . . the core of his ill-success lay in his addiction to pleasure and frivolous amusements and his dependence on unscrupulous favourites and Wazirs for the conduct of the administration.”¹³ His much more favorable depiction of ‘Adud al-Dawla, while it admits him to be a lover

12 M. Kabir, *The Buwayhid Dynasty of Baghdad (334|946-447|1055)*, (Iran Society; Calcutta; 1964): 119.

13 Kabir, 39.

of learning,¹⁴ nevertheless attributes him with meticulousness, stern authority, severe discipline, miserliness, religious indifference, and grim practicality.¹⁵ The majority of the other Buyid kings falls into these two categories, the frivolous and easily manipulated prince or the severe despot. The only exceptions who attain any degree of civilization are ‘Adud himself and his son Sharaf al-Dawla.¹⁶ In addition, Kabir only mentions the title *Shahanshah* twice in his narrative, which, as we have seen, was such a subtle yet effective instrument in emphasizing the Iranian heritage of the Buyid kings. While it may be valid to a point, this depiction of the Buyids does not allow for the possibility that they as a whole could achieve any kind of political or cultural sophistication.

The golden age of literature that flowered under Buyid rule also receives a highly different explanation. On the whole, the Buyids were far too concerned with amassing loot, fighting challengers to the throne, and keeping their subordinates at bay to bother themselves with literature beyond rote patronage. Kabir, in fact, contends that much of the patronage did not stem from the kings themselves at all: “The Buwayhids were singularly fortunate in having a number of Wazirs who were themselves men of learning and patronized art and culture,”¹⁷ and again: “Under Baha al-Dawlah . . . the cultural spirit of the earlier reigns was to a certain extent maintained though not under the patronage of the rulers themselves.”¹⁸ Kabir also makes little note of the achievements of Persian as a literary language in this period, preferring instead to concentrate on the advances made in the Arabic language.¹⁹ This effectively complements his Arab-centric view that sees the arrival of the Buyids as a general catastrophe for the Arab-Islamic state, and attributes all cultural advances to the brilliance and perseverance of the native Arab bureaucracy, rather than to the innovations of the newcomers.

Kabir’s narration of the fall of the Buyids is consistent with his view that they were, for the most part, uncivilized looters who had no ability to see beyond the short-term gain and were thus incapable of good empire-building and statecraft.²⁰ Their heavy reliance on *iqtas* and tax farmers and their inability to establish any kind of orderly method of dynastic succession created a heavily decentralized feudal state in which discontent and ambition formed a dangerous combination, especially in the form of rebellious army officers. Daylamite-Turkish enmity within the army was a critical factor in Buyid decline, and the amirate was, more often than not, helpless against the rival factions struggling for control. By the time the Saljuq Turks arrived and deposed the last amir in Baghdad, the state had all but dissolved into leaderless bands of warriors, pillaging the land and fighting among themselves. Unable to establish a stable system of succession and to keep its subjects and armies loyal, the Buyids were doomed to failure. Although Kabir’s negative reading stands in stark contrast to Busse, they are similar in the criteria with which they evaluate the Buyids. Busse detects an amount of national pride, a sense of belonging to a great and ancient tradition, and accordingly generates a very orderly and unified account of their history. According to Kabir, the

14 Kabir, 171.

15 Kabir, 58-68.

16 Kabir, 179.

17 Kabir, 169.

18 Kabir, 180.

19 Kabir, 183.

20 Kabir, 120.

Buyids have no core, no sense of self, no common ground upon which a mutual future is formed, discipline maintained, and succession ensured. Such a fragmented unit cannot hope to survive for long.

In the essay *Military Organization under the Buyids of Persia and Iraq*, C. E. Bosworth espouses Kabir's ideas and draws them out to their furthest extent. Although Kabir's condescending attitude towards the Buyids can be discerned mostly through his cursory treatment of their rise and fall, Bosworth is utterly explicit in his judgment of their character, in a pronouncement he makes in his opening paragraph: "It is true that the first generation of Dailami condottieri . . . were barbarians who brought savage destruction into the ancient lands of culture and civilisation of western Persia and Iraq, and equally true that in the first half of the 11th century, the Buyid family dissolved into a warring band of mediocrities."²¹ He does acknowledge that great advances of learning and literature were made in their era, but, like Kabir, explains that they were due to the Arab governors of the Buyid provinces, not the rulers themselves.²²

As the title of his essay would suggest, Bosworth is chiefly concerned with the organization of the Buyid army. From his point of view, this would only be natural: as the Buyids were first and foremost a military dynasty, the makeup, politics, and affairs of their army would be the key to interpreting Buyid history. With this as his premise, he covers some interesting ground, aspects which other, more culturally oriented historians gloss over. He takes special effort to delineate the ethnic backgrounds of the army, emphasizing the Daylamites' cultural poverty, hardiness in battle, and their weapons and traditions of war. Like Kabir, Bosworth asserts that a critical weakness for the Buyids was the deadly rivalry between the two chief components of their army, the Daylamites and the Turks. By placing such a strong emphasis on group solidarity and intergroup rivalry, Bosworth, oddly enough, envelops the Buyid army (and their Daylamite/Turkish contingents) in a kind of proto-nationalism, a certain pervasive "group feeling" that has the power to overwhelm individual rulers and determine the course of history; an initial source of problems, therefore, occurred when the Buyid monarchs "began to lose touch to some extent with their co-nationals."²³ This is not the same nationalism that the *Cambridge History* hints at; there is no latent Iranian consciousness waiting to be awoken by Persian court ritual and the title of *Shahanshah*. It is rather a primitive tribal solidarity, much the same kind as has been attributed to the Turks, Mongols, and Bedouin Arabs, and it has no long durability.

Bosworth does admit that other social or political factors could have had an affect on Buyid history, but he assigns these a secondary level of importance compared to the military. For instance, he mentions the religious gap between the Shi'a Daylamites and the Sunni Turks, and the possible ways that this rivalry could polarize the Buyid state into their respective religious camps and draw more orthodox outside powers such as the Fatimids and the Samanids into the fray.²⁴ As far as nationalist ideology is concerned, however, Bosworth is silent. He does not seem convinced that there was any Arab/Iranian friction, even as far as the topics of court ritual, imperial titles, and literary language are concerned; clearly,

21 C. E. Bosworth, "Military Organisation under the Buyids of Persia and Iraq," *Oriens* 18-19 (1965-66): 143.

22 Bosworth, 144.

23 Bosworth, 154.

24 Bosworth, 157.

any broad notion of an ‘Iranian cultural awakening’ is out of the question. One might object to this, contending that his silence is due to a self-imposed limitation of his topic to military affairs, and he must be interpreted as being merely neutral on the issue, rather than rejecting its validity. This could be true; however, it is tempting to wonder why he felt the intricacies of the Buyid army were worthy of his scholarly attention at the expense of other potential factors if he did not fundamentally believe that the Buyids were indeed a phenomenon whose origins, rise, and fall depended on the status of its army, as opposed to any kind of cultural self-awareness. There is no doubt that he delves deeply into the complexities of Buyid army management, greatly enriching our understanding of this aspect of their society, with this premise in mind. The usefulness of his position is therefore not an issue. It is important, however, that Bosworth echoes and refines Kabir’s notion that the Buyids were, at their core, a primitive and rapacious band of warriors who had no cultural contribution to make to Islamic civilization.

In contrast, *The Assumption of the Title Shahanshah by the Buyids*, by Wilferd Madelung, views the Buyid movement as a primarily cultural development, one that derived its authority and initial unity from a strongly defined ideological concept. Every sentence in this essay is tinted with the language of nationalism, especially in the realm of Persian cultural resistance to Arab-Islamic imperialism, a tried and true theme employed by many contemporary historians of Iran in their efforts to recreate Iran as a nation-state. The Buyids are merely the most overt form of Persian resentment to Arab rule to date; in and of themselves, they represented nothing new.²⁵ In this way, Madelung adopts the Buyids as a symbol to represent the culmination of a movement far beyond their physical scope: the cultural backlash to the Arab-Muslim conquest of Iran.

While this is an attractive and plausible theory on the surface, it rests upon a very specific reading of history. From the first sentence in his essay, Madelung asserts that there *was* a “Persian national consciousness” that could resist Arab imperialism.²⁶ He therefore sees the seemingly innocuous incorporation of Persian culture into Islamic beliefs as an expression of this resistance, rather than a more neutral transition of culturally held values and traditions from one religious framework to another. He embellishes on this assumption with his descriptions of the Saffarid and Samanid dynasties, which showed no “active” political resistance to the Arab-Islamic hegemony and instead promoted a cultural reawakening in their patronage of Persian literature. Mardavij, the Ziyarid king in whose ranks the Buyids began their careers, is a truly patriotic figure: “I shall restore the empire of the Persians and destroy the empire of the Arabs.”²⁷ In this way, Madelung establishes a long history of Persian resentment and rebellion to Arab rule, setting a precedent for the Buyids to arise as a nationalist movement.

Buyid history, from this point of view, becomes a story about the careful and deliberate insertion of Persian regal tradition into the ‘Abbasid caliphate while maintaining its outward Islamic veneer. As the overt rhetoric of Mardavij had clearly failed, his ideological successor ‘Ali b. Buya had to be more cautious in his subversion of the caliphate, feigning friendship until he received official investiture with the reins of

25 Madelung, 86.

26 Madelung, 84.

27 Madelung, 86.

government.²⁸ The coining of the new phrase *Dawlat al-Daylam* (“the cycle, or the period, of Daylam”) also helped assuage devout Muslims’ fears of a return to a pre-Islamic past; this was merely a new era of the ‘Abbasid caliphate. At the same time, ‘Ali incorporated Persian terms into the administration that would carry a special significance for the Iranian elements in his entourage.²⁹ As both of his brothers were now kings of their own provinces, his adoption of the title *Shahanshah* heralded the imposition of a very Sassanian form of administration, in which a high king ruled over lesser ones.

In the next generation of Buyid kings, Madelung locates another tug-of-war between the amirate and the caliphate that is again indicative of a very subtle struggle for ideological dominance, which took the form of a letter written by the pro-‘Abbasid vizier Ibn Baqiyya. The letter attempted to define caliphal investiture as the reward of those who most closely served the caliphate. This redirected power back into the hands of the caliph by assigning him the task of choosing the leader of the Buyids, rather than through the traditional Persian system of dynastic precedence.³⁰ This was a direct affront to ‘Adud al-Dawla, who left his kingdom in Fars and ousted his brother from Iraq. A refutation of the letter was then composed, which placed legitimate authority over the *Dar al-Islam* in the hands of ‘Ali b. Buya and his appointed successors, whose family was now being traced back to that of the Sassanids.³¹ In addition, ‘Adud began to regularly call himself *Shahanshah* and *Taj al-Milla* (“the crown of the community”). These moves essentially established a Persian form of rule over the empire, although it was nominally “recognized” by the ‘Abbasid caliphate.

As has been mentioned, this version of Buyid history requires a very precise and selective reading of events. The military, infamous in other narratives for its Daylamite-Turkish rivalry and enormous influence over the Buyid kings, receives little attention here. This is a world of politics, and in his illustration of the Buyids’ clever maneuvering and manipulation of the caliphate for their ideological ends, the author casts them in a very sophisticated light. Madelung himself seems transfixed by the subtle layers of meaning he finds in Buyid court ritual and the specific language of court literature. The title *Shahanshah* is a keystone in his argument, because he not only notes its obvious reference to a pre-Islamic Iranian government, but also its secondary anti-Islamic connotation.³² It is therefore highly significant for Madelung that the Buyids insisted upon using this term; it suggests an ideological war being waged for control of the *Dar al-Islam*, a war which would determine whether this new era would have an Arab or an Iranian face.

This brings us to the central argument of this analysis: the Buyids, due to their placement at the crux of a historical transition, are often assigned a symbolic role that exceeds their actual significance. Despite the wide range of focus in these four essays, whether they are historical surveys or pinpoint analyses, all four employ a certain descriptive language of the Buyids that places them squarely in a pro-Iran or pro-Arab camp. Buyid history is symbolically reduced to represent either a resurgence of Iranian

28 Madelung, 91.

29 Madelung, 93.

30 Madelung, 102.

31 Madelung, 106.

32 Madelung, 84.

national culture or a collapse of Arab-Muslim sovereignty to barbaric invasion. This is not meant to condemn the quality of scholarly work that Busse, Kabir, Bosworth, and Madelung all represent. It is simply meant to illustrate the impact that modern political thought and debate can have upon the interpretation of historical data, something that none of these authors could hope to avoid. It is worth noting, too, that all four essays were published in the 1960s, before the work of Edward Said brought attention to the imperialism and nationalism that was being written into oriental studies at the time. It would be very worthwhile to do a follow-up to this study and examine some modern analyses of the Buyids to see if the same nationalist tendencies are present.

Something as dramatic as the fall of classical Persia to the Muslim invaders, followed by the 'retaking' of Persian control in the guise of the Buyids, begs to be romanticized in the same vein as other famously exaggerated rivalries: France against England, Rome against Carthage, Indians against settlers. While there is no doubt that there were two (probably more) distinct cultures at play in this story, our tendency to look at this competition as an expression of nationalism is a projection of a modern phenomenon into the tenth century. It seems clear that the four essays examined here fall into this trap to some extent. The references of Busse and Madelung to "Iranian national consciousness" and the "restoration of the Persian Empire" are explicit; Kabir and Bosworth, in their endless reiteration of Buyid fragmentation and disorganization, condemn them to an ignoble destiny because they *lack a* national identity, the common cause that brings unity and purpose to the state. There is an implicit refusal to look beyond the nation, i.e., the group body self-identified by their culture and language, as the primary actor on the historical stage. While this should not be held against these essays, it is a limiting factor in their ability to creatively interpret history outside of a European perspective, and leaves them locked in the glass box, only capable of seeing the *Dar al-Islam* in the 10th century as it would have been if it was 19th-century Western Europe.

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