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Iranian Studies as “Technography”: A Critique of the Austrian Academy of Sciences Publications

Preface: Honest Critique as Scholarly Duty

In a living scientific tradition, critique is not hostility—it is care. When critique comes from genuine concern and with an eye toward the future, it does not reduce the value of the institution being examined; it opens a path toward the highest level that institution can reach. This essay is written in that spirit.

The publications of the Austrian Academy of Sciences (ÖAW) in Iranian Studies—specifically the output of its Institute for Iranian Studies—have real strengths. That this respected European institution has invested for decades in the study of Iran—one of the four great centers of human civilization, alongside China, India, and the Greco-Roman world—is already a contribution of lasting value. The Academy has kept this field alive in Europe, trained several generations of scholars, and published hundreds of valuable works on Iran’s history, languages, and culture. This record of service, especially at a time when many academic institutions around the world have paid little attention to Iranian Studies, deserves honest recognition.

The critiques in this essay do not take away from that value; careful attention to them would multiply it. Any institution that can face criticism and grow from it will, over time, achieve far more than one that rests in comfortable agreement. This essay is offered as a contribution to a future in which the Institute for Iranian Studies in Vienna can play a larger and more historically important role.

The Method of This Critique

This critique rests on three foundations:

First: Structural critique, not personal critique.** This essay singles out no individual researcher or author. Many works in the ÖAW collection are precise, valuable, and scientifically sound in

their own terms. The critique here is directed at the **overall structure** of the publication programme—what has been chosen, what has been left out, and the governing approach of the collection as a whole.

Second: Evidence-based critique.** Every claim made here is grounded in direct examination of the Academy’s official catalogue, its list of authors, and the thematic organization of its works—not in prior prejudice. Full references are provided in the bibliography.

Third: Philosophically grounded critique.** This essay draws on Gadamer’s hermeneutics (**Truth and Method**, 1960)—in particular the concepts of the **fusion of horizons** and the necessity of dialogue—and on the standards of civilizational studies, including the distinction between center and periphery, to move the critique beyond matters of personal preference and onto firm theoretical ground.

Prologue: The Decision That Was Never Made

Understanding any civilization requires what might be called a **founding decision**: do we approach this civilization as a living whole, or as a collection of parts to be catalogued? This decision comes before every method, every tool, and every document. No amount of data, no number of fascicles, and no level of philological care can replace this prior philosophical-epistemological choice.

Iranian Studies, properly understood, is the interdisciplinary science of understanding “Iran” as a **continuous civilizational form** and a **unified system of meaning**. It uses a method that moves back and forth between the specific detail and the larger whole, examining the organic connections among linguistic, intellectual, artistic, and social layers in order to grasp the **internal logic** and **living identity** of this cultural totality across historical change. See Gholami, **Iranian Studies**, chap. 1.

A review of the ÖAW’s Iranian Studies publications—more than 240 titles across the main series **Veröffentlichungen zur Iranistik** and **Iranisches Personennamenbuch** [1]—shows that this founding decision was never made. An institution that could have become a home for civilizational Iranian Studies chose instead the path of the specialist archivist. This essay argues that

this absence is not a minor gap but a foundational problem—one that a civilizational framework allows us to name precisely.

1. Historical Roots: From the Name-Dictionary to the Institute

To understand the structural nature of this problem, one must go back to the institution's origins. Manfred Mayrhofer founded a commission in 1969 to prepare a dictionary of Iranian names—a successor to Justi's **Iranisches Namenbuch** of 1895. This project grew until 2002, when it became the Institute for Iranian Studies, supporting two main publication series: **Iranisches Personennamenbuch** and **Veröffentlichungen zur Iranistik** [2].

This origin is itself the key to the current problem. An institution born from a **lexicographical project** carries a lexicographical worldview with it. Its founding identity was cataloguing, not theorizing.

From the standpoint of civilizational Iranian Studies, this is a clear case of what scholars call **epistemic atomism**: the tendency to study isolated pieces of the civilizational domain without any connection to the larger picture. Researchers work in separate islands, each gathering small-scale data without a shared map of the whole. See Gholami, **Iranian Studies**, chap. 3. The puzzle pieces exist in large numbers. But because there is no theoretical framework showing how they fit together, no clear image of Iran as a civilizational whole ever appears. The field produces information without reaching civilizational understanding.

2. The Need for Theoretical Foundations: You Cannot Navigate the Periphery Without a Center

Iran is a civilization, not merely a collection of languages and texts. Civilizations have a structure, with central points that generate cultural energy which then flows outward to the edges. These centers in Iranian civilization are clearly visible: the tradition of political thought from the **Avesta** to Nizam al-Mulk; the philosophical tradition from Avicenna to Mulla Sadra; wisdom poetry from Rudaki to Hafez; and above all, the **logic of continuity** that has kept Iran alive through wave after wave of historical disruption.

Without understanding these centers, venturing into the edges is not only incomplete but misleading. The Institute's own official description acknowledges that "Iranian cultural studies must be freed from the monopoly of dependence on language and must consider cultural processes in general." But this acknowledgment has stayed inside the Institute's internal documents and never changed the structure of its publications.

A well-grounded approach to Iranian Studies requires every research project to establish a *connection between the specific subject and the civilizational whole*: to go beyond disconnected data and explain the organic relationship between a particular object of study and the larger pattern of Iranian civilization. See Gholami, **Iranian Studies**, chap. 12. A project that simply lists names, inscriptions, or local manuscripts without connecting this data to the civilizational whole is, in the terms of that framework, a *reporter*, not an Iranian Studies scholar.

What the ÖAW collection offers—from Sogdian studies to Khwarazmian research, from Kazakhstani documents to Khivan inscriptions—resembles, without a central theory of Iranian civilization, a *map without a center*: all the edges are marked, but the point from which they radiate outward is blank.

Three major absences define this structural gap:

A. The philosophy of political thought and governance in Iran**—neither in the ancient period nor in the Islamic era.

B. The logic of civilizational continuity**—the internal mechanism that has kept Iran alive through repeated political collapse. This is precisely what the concept of the *civilizational genome* addresses: the set of foundational codes and patterns transmitted through language and myth that protect civilizational identity across historical ruptures. See Gholami, **Iranian Studies**, chap. 13. The ÖAW collection contains no systematic inquiry into this mechanism.

C. Iranian self-awareness**—texts in which Iranians have written about themselves, not what outsiders have written about them. An Iranian Studies that consistently privileges the external observer over the internal inheritor does not achieve what Gadamer calls the *fusion of horizons*; it achieves only a one-directional extraction.

3. The Absence of Dialogue — Gadamer Against Structural Monologue

The sharpest philosophical critique of this collection must be drawn from the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer. In **Truth and Method**, Gadamer defines understanding as a kind of negotiation between oneself and a dialogue partner—arriving at a shared **horizon**, which is why he calls genuine understanding the **fusion of horizons** (**Horizontverschmelzung**) [3]. This fusion is a mutual transformation: we do not live in closed horizons, and we cannot accept the positivist assumption that we can “forget ourselves” to achieve a purely objective view of another culture. Genuine understanding requires openness to an experience that is willing to recognize the other—a dialogue in which “it is not we who discover truth, but truth that reveals itself.”

In 85 volumes of the main collection, what dialogue has actually taken place? Which researcher, fully aware of the assumptions built into their own perspective, has genuinely opened themselves to the perspective of Iran? The dominant method is precisely what Gadamer criticizes: the old model of interpretation that treated understanding as an objective, neutral activity, in which the interpreter simply “uncovers meaning” rather than entering into dialogue with it.

This absence of dialogue takes concrete structural form in the ÖAW collection:

- No collaborative work between a European researcher and an Iranian scholar based in Iran.
- No Iranian voice on the question of what Iran fundamentally **is**.
- No mutual critique among the works themselves, or among different schools of Iranian Studies—the collection has remained in a condition of “consensual silence.” And consensual silence is the negation of living science.

4. The Absent Inheritors — Iranian Scholars Whose Voices Were Not Heard

This section of the critique is the sharpest and most concrete. Not because European researchers are incapable, but because a foundational epistemological principle has been violated: understanding any civilization requires hearing the voices of those who have not only observed it from the outside but have **lived it from within**.

One of the three minimum conditions for genuine access to Iranian civilization is precisely this: **genuine openness to the critical voices of Iranians who are the inheritors of this civilizational*

tradition*. See Gholami, **Iranian Studies**, chap. 6. This means not only engaging with Iranian scholarly literature, but actively exposing one's interpretations to the criticism of Iranian researchers, intellectuals, and communities who live within the tradition being studied—and taking that criticism seriously as a source of real insight rather than mere courtesy. The dialogical relationship between the external scholar and the internal inheritors of the tradition is not optional; it is a structural requirement for genuine access to Iranian civilization.

A review of authors from the past decade (2015–2025) shows: Julia Rubanovich (Israel), Nicholas Sims-Williams (UK), Ludwig Paul (Germany), Philip Bockholt (Germany), Antonio Panaino (Italy), Nuryoghdi Toshov (Uzbekistan), Allen J. Frank (USA). All are valuable researchers in their own right. But one essential element is missing: Iranian scholars who are the living inheritors of this civilization.

- Iraj Afshar (1925–2011)

The leading bibliographer and authority on Persian manuscripts; the tireless promoter of Iranian culture who in 2006 received the first lifetime achievement award of the International Society for Iranian Studies—the only award then given to researchers within Iran. He authored or edited approximately 300 books and published more than 2,000 articles in Iranian and international journals. The international scholarly community published memorial volumes in three languages—but his name does not appear in the ÖAW author list. This gap is the most telling single piece of evidence for the structural problem [4].

- Mohammad-Reza Shafiei Kadkani (born 1939)

Poet, literary scholar, and critic; Professor of Literature at the University of Tehran. He is among the rarest of cases in the history of Persian literature: simultaneously a major poet and a major literary scholar. His complete edition of 'Attar's **Divan**, three volumes on Hafez, his theory of imagery in Persian poetry, and dozens of other works are all the products of a mind that knows the spirit of Iran from **within** poetry. Had the ÖAW published a work on the mystical-poetic tradition of Iran in collaboration with Shafiei Kadkani, the result would have been something no European philologist could have produced alone [9].

- Jalal Khaleghi Motlagh (born 1937)

The unrivaled Ferdowsi scholar; author of the eight-volume critical edition of the **Shahnameh**—the product of more than three decades of careful work—which by scholarly

consensus gives the best available access to Ferdowsi's masterpiece. The **Shahnameh** has since its composition served as the backbone of Iranian civilizational identity and the primary vehicle through which Iranian identity has been transmitted across conquest and rupture. Without Khaleghi Motlagh, this text would not be scientifically accessible. It is striking that the ÖAW did not invite this scholar to collaborate—while the University of Hamburg accepted his scholarly legacy in September 2025 [5].

- Jaleh Amouzgar

Professor at the University of Tehran and one of the most authoritative Iranian voices in the field of Middle Persian and Zoroastrian literature. In collaboration with Ahmad Tafazzoli, she made an essential contribution to the study of ancient Iran and the history of early Iranian literature. She works in precisely the areas where the ÖAW claims expertise—yet her voice has not been included [8].

- Seyyed Hossein Nasr (born 1933)

Professor of Islamic Studies at George Washington University; one of the most influential Muslim scholars in the world in the areas of tradition and Islamic philosophy, and the only Muslim thinker included in the **Library of Living Philosophers**. Nasr, who studied Islamic philosophical texts directly under Allameh Tabatabai, is a living bridge between the living Shi'a tradition and academic scholarship. With more than fifty books and five hundred articles, he was precisely the scholar who could have addressed the structural absence of Iranian Islam and Shi'a studies in this collection—but the opportunity was never created [7].

- Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi

Professor at the École Pratique des Hautes Études (EPHE/Sorbonne) and holder of the Chair in “Interpretation and Theology of Shi'a Islam”; one of the leading scholars of Twelver Shi'ism, whose **The Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism** is recognized as a landmark work on Shi'ism as a deeply spiritual and esoteric movement. In November 2025, the international scholarly community gathered at the Sorbonne to honor four decades of his research [6]. Yet his name does not appear in the ÖAW author list.

- Mahmoud Jafari Dehaghi, Abolqasem Esmailpour Motlagh, Hekmatollah Mollasalehi, Rasoul Jafarian

These are distinguished Iranian scholars who have produced deeply theoretical works in Iranian mythology, Iranian mysticism, epistemological archaeology, and the history of Shi'ism in Iran—precisely in the areas that are most empty in the ÖAW collection. Their absence is not accidental; it is structural.

5. Iranian Islam and Shi'a Studies — The Greatest Structural Absence

Of all the absences in this collection, the absence of Iranian Islam—and in particular Twelver Shi'ism—is both the clearest and the hardest to explain. It is remarkable that an academy claiming expertise in Iranian Studies has maintained silence on both.

Iranian Islam—the particular synthesis formed between the inner experience of Iranians, the mystical tradition, and revealed texts—is not an external layer applied over Iranian civilization. It is deeply woven into the structure of this civilization. Avicenna, Biruni, Suhrawardi, Mulla Sadra, Hafez—all lived and thought within this Iranian Islam. In terms of the Civilizational Genome framework, Iranian Islam is one of the most important **phenotypic expressions** of the deepest **semantic core** of Iranian civilization—the layer in which the civilization's fundamental responses to questions about humanity's relationship with the sacred, with justice, and with time found their richest articulation. See Gholami, **Iranian Studies**, chap. 13. ♦

Twelver Shi'ism, which before the Safavids existed among Iranians as deep devotion to the **Ahl al-Bayt** and after the Safavids became the official state religion, has been one of the most powerful forces shaping the historical, cultural, and political life of Iran. Iranian Shi'ism is not only a belief system; it is a school of civilizational self-awareness through which Iran maintained its distinctive identity against Turkish, Mongol, and Sunni rulers—a clear example of the civilizational genome's capacity for **cultural adaptation**: absorbing a transformative pressure into its own informational architecture and generating a richer civilizational synthesis rather than dissolving. See Gholami, **Iranian Studies**, chap. 13.

In a collection of more than 200 titles, one searches for a serious work on Shi'a theology in the context of Iranian civilization and finds nothing. One searches for an analysis of the political philosophy of **imāmate** and its influence on Iranian thought and finds nothing. One searches for research on the role of Ashura in the formation of Iranian collective identity and finds noth-

ing. This silence is not neutrality—it is a **structural blindness** that presents Iranian civilization without one of its most essential axes of self-awareness.

6. Critique of the Content — Abundance of Detail, Poverty of Explanation

The IPNB project, which began in 1969, has grown to more than fifty volumes, each devoted to a specific source. This project is a clear example of **petty positivism**: it tells us how a name was written in an Elamite inscription, but never asks what **civilizational weight** that name carried in the social and political life of Iran.

This is a systematic failure of what civilizational Iranian Studies identifies as a core research standard: **grounding in the history of concepts**. See Gholami, **Iranian Studies**, chap. 12. A shift in the use of a key term or name in Persian is not only a linguistic event; it is evidence of a change in the inner layers of civilizational consciousness. When the IPNB catalogs names without asking what those names **meant** within the civilizational system—without asking how they worked as carriers of civilizational memory—it produces **information** without **understanding**.

The line between genuine Iranian Studies and mere data reporting is clear: a research project belongs to Iranian Studies only when it establishes a meaningful relationship between a specific piece of evidence and the civilizational whole—only when a name, text, or artifact becomes a window into the structure of power, identity, and civilizational reproduction. See Gholami, **Iranian Studies**, chap. 12.

7. The Problem of Objectification — Iran as a Passive Subject

If section 6 addressed the **content** of what is missing in the ÖAW collection, this section addresses the deeper **methodological stance** that produces those gaps.

The dominant approach in this collection is what can be called **mechanical anatomism**: the external classification and description of objects and events, without any attempt to grasp the living logic that connects them. See Gholami, **Iranian Studies**, chap. 6. Iran in these works

does not speak, does not think, does not act—it simply produces data to be decoded from the library in Vienna.

Gadamer's point is directly relevant: "modern scientific concepts are not enough for understanding human beings and our experience of art." The positivist scientific method is an inadequate tool for knowing a living civilization—and the ÖAW publications demonstrate this inadequacy.

The remedy is what civilizational Iranian Studies calls the **hermeneutic turn**: the shift from explaining external structures to understanding inner meanings. Applied to the ÖAW's practice, this means a fundamental change of direction: from treating Iranian texts and artifacts as objects to be decoded, toward treating Iran as what it actually is—an **open, meaning-producing subject** whose ongoing vitality is itself a contribution to global cultural diversity. See Gholami, **Iranian Studies**, chap. 7.

The Civilizational Genome framework makes this diagnosis precise. The ÖAW's philological and archaeological work has been operating, without knowing it, only at the level of the **outer expressions** of the civilizational genome—the variable surface manifestations of civilization that respond most directly to external pressures. It has never reached the **cultural logic** layer (the characteristic patterns of problem-solving and aesthetic judgment) or the **semantic core** (the civilization's fundamental responses to the deepest questions of human existence). See Gholami, **Iranian Studies**, chap. 13. Without accessing these deeper layers, even the most careful philological work remains a surface anatomy—technically sound, but civilizationaly silent.

8. The Missing Culture of Critique

Beyond all the thematic and structural absences noted above, the ÖAW collection faces another fundamental problem: the **absence of a culture of critique**. Among 85 volumes and more than fifty fascicles, one rarely finds works that challenge other works, question methodological assumptions, or engage in critical dialogue across different schools of Iranian Studies. The collection has remained in a condition of "consensual silence." And consensual silence is the negation of living science.

A field that does not engage in continuous critical dialogue becomes a dead field. See Gholami, **Iranian Studies**, chap. 5. When scholars stop questioning and challenging one another, knowledge hardens into **epistemic sclerosis**—the stiffening of the field into rigid structures that are no longer open to revision. The collection's systematic avoidance of internal critique, and its parallel avoidance of genuine engagement with critical scholarship from within Iran, means it has never undergone the process of **self-correction** that any healthy academic discipline requires.

The principle of **falsifiability**—which civilizational Iranian Studies insists upon—applies not only to individual research claims but to the foundational assumptions of the institution itself. See Gholami, **Iranian Studies**, chap. 12. An institution whose core methodological assumptions—the positivist cataloguing approach, the external-observer stance, the privileging of language over civilization—have never been subjected to principled critique cannot claim to be advancing knowledge. It can only claim to be accumulating it.

9. Conclusion: Time for Reckoning

The ÖAW Iranian Studies publications form a **fragmented encyclopaedia**: each book precise in its own right, but together offering no larger narrative of Iranian civilization. This is the result of choosing **technique** over **thinking**, **archiving** over **understanding**.

The framework of civilizational Iranian Studies allows this condition to be named precisely. What the ÖAW collection lacks is not more data—it has more than enough. What it lacks is:

A **paradigmatic self-awareness** that defines what Iranian Studies is, what it aims to explain, and what methods are suited to that purpose. See Gholami, **Iranian Studies**, chap. 2.

A **dialectical method** that moves continuously between the specific piece of evidence and the civilizational whole, between structural analysis and inner understanding. See Gholami, **Iranian Studies**, chap. 3.

A **layered knowledge framework** that brings together philology, semiotics, history, philosophy, religion, sociology, aesthetics, and political science within a single coherent system. See Gholami, **Iranian Studies**, chap. 4.

A commitment to **genuine dialogue** with the living bearers of Iranian civilizational tradition—treating Iran not as a passive archive but as an active, meaning-producing subject, and genuinely opening the collection to the critical voices of Iranian scholars and thinkers. See Gholami, **Iranian Studies**, chaps. 6 and 7.

Engagement with the **civilizational genome**—the informational mechanisms through which Iranian identity has been reproduced across ruptures—whose investigation requires not only philological precision but theoretical depth and the real fusion of external and internal scholarly perspectives. See Gholami, **Iranian Studies**, chap. 13.

Three fundamental changes are necessary for departure from the current situation:

First: Ask the **central theoretical question** before every specific project—What is Iran as a civilization? Where does it generate its energy? Through what mechanisms does it reproduce itself?

Second: Open the door to **genuine dialogue with the living bearers of Iranian civilizational spirit**—Iranian researchers, Iranian thinkers, and works that express Iranian self-awareness. Without this openness, the **fusion of horizons** in Gadamer's sense will not take place.

Third: Replace **thematic variety** with **variety of theoretical approach**—bring the philosopher of civilization, the historical sociologist, and the political thinker into the room alongside the philologist and the numismatist.

Iranian Studies without theory is nothing more than an **archive of word-memories**. And an archive, however precise, is not a substitute for understanding. Iran is not a collection of objects to be catalogued; it is a continuous civilizational form, a unified system of meaning, a living process of substantial motion—one that has maintained its identity across more than two and a half millennia of transformation, absorption, and renewal. The scholarly institution that aspires to know it must aspire to understand it from within.

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Note:

This article was written on the occasion of the first specialized exhibition of Iranian Studies books in Vienna in 2026, organized by Iranian Wisdom House.

