

National Identity and Ancient Persia: The Semiotics of Pre-Islamic Symbols in Modern Iran

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of pre-Islamic Persian symbols in shaping contemporary Iranian national identity through contemporary semiotic theory. Drawing on Yuri Lotman, Umberto Eco, Winfried Nöth, Kalevi Kull, and the Tartu-Moscow School, it analyzes symbols such as the Faravahar and Persepolis as dynamic semiotic resources rather than fixed historical representations. The study explores how these symbols circulate across political discourse, digital media, tourism, popular culture, and diaspora communities, acquiring new meanings within competing ideological contexts. It argues that ancient Persian symbols mediate relationships among heritage, nationalism, religion, and globalization while actively shaping collective memory and national imagination. The findings contribute to cultural semiotics by illuminating identity formation, symbolic boundaries, and heritage in modern Iran.

Keywords: Cultural Semiotics; National Identity; Cultural Memory; Pre-Islamic Persian Symbols; Iranian Heritage

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between cultural heritage and national identity has become an increasingly important area of inquiry in contemporary semiotics, memory studies, and cultural analysis. Recent scholarship has moved beyond viewing heritage as a passive repository of historical artifacts and instead conceptualizes it as an active semiotic system through which societies negotiate meanings, identities, and collective memories (Mazzucchelli, 2024; Salsano, 2025). Within this framework, cultural symbols are understood not as fixed representations of the past but as dynamic signifying resources that acquire new meanings through processes of circulation, reinterpretation, and social interaction. Such an approach is particularly relevant in contexts where historical narratives remain central to contemporary debates about identity, belonging, and cultural continuity.

Iran represents a compelling case for examining these processes. As one of the world's oldest civilizations, Iran possesses a complex cultural heritage that encompasses both pre-Islamic and Islamic traditions. In contemporary Iranian society, symbols associated with ancient Persia—including the Faravahar, Persepolis, Achaemenid iconography, and representations of imperial Persian history—continue to occupy a prominent place in public discourse, cultural production, tourism, and digital communication. These symbols circulate across multiple communicative spaces, ranging from official heritage institutions and educational materials to social media platforms and diasporic networks. Their persistence suggests that pre-Islamic imagery remains a significant symbolic resource for articulating contemporary understandings of Iranian identity.

Recent developments in cultural semiotics provide useful theoretical tools for understanding this phenomenon. Building on Lotman's concept of the semiosphere, contemporary scholars argue that cultural meanings emerge through continuous processes of translation, boundary formation, and symbolic negotiation within broader cultural systems (Tamm & Torop, 2022; Bergman, 2025). From this perspective, cultural symbols are not meaningful because they preserve an original historical significance; rather, they become meaningful through their ongoing reinterpretation in changing social and political contexts. The semiosphere thus functions as a dynamic environment in which signs are constantly transformed as they move between different cultural domains and communities of interpretation (Monticelli, 2024).

The growing influence of digital media has further intensified these semiotic processes. Contemporary communication technologies facilitate the rapid circulation of cultural symbols across national and transnational networks, enabling heritage signs to acquire new meanings beyond their original historical contexts. Recent research on digital cultural heritage demonstrates that collective memory is increasingly produced and negotiated through online environments where historical symbols become embedded in new forms of visual communication, identity construction, and cultural participation (Mazzucchelli, 2024; Qian et al., 2026). Consequently, symbols of ancient Persia are no longer confined to archaeological sites or historical narratives; they now function as active components of contemporary cultural and political discourse.

The Faravahar provides a particularly illustrative example of this process. Although historically associated with Zoroastrian religious traditions, the symbol has increasingly been appropriated as a broader marker of Iranian cultural identity, national heritage, and diasporic belonging. Similarly, Persepolis functions not only as an archaeological monument but also as a symbolic site through which narratives of civilization, historical continuity, and national pride are communicated and contested. The multiplicity of meanings attached to these symbols demonstrates their polysemic character and highlights the importance of examining how cultural signs operate within contemporary semiotic environments.

This article investigates the role of pre-Islamic Persian symbols in the construction and negotiation of contemporary Iranian national identity. Drawing upon recent developments in cultural semiotics, memory studies, and heritage research, the study examines how ancient Persian symbols are reinterpreted across political discourse, cultural institutions, digital media, and transnational communities. It argues that these symbols function as semiotic mediators connecting historical memory with contemporary identity formation. By analyzing the contemporary semiosis of ancient Persian imagery, the article contributes to current debates concerning cultural memory, symbolic boundaries, heritage politics, and the role of sign systems in shaping collective identities in the twenty-first century.

Although numerous studies have examined Iranian nationalism, Persian heritage, and pre-Islamic symbols from historical and political perspectives, relatively little attention has been paid to how these symbols function as dynamic semiotic resources within contemporary digital and transnational communicative environments. Furthermore, few studies have integrated cultural semiotics and memory studies to examine the ongoing reinterpretation of ancient Persian symbols in contemporary Iran.

This study addresses the following questions:

How are pre-Islamic Persian symbols reinterpreted in contemporary Iranian cultural discourse?

How do these symbols contribute to the construction of national identity?

How does digital communication influence the circulation and transformation of these symbols?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Cultural Semiotics and the Semiosphere

Contemporary semiotic scholarship increasingly conceptualizes culture as a dynamic system of signification rather than a collection of isolated symbols or texts. One of the most influential approaches in this regard is cultural semiotics, particularly the work of Yuri Lotman and subsequent developments within the Tartu–Moscow School. Although Lotman's foundational contributions emerged in the twentieth century, recent scholarship continues to expand and reinterpret his concepts in relation to contemporary issues of identity, communication, and cultural transformation (Tamm & Torop, 2022; Bergman, 2025).

Central to cultural semiotics is the concept of the semiosphere, defined as the semiotic space within which communication, meaning production, and cultural interpretation become possible (Tamm & Torop, 2022). Similar to the biosphere in biological systems, the semiosphere encompasses all sign processes operating within a cultural environment. Meaning does not reside within individual signs themselves but emerges through

relationships among signs, texts, institutions, and interpretive communities. Consequently, cultural symbols should not be understood as fixed carriers of meaning but as elements within broader networks of communication.

Recent interpretations of Lotman's work emphasize that the semiosphere is characterized by constant movement, translation, and negotiation between its center and periphery (Monticelli, 2024). Cultural meanings are continually reconstructed as symbols circulate across different social, political, and technological contexts. This perspective is particularly relevant for understanding the contemporary significance of pre-Islamic Persian symbols. Symbols such as the Faravahar and Persepolis do not possess a single stable meaning; rather, their significance is continually transformed through interactions among state institutions, heritage organizations, digital communities, and diasporic networks.

The concept of symbolic translation is especially important for the present study. As signs move between different cultural contexts, they undergo processes of reinterpretation and re-signification. Ancient Persian symbols that once functioned primarily within religious, imperial, or historical frameworks may acquire new meanings related to nationalism, cultural pride, resistance, or transnational identity. Cultural semiotics therefore provides a useful framework for examining how historical symbols continue to generate meaning within contemporary Iranian society.

Cultural Memory and Heritage as Semiotic Resources

The relationship between memory and identity has become a major concern within contemporary humanities and social science research. Recent scholarship argues that collective memory is not simply a repository of historical facts but a socially constructed process through which communities interpret and organize their understanding of the past (Cossu, 2023; Dufresne, 2025). Memory is therefore inherently semiotic because it relies upon signs, narratives, monuments, rituals, and symbolic representations to preserve and communicate cultural meanings across generations.

Within this perspective, cultural heritage functions as a semiotic resource that mediates relationships between past and present. Heritage sites, monuments, historical narratives, and symbolic artifacts do not merely represent history; they actively participate in the production of social memory and collective identity (Salsano, 2025). Their meanings are continually negotiated according to contemporary political, cultural, and ideological concerns.

Recent studies of heritage semiotics emphasize that symbolic artifacts gain significance through ongoing processes of reinterpretation rather than through the preservation of original meanings (Mazzucchelli, 2024). Heritage symbols operate as communicative devices that allow societies to construct narratives of continuity, legitimacy, and belonging. In this sense, the symbolic value of a monument such as Persepolis extends beyond its archaeological importance. It becomes a site where competing interpretations of national history, cultural authenticity, and collective memory are articulated.

Digital technologies have further transformed these processes. The emergence of digital heritage environments enables historical symbols to circulate rapidly across social media platforms, online communities, and transnational networks (Qian et al., 2026). Consequently, heritage signs are no longer controlled exclusively by cultural institutions or state authorities. Instead, they become subject to multiple interpretations generated by diverse actors operating within global communication networks. This development has increased both the visibility and the symbolic complexity of pre-Islamic Persian imagery in contemporary public discourse.

National Identity as a Semiotic Process

National identity is increasingly understood as a symbolic and communicative construction rather than a fixed social reality. Contemporary theories of nationalism emphasize that nations are produced and maintained through shared narratives, collective memories, cultural symbols, and symbolic boundaries. Semiotic approaches contribute to this understanding by highlighting the role of sign systems in the creation and maintenance of collective identities.

From a cultural semiotic perspective, national identity emerges through the circulation of signs that communicate shared meanings about history, territory, culture, and belonging. Symbols function as powerful mechanisms through which communities imagine continuity between past, present, and future. They provide recognizable markers that enable individuals to identify themselves as members of a larger cultural collective.

Recent scholarship suggests that national symbols are particularly effective because they condense complex historical narratives into easily recognizable forms (Dufresne, 2025). Monuments, historical figures, flags, architectural sites, and cultural icons become symbolic shorthand for broader ideas concerning nationhood and collective identity. Their effectiveness derives not from historical accuracy alone but from their ability to generate emotional, cultural, and political meanings.

Within the Iranian context, pre-Islamic Persian symbols constitute an important symbolic repertoire through which national identity is negotiated. Ancient symbols provide references to a historical past that predates modern political structures and contemporary ideological divisions. As a result, they often function as symbolic bridges connecting diverse interpretations of Iranian identity. The Faravahar, Persepolis, and representations of Cyrus the Great can simultaneously signify cultural heritage, civilizational continuity, national pride, and collective memory, depending on the context in which they are deployed.

Contemporary cultural semiotics further suggests that national identity should be understood as an ongoing process of semiosis rather than a completed social fact. Meanings attached to national symbols are continuously reconstructed through communication, contestation, and reinterpretation. This perspective is particularly relevant in the digital age, where symbolic representations circulate rapidly across multiple communicative environments and are subject to competing interpretations. Consequently, the study of pre-Islamic Persian symbols offers valuable insights into the semiotic mechanisms through which contemporary Iranian identity is produced, negotiated, and transformed.

The present study adopts this theoretical perspective to examine how ancient Persian symbols function as dynamic semiotic resources within contemporary Iranian culture. By integrating cultural semiotics, memory studies, and theories of national identity, the article seeks to explain how historical symbols continue to generate meaning in contemporary communicative environments and contribute to the ongoing construction of collective identity.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in cultural semiotics and interpretive textual analysis. The objective is not to measure public attitudes toward pre-Islamic Persian symbols but to examine how these symbols generate meaning within contemporary cultural and communicative environments. Consistent with contemporary approaches in cultural semiotics, signs are understood as dynamic elements of broader systems of communication whose meanings emerge through processes of circulation, interpretation, and symbolic negotiation (Tamm & Torop, 2022).

A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate because the study seeks to investigate how symbols associated with ancient Persia function as cultural resources in the construction of contemporary Iranian identity. Rather than treating symbols as fixed representations, the analysis focuses on the processes through which meanings are produced, transformed, and contested across different communicative contexts.

The study adopts a cultural semiotic perspective informed by Lotman's concept of the semiosphere, which conceptualizes culture as a complex network of interacting sign systems. This perspective allows for the examination of how historical symbols move between institutional, political, digital, and transnational domains while acquiring new meanings and social functions.

Research Corpus

The corpus consists of visual, textual, and digital representations of selected pre-Islamic Persian symbols that are widely recognized in contemporary Iranian cultural discourse. Purposeful sampling was employed to identify symbolic materials that frequently appear across public, cultural, and digital environments.

The analysis focuses on three principal symbolic categories:

The Faravahar

The Faravahar represents one of the most recognizable symbols associated with ancient Persian and Zoroastrian heritage. Contemporary uses of the symbol extend beyond its historical religious context and appear in cultural organizations, heritage initiatives, social media content, diasporic communities, and expressions of national identity.

Persepolis

Persepolis functions as both an archaeological site and a symbolic representation of ancient Persian civilization. Contemporary references to Persepolis appear in tourism campaigns, educational materials, heritage discourse, cultural productions, and digital media.

Cyrus the Great

Representations of Cyrus the Great constitute another important symbolic resource within contemporary Iranian identity discourse. Narratives surrounding Cyrus frequently appear in historical commemorations, heritage discussions, online communities, and transnational cultural networks.

The selected symbols were chosen because of their visibility, historical significance, and continued circulation across diverse communicative contexts.

Sources of Data

Data for this study were collected from multiple sources in order to capture the circulation of symbols across different communicative environments. These sources include:

- Official heritage and tourism websites.
- Museum exhibitions and cultural institution publications.
- Educational and historical materials.
- Public monuments and commemorative representations.
- Digital media platforms, including Instagram, X, Telegram, and YouTube.
- Iranian diaspora websites and cultural organizations.
- News media and public cultural discourse.

The inclusion of both institutional and digital sources enables the analysis of how symbolic meanings are negotiated between official and non-official communicative spaces.

Analytical Framework

The study employs cultural semiotic analysis to examine how pre-Islamic Persian symbols generate and communicate meanings. The analysis focuses on four interconnected dimensions.

The first dimension concerns the meanings associated with each symbol. This stage identifies the historical, cultural, and contemporary meanings attached to the selected symbols and examines how these meanings vary across contexts.

The second dimension investigates how symbols acquire new meanings as they move between different communicative environments. Particular attention is given to shifts from religious and historical meanings toward contemporary interpretations related to nationalism, cultural heritage, identity, and collective memory.

The third dimension examines the relationship between symbolic representations and collective memory. The analysis explores how selected symbols contribute to narratives of continuity, historical legitimacy, and cultural belonging.

The fourth dimension investigates the role of digital communication in the production and dissemination of symbolic meanings. This component focuses on how social media platforms facilitate the reinterpretation, adaptation, and contestation of heritage symbols within contemporary communicative networks.

Procedure of Analysis

The analysis was conducted in four stages.

First, symbolic materials were collected from the selected sources and organized according to symbolic category. The materials were then examined to identify recurring visual and textual representations.

Second, each symbol was analyzed within its historical context in order to establish its traditional cultural meanings. This stage provided a baseline for understanding contemporary reinterpretations.

Third, contemporary representations were examined using cultural semiotic analysis. Particular attention was given to the ways symbols were associated with themes such as nationhood, heritage, identity, cultural continuity, and historical memory.

Fourth, the findings were interpreted through the theoretical concepts outlined in the previous section, including semiosphere, symbolic translation, cultural memory, and identity construction. This stage enabled the identification of broader patterns in the circulation and transformation of symbolic meanings.

The study enhances analytical credibility through data triangulation. By examining symbols across multiple communicative contexts—including institutional discourse, cultural heritage representations, and digital media—the research reduces reliance on a single source of interpretation.

However, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, symbolic meanings are inherently polysemic and may vary among different audiences and communities. Second, the study focuses on selected symbols rather than the entire range of pre-Islamic Persian imagery. Third, digital content is subject to rapid change, which may affect the long-term stability of specific interpretations.

Despite these limitations, the selected corpus provides a robust basis for examining the contemporary semiotics of ancient Persian symbols and their role in the construction of Iranian national identity.

Ethical Considerations

The study relies exclusively on publicly accessible cultural materials, heritage resources, and publicly available digital content. No personal data, private communications, or human subjects were involved in the research. Consequently, formal ethical approval was not required. Nevertheless, the analysis seeks to represent cultural materials accurately and to avoid imposing essentialist interpretations upon complex and diverse symbolic practices.

The Semiosis of Ancient Persia in Contemporary Iran

The Faravahar as a Symbol of Cultural Continuity Among the various symbols associated with ancient Persia, the Faravahar occupies a particularly significant position within contemporary Iranian cultural discourse. Historically linked to Zoroastrian traditions, the symbol has undergone substantial semiotic transformation over time. While its original meanings were embedded within specific religious and cosmological frameworks, its contemporary significance extends far beyond its historical context. Today, the Faravahar functions as a widely recognized marker of Iranian cultural heritage, historical continuity, and collective identity.

From a cultural semiotic perspective, the Faravahar illustrates how symbols acquire new meanings through processes of translation and reinterpretation within the semiosphere (Tamm & Torop, 2022). Contemporary representations frequently detach the symbol from exclusively religious associations and reposition it within broader narratives of national culture and civilizational heritage. This process demonstrates what cultural semioticians describe as symbolic mobility, whereby signs move between different interpretive contexts while retaining enough continuity to remain recognizable.

The Faravahar's circulation across digital and transnational spaces has further expanded its semiotic functions. Social media platforms, diaspora organizations, cultural associations, and heritage initiatives frequently employ the symbol as a visual shorthand for Iranian identity. In many cases, users deploy the symbol not to express religious affiliation but to communicate cultural belonging, historical awareness, or attachment to Iranian heritage. Consequently, the sign operates as a flexible symbolic resource capable of accommodating multiple interpretations simultaneously.

This polysemic character reflects the dynamic nature of contemporary semiosis. The Faravahar functions differently depending on the communicative environment in which it appears. Within heritage discourse, it often signifies cultural continuity and historical preservation. Within diasporic communities, it may symbolize collective belonging and cultural memory. Within digital environments, it can serve as a visual marker through which users negotiate personal and collective identities. Such multiplicity demonstrates that contemporary meanings emerge not from the symbol itself but from the social and cultural interactions surrounding it.

The continued visibility of the Faravahar also illustrates the role of symbols in constructing temporal continuity. By linking contemporary identity to ancient Persian civilization, the symbol creates a narrative bridge between past and present. Through this process, historical heritage becomes integrated into contemporary understandings of nationhood and cultural belonging. The Faravahar therefore functions not merely as a representation of the past but as an active participant in the ongoing production of Iranian identity.

Persepolis and the Semiotics of Civilizational Memory

Persepolis occupies a unique position within the symbolic landscape of contemporary Iran. As one of the most prominent archaeological sites associated with the Achaemenid Empire, it represents both a material remnant of ancient civilization and a powerful symbolic resource within modern cultural discourse. Its significance extends beyond archaeological value to encompass broader meanings related to historical continuity, civilizational achievement, and collective memory.

Recent scholarship in memory studies suggests that heritage sites function as memory infrastructures through which societies organize and communicate understandings of the past (Cossu, 2023; Dufresne, 2025). Persepolis exemplifies this process. The site serves as a symbolic reference point through which narratives of Iranian history are constructed, preserved, and communicated across generations. Through educational materials, tourism campaigns, media representations, and digital content, Persepolis becomes embedded within broader cultural narratives concerning national heritage and historical identity.

From a cultural semiotic perspective, Persepolis operates as a symbolic text that generates multiple layers of meaning. Its monumental architecture communicates ideas of political authority, artistic achievement, and civilizational sophistication. However, these meanings are not fixed. Contemporary actors continuously

reinterpret the site according to present-day concerns and cultural contexts. Consequently, Persepolis functions as an open semiotic resource rather than a static historical artifact.

The digital circulation of images and narratives associated with Persepolis has intensified these processes of reinterpretation. Social media platforms facilitate the dissemination of photographs, videos, historical narratives, and commemorative content related to the site. Through such practices, Persepolis becomes accessible to audiences far beyond its physical location. Digital representations allow individuals to engage with the site symbolically, transforming it into a communicative object within global cultural networks.

The symbolic significance of Persepolis also derives from its capacity to condense complex historical narratives into a single recognizable image. Within contemporary discourse, references to Persepolis frequently evoke notions of antiquity, cultural resilience, historical continuity, and national pride. Such associations demonstrate how heritage sites function semiotically by transforming material structures into symbolic representations of collective identity.

Furthermore, Persepolis serves as a site of symbolic negotiation. Different actors may emphasize distinct aspects of its meaning depending on ideological, cultural, or political objectives. Some interpretations foreground its role as evidence of civilizational achievement, while others emphasize cultural memory, tourism, or heritage preservation. These competing interpretations highlight the dynamic nature of cultural memory and illustrate how historical symbols remain subject to ongoing processes of reinterpretation.

Cyrus the Great and the Politics of Historical Meaning

Historical figures often function as powerful symbolic resources within national narratives, and few figures occupy a more prominent position within contemporary Iranian discourse than Cyrus the Great. As founder of the Achaemenid Empire, Cyrus has become a central reference point in discussions concerning Iranian history, civilization, governance, and cultural identity. However, his contemporary significance extends beyond historical biography. Through processes of semiosis, Cyrus has been transformed into a symbolic figure whose meanings vary across different cultural and political contexts.

From a semiotic perspective, historical personalities may operate as cultural signs that condense broader narratives into identifiable symbolic forms. Contemporary representations of Cyrus frequently associate him with themes such as justice, tolerance, leadership, and civilizational achievement. These associations contribute to the construction of collective memory by linking contemporary identity narratives to an idealized historical past.

The symbolic power of Cyrus derives partly from his adaptability across different communicative environments. Educational materials, cultural organizations, social media platforms, and diasporic communities often mobilize references to Cyrus in order to articulate particular visions of Iranian identity. Such representations demonstrate how historical figures can function as flexible symbolic resources capable of supporting multiple and sometimes competing interpretations.

Digital communication has significantly expanded the circulation of narratives surrounding Cyrus. Online commemorations, visual representations, and historical discussions contribute to the continuous reproduction of his symbolic significance. Through these processes, historical memory becomes increasingly decentralized, allowing diverse actors to participate in the construction and reinterpretation of cultural narratives. The digital environment thus transforms Cyrus from a historical figure into an active element within contemporary identity discourse.

The case of Cyrus also illustrates the role of symbolic condensation in national identity formation. Complex historical narratives concerning ancient Persia are frequently reduced to recognizable symbolic figures that facilitate collective identification. As a result, Cyrus functions not only as an individual historical actor but also as a broader signifier of cultural continuity, historical prestige, and collective memory.

Within the framework of cultural semiotics, the significance of Cyrus lies less in historical accuracy than in symbolic effectiveness. His contemporary meanings emerge through ongoing interpretive processes rather than through direct transmission from the past. Different social actors selectively emphasize particular aspects of his legacy in order to support specific narratives of nationhood and cultural belonging. This process demonstrates how collective memory operates through symbolic reconstruction rather than simple historical preservation.

Comparative Analysis: Symbolic Transformation and Identity Construction

Although the Faravahar, Persepolis, and Cyrus the Great differ in origin and form, their contemporary functions reveal several common semiotic patterns. First, all three symbols have undergone processes of symbolic transformation that extend their meanings beyond original historical contexts. Religious, architectural, and political symbols have been reinterpreted as broader markers of cultural identity and collective memory.

Second, each symbol operates as a mechanism of temporal mediation. By linking contemporary identity to ancient Persian civilization, these symbols establish narratives of continuity between past and present. Such narratives contribute to the construction of national identity by providing symbolic resources through which individuals and communities imagine historical belonging.

Third, digital communication has significantly expanded the circulation and reinterpretation of these symbols. Social media platforms, online communities, and transnational networks facilitate the movement of signs across cultural boundaries, increasing both their visibility and their interpretive flexibility. As a result, symbolic meanings are no longer controlled by traditional institutions but are continually negotiated among diverse actors.

Finally, the analysis demonstrates that pre-Islamic Persian symbols function as dynamic semiotic resources rather than static representations of history. Their meanings emerge through ongoing processes of communication, interpretation, and contestation within the contemporary semiosphere. The Faravahar, Persepolis, and Cyrus the Great continue to generate cultural significance because they provide symbolic frameworks through which individuals and communities negotiate questions of memory, heritage, and national identity.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the contemporary significance of ancient Persian symbols lies not in their preservation of fixed historical meanings but in their capacity to generate new meanings across changing cultural contexts. Through continuous processes of semiosis, these symbols remain central to the ongoing construction and negotiation of Iranian national identity.

Digital Circulation and Symbolic Reinterpretation

Digital Media and the Expansion of the Semiosphere

The emergence of digital communication technologies has fundamentally transformed the circulation, interpretation, and reproduction of cultural symbols. Contemporary semiotic scholarship increasingly recognizes digital environments as important spaces of semiosis in which signs are continuously created, translated, and recontextualized (Mazzucchelli, 2024; Qian et al., 2026). Social media platforms, online communities, digital archives, and transnational communication networks have expanded the semiosphere by enabling cultural symbols to move rapidly across geographical, political, and institutional boundaries.

Within the Iranian context, digital media has significantly altered the ways in which pre-Islamic Persian symbols are encountered and interpreted. Symbols such as the Faravahar, Persepolis, and Cyrus the Great no longer circulate solely through educational institutions, heritage organizations, or official cultural narratives. Instead, they are increasingly reproduced through user-generated content, visual communication, digital storytelling, and online cultural practices. This transformation has multiplied both the visibility of these symbols and the range of meanings associated with them.

From a cultural semiotic perspective, digital environments function as spaces of symbolic translation. As signs move across different platforms and audiences, they acquire new meanings that may differ substantially from

their historical origins. The digital circulation of pre-Islamic Persian symbols demonstrates how cultural signs are continuously reconstructed within contemporary communicative systems. Rather than preserving fixed meanings, digital media facilitates the production of new symbolic associations that reflect changing social, cultural, and political realities.

Moreover, digital communication has reduced the ability of traditional institutions to monopolize cultural interpretation. Heritage organizations, state institutions, academic authorities, and cultural elites now share interpretive space with social media users, influencers, diaspora communities, and independent content creators. As a result, symbolic meanings emerge through decentralized processes of negotiation and contestation rather than through top-down cultural transmission.

Social Media and the Re-Signification of Ancient Persian Symbols

Social media platforms play a central role in the contemporary re-signification of cultural heritage. Through visual imagery, hashtags, videos, memes, and commemorative posts, users actively participate in the production of symbolic meanings. The circulation of pre-Islamic Persian symbols on platforms such as Instagram, X, Telegram, and YouTube demonstrates how digital communication transforms historical signs into contemporary cultural resources.

The Faravahar provides a particularly illustrative example. Within digital environments, the symbol frequently appears in profile images, cultural campaigns, artistic productions, and heritage-related content. In many cases, its use is disconnected from traditional religious meanings and instead communicates broader ideas concerning cultural heritage, historical continuity, and Iranian identity. The symbol's adaptability allows it to function across diverse social contexts while maintaining its recognizability as a marker of Iranian culture.

Similarly, digital representations of Persepolis often extend beyond archaeological documentation. Users frequently employ images of the site to express admiration for ancient Persian civilization, commemorate historical achievements, or emphasize narratives of cultural resilience. Through repeated circulation, the site acquires symbolic meanings that transcend its material existence and become embedded within broader discourses of identity and memory.

Representations of Cyrus the Great undergo similar processes of re-signification. Historical narratives associated with Cyrus are frequently simplified, adapted, and redistributed through digital formats that prioritize symbolic resonance over historical complexity. Quotes, images, videos, and commemorative posts contribute to the construction of Cyrus as a contemporary cultural symbol whose significance extends beyond historical scholarship. Through these practices, historical memory becomes integrated into everyday digital communication.

The digital re-signification of these symbols demonstrates the fluidity of cultural meaning. Rather than reproducing historical interpretations unchanged, social media users actively participate in symbolic reconstruction, generating new meanings that respond to contemporary concerns and cultural contexts.

Diaspora Communities and Transnational Semiosis

The role of Iranian diaspora communities is particularly significant in the contemporary circulation of pre-Islamic Persian symbols. Advances in communication technology have enabled transnational communities to maintain cultural connections across geographical boundaries while participating in shared symbolic practices. Consequently, digital media facilitates the emergence of transnational semiospheres in which cultural meanings are produced through interactions among geographically dispersed actors.

Within diasporic contexts, ancient Persian symbols often acquire functions related to cultural preservation, identity maintenance, and collective belonging. The Faravahar, for example, frequently appears in community organizations, cultural events, digital platforms, and heritage initiatives. Such uses illustrate how historical symbols can serve as markers of continuity within communities navigating experiences of migration and displacement.

Diasporic engagement with Persepolis and Cyrus the Great similarly reflects efforts to maintain connections with cultural heritage. Digital communication allows these symbols to circulate within global networks, enabling individuals to participate in collective memory practices regardless of physical location. Through online interactions, diaspora communities contribute to the reinterpretation and dissemination of symbolic narratives concerning Iranian history and identity.

From a cultural semiotic perspective, these processes demonstrate the importance of transnational communication in contemporary meaning production. Cultural symbols are no longer confined to specific national contexts but move across multiple cultural environments where they encounter new audiences and interpretations. The resulting interactions contribute to the diversification of symbolic meanings and expand the semiotic functions of heritage symbols.

Symbolic Contestation and Competing Narratives

While digital communication facilitates the circulation of cultural symbols, it also creates opportunities for symbolic contestation. Contemporary semiotics emphasizes that signs rarely possess universally accepted meanings. Instead, meanings emerge through ongoing struggles among competing interpretations and ideological positions (Monticelli, 2022).

Pre-Islamic Persian symbols are frequently subject to such contestation. Different actors may mobilize the same symbol to support contrasting narratives concerning history, culture, religion, or national identity. The Faravahar, for example, may be interpreted as a symbol of cultural heritage, religious tradition, historical continuity, or secular identity depending on the context in which it is deployed. Similarly, representations of Persepolis and Cyrus the Great may generate diverse interpretations that reflect differing understandings of Iranian history and nationhood.

Digital platforms intensify these dynamics by increasing opportunities for public participation in symbolic interpretation. Users may challenge dominant narratives, propose alternative meanings, or combine historical symbols with contemporary concerns. Consequently, digital communication transforms symbolic interpretation into an ongoing process of negotiation rather than a stable transmission of established meanings.

The existence of competing interpretations does not diminish the significance of these symbols. Rather, it highlights their continuing relevance within contemporary cultural discourse. Symbols remain powerful precisely because they are capable of accommodating multiple meanings while providing a shared framework for communication and identification.

Digital Heritage and the Future of Cultural Memory

The increasing digitization of cultural heritage raises important questions concerning the future of collective memory and symbolic communication. Contemporary research suggests that digital technologies are transforming the ways in which societies preserve, access, and interpret historical resources (Qian et al., 2026). Heritage is no longer limited to physical monuments, museums, or archives; it increasingly exists within digital environments characterized by rapid circulation and continuous reinterpretation.

For pre-Islamic Persian symbols, digital communication has expanded opportunities for visibility, participation, and engagement. At the same time, it has accelerated processes of symbolic transformation by exposing heritage signs to diverse audiences and interpretive communities. The result is a more dynamic and decentralized system of cultural memory in which meanings are continually reconstructed through communication.

The Iranian case demonstrates that heritage symbols remain highly influential within contemporary identity formation despite the profound technological changes of the digital age. Ancient Persian symbols continue to function as important semiotic resources because they provide cultural frameworks through which individuals and communities interpret relationships between history, memory, and belonging.

The analysis presented in this section suggests that digital media should not be understood merely as a channel for transmitting cultural symbols. Rather, digital environments constitute active spaces of semiosis that reshape the meanings, functions, and social significance of heritage signs. Through processes of digital circulation, symbolic translation, and transnational communication, pre-Islamic Persian symbols continue to play a central role in the ongoing negotiation of Iranian national identity.

DISCUSSION

Ancient Persian Symbols as Dynamic Semiotic Resources

The findings of this study demonstrate that pre-Islamic Persian symbols function not as static remnants of history but as dynamic semiotic resources that continually generate new meanings within contemporary Iranian society. The analyses of the Faravahar, Persepolis, and Cyrus the Great reveal that these symbols operate within complex networks of cultural communication where historical significance is constantly reinterpreted according to changing social, political, and technological contexts.

This finding supports contemporary developments in cultural semiotics that emphasize the processual nature of meaning production (Tamm & Torop, 2022). Rather than preserving fixed historical meanings, symbols acquire significance through ongoing processes of semiosis. Their meanings emerge through interactions among institutions, communities, media platforms, and cultural actors. Consequently, the significance of ancient Persian symbols cannot be explained solely by reference to their historical origins. Instead, their contemporary relevance derives from their capacity to participate in current cultural debates concerning identity, memory, and belonging.

The concept of the semiosphere provides a useful framework for interpreting these processes. As Lotman suggested, signs exist within broader systems of communication where meanings are continuously produced through interaction and translation. The present study demonstrates that pre-Islamic Persian symbols operate within a contemporary semiosphere that includes heritage institutions, educational systems, digital media platforms, tourism industries, and transnational communities. As symbols move across these domains, they undergo processes of reinterpretation that generate new layers of meaning while maintaining connections to historical narratives.

This dynamic character explains why symbols associated with ancient Persia remain culturally influential despite dramatic social and political transformations. Their continued relevance does not depend upon the preservation of original meanings but upon their adaptability to contemporary communicative needs. The Faravahar, Persepolis, and Cyrus the Great continue to function as effective symbols because they provide flexible semiotic resources capable of accommodating diverse interpretations of Iranian identity.

Cultural Memory and the Semiotics of Heritage

A second major finding concerns the relationship between cultural memory and symbolic communication. The study demonstrates that pre-Islamic Persian symbols play a crucial role in mediating collective memory and constructing narratives of historical continuity. Through repeated circulation in cultural, educational, and digital contexts, these symbols contribute to the formation of shared understandings of the past and its relevance to contemporary identity.

This observation aligns with recent scholarship that conceptualizes memory as a semiotic process rather than a passive storage of historical information (Cossu, 2023; Dufresne, 2025). Collective memory depends upon signs, narratives, and symbolic representations that enable communities to communicate historical meanings across generations. Heritage symbols therefore function not merely as references to historical events but as active mechanisms through which societies organize and reconstruct relationships with the past.

The findings indicate that Persepolis serves as a particularly significant site of cultural memory. Beyond its archaeological importance, the site functions as a symbolic representation of civilizational achievement, historical continuity, and cultural resilience. Similarly, the Faravahar and Cyrus the Great operate as memory

symbols that condense complex historical narratives into recognizable forms capable of sustaining collective identification.

Importantly, the study suggests that memory should not be understood as a stable reproduction of historical facts. Rather, memory emerges through continuous processes of selection, interpretation, and symbolic reconstruction. Contemporary representations of ancient Persia do not simply preserve the past; they actively reshape historical meanings according to present cultural concerns. Heritage thus becomes a dynamic field of signification where competing narratives of history and identity are negotiated.

This perspective contributes to current debates concerning the politics of heritage. The findings indicate that heritage symbols derive their significance not from intrinsic historical value alone but from their ability to function as communicative resources within contemporary cultural systems. Consequently, heritage preservation involves not only the protection of physical artifacts but also the ongoing negotiation of symbolic meanings.

National Identity as an Ongoing Process of Semiosis

The analysis further demonstrates that national identity is best understood as an ongoing process of semiosis rather than a fixed cultural condition. Throughout the study, pre-Islamic Persian symbols appeared as important resources through which diverse actors construct, communicate, and negotiate understandings of Iranian identity. These symbolic practices illustrate the central role of sign systems in the production of collective belonging.

Contemporary theories of nationalism increasingly emphasize the symbolic foundations of national identity. Nations are not merely political entities but cultural constructions maintained through narratives, memories, and symbolic representations. The findings support this perspective by showing how historical symbols facilitate connections between contemporary communities and imagined historical continuities.

The Faravahar, Persepolis, and Cyrus the Great each contribute to the production of national identity by linking present-day cultural experiences to broader narratives of Iranian civilization. These symbols provide recognizable reference points through which individuals can interpret relationships between history, culture, and belonging. Their effectiveness derives from their capacity to condense complex historical narratives into accessible symbolic forms.

At the same time, the findings reveal that national identity is characterized by interpretive diversity rather than symbolic consensus. Different actors attribute different meanings to the same symbols depending upon their social positions, cultural experiences, and ideological perspectives. Consequently, national identity emerges not from uniform agreement but from ongoing symbolic negotiation.

This observation challenges essentialist understandings of identity that assume stable or homogeneous cultural meanings. The study instead supports a semiotic perspective in which identity remains continuously open to reinterpretation. Ancient Persian symbols contribute to this process by providing shared symbolic resources that can support multiple and sometimes competing narratives of Iranian nationhood.

The Digital Semiosphere and Symbolic Reinterpretation

One of the most significant findings of the study concerns the transformative role of digital communication in contemporary semiosis. Digital media platforms have expanded opportunities for symbolic circulation, reinterpretation, and participation, creating new environments in which heritage symbols acquire meaning. These developments suggest the emergence of what may be described as a digital semiosphere characterized by intensified processes of symbolic interaction and cultural translation.

The analysis demonstrates that social media platforms facilitate the rapid movement of symbols across institutional, national, and cultural boundaries. Heritage signs that once circulated primarily through educational systems, museums, or cultural organizations now appear within highly decentralized communication networks. Users actively participate in the production of symbolic meanings through images, videos, hashtags, commemorations, and digital storytelling practices.

This transformation has important implications for contemporary cultural semiotics. Traditional models of cultural communication often assume relatively stable channels of symbolic transmission. However, digital communication environments are characterized by constant reinterpretation and user participation. Meanings are increasingly produced through horizontal interactions among diverse actors rather than through centralized institutional authority.

The role of diaspora communities further illustrates this transformation. Digital technologies enable transnational communities to engage actively with cultural heritage regardless of geographical location. As a result, ancient Persian symbols circulate within global communication networks where they acquire new meanings related to migration, belonging, and cultural preservation. These developments expand the interpretive possibilities associated with heritage symbols and contribute to the diversification of collective memory.

The findings therefore support recent arguments that digital media should be understood not simply as a communication tool but as a semiotic environment that actively shapes cultural meaning (Mazzucchelli, 2024; Qian et al., 2026). Through processes of digital circulation and symbolic translation, heritage signs become increasingly dynamic, polysemic, and globally interconnected.

Theoretical Contributions of the Study

The present study makes several contributions to contemporary semiotic scholarship. First, it extends cultural semiotic approaches to the analysis of heritage symbols within contemporary Iranian society. While previous research has often examined pre-Islamic Persian symbols from historical, political, or archaeological perspectives, this study demonstrates the value of analyzing them as active sign systems operating within contemporary communicative environments.

Second, the study contributes to cultural memory research by illustrating how heritage symbols function as mediators between historical narratives and contemporary identity formation. The findings support recent arguments that memory should be understood as a dynamic semiotic process rather than a static representation of the past.

Third, the research advances understanding of the relationship between digital communication and cultural semiosis. By examining the circulation of ancient Persian symbols across digital platforms and transnational networks, the study highlights the importance of digital environments in shaping contemporary symbolic practices.

Finally, the study contributes to Iranian Studies by providing a semiotic account of how pre-Islamic Persian symbols participate in ongoing debates concerning national identity, heritage, and collective memory. The findings demonstrate that these symbols remain significant not because they preserve fixed historical meanings but because they continue to generate new meanings within changing cultural contexts.

Taken together, these contributions suggest that contemporary Iranian identity is best understood as a dynamic semiotic process in which historical symbols, collective memory, and digital communication interact continuously within an expanding semiosphere. Ancient Persian symbols therefore remain important not as relics of the past but as active participants in the ongoing construction and negotiation of cultural meaning.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the role of pre-Islamic Persian symbols in the construction and negotiation of contemporary Iranian national identity through the theoretical lenses of cultural semiotics, cultural memory, and heritage studies. Focusing on the Faravahar, Persepolis, and Cyrus the Great, the research explored how these symbols function within contemporary communicative environments and how their meanings are continuously reinterpreted through cultural, institutional, and digital processes. By analyzing the circulation of these symbols across heritage discourse, public culture, digital media, and transnational communities, the study sought to explain how historical signs continue to shape contemporary understandings of identity and belonging.

The findings demonstrate that pre-Islamic Persian symbols should not be understood as static representations of a distant past. Rather, they function as dynamic semiotic resources whose meanings emerge through ongoing processes of interpretation, translation, and symbolic negotiation. Although each symbol possesses a specific historical origin, its contemporary significance is produced within broader cultural systems that connect historical memory with present-day concerns. The Faravahar, Persepolis, and Cyrus the Great therefore operate as active signifiers through which individuals and communities articulate relationships between heritage, memory, and national identity.

The analysis further revealed the importance of cultural memory in sustaining the contemporary relevance of these symbols. Heritage symbols serve not only as references to historical events or civilizations but also as mechanisms through which collective memory is organized and communicated. Through educational narratives, cultural institutions, public commemorations, and digital representations, ancient Persian symbols contribute to the construction of historical continuity and collective belonging. In this sense, cultural memory emerges not as a passive preservation of the past but as an active process of meaning-making in which symbolic representations play a central role.

A significant contribution of the study concerns the impact of digital communication on symbolic circulation and reinterpretation. Digital platforms have transformed the ways in which cultural symbols are produced, disseminated, and interpreted. Social media, online communities, and transnational communication networks facilitate the movement of heritage symbols across geographical and cultural boundaries, enabling new forms of engagement with historical narratives. As a result, symbolic meanings are increasingly generated through decentralized and participatory processes rather than through exclusive institutional control. The emergence of digital environments has therefore expanded the semiosphere and intensified opportunities for symbolic transformation.

The study also demonstrates that national identity is best understood as a semiotic process rather than a fixed cultural condition. Iranian identity is continuously produced through symbolic practices that connect contemporary experiences with historical narratives and cultural memories. Pre-Islamic Persian symbols contribute to this process by providing recognizable cultural references through which individuals and groups negotiate questions of belonging, continuity, and collective self-understanding. The meanings associated with these symbols are neither uniform nor permanent; instead, they remain open to reinterpretation according to changing social, cultural, and technological contexts.

From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to contemporary cultural semiotics by applying the concepts of semiosphere, symbolic translation, and cultural memory to the analysis of heritage symbols in a non-Western context. The findings support recent arguments that signs should be understood as dynamic elements within broader communicative systems rather than as isolated carriers of meaning. Furthermore, the study demonstrates the usefulness of integrating cultural semiotics with memory studies and heritage research in order to examine the complex relationships between historical symbols and contemporary identity formation.

The research also contributes to the growing literature on digital heritage and symbolic communication. By examining the digital circulation of ancient Persian symbols, the study highlights the importance of contemporary media environments in shaping cultural memory and identity. Heritage symbols increasingly operate within transnational networks characterized by rapid circulation, participatory interpretation, and symbolic contestation. Future studies of heritage and identity must therefore pay greater attention to the role of digital communication in transforming cultural signification.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study focused primarily on three prominent symbols and did not examine the full range of pre-Islamic Persian imagery present in contemporary Iranian culture. Second, the analysis relied on qualitative semiotic interpretation and did not incorporate audience reception studies or interviews with users and cultural practitioners. Third, because digital environments evolve rapidly, symbolic meanings may continue to change beyond the temporal scope of the present research.

These limitations suggest several directions for future research. Subsequent studies could investigate audience interpretations of ancient Persian symbols through interviews, surveys, or digital ethnography. Comparative

research might explore how similar heritage symbols function in other cultural contexts characterized by strong historical traditions and contemporary identity debates. Future scholarship could also examine the role of artificial intelligence, virtual heritage technologies, and algorithmic communication in shaping the circulation and reinterpretation of cultural symbols. Such investigations would further enhance understanding of the relationship between heritage, memory, and identity in increasingly digital societies.

In conclusion, the study argues that the contemporary significance of pre-Islamic Persian symbols lies not in their preservation of fixed historical meanings but in their capacity to generate new meanings across changing cultural contexts. Through ongoing processes of semiosis, cultural memory, and digital circulation, the Faravahar, Persepolis, and Cyrus the Great continue to function as powerful symbolic resources within contemporary Iranian identity formation. Their enduring relevance illustrates the capacity of cultural symbols to connect past and present while remaining open to continuous reinterpretation. The case of ancient Persian symbolism therefore demonstrates how heritage operates as a living semiotic system through which societies negotiate memory, identity, and belonging in the twenty-first century.

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