

The Arab Conquests and Sasanian Iran

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Part I - Some General Observations on the Late Sasanian Period

This essay is an attempt at collecting some thoughts on an important historical event and its related historiographical questions. It is not written with the intention of providing definitive answers to the larger questions surrounding the Arab conquests or the specific case of the fall of the Sasanians, but rather seeks to present a basic framework for thinking about the issues.¹

Introduction

How did the mighty Sasanian Empire fall? This question is central to almost everything I do as an historian of the Sasanians. Like many, I have looked at the question in the context of administration, the Sasanian-Byzantine Wars, Sasanian-Arab relations, Zoroastrianism and other religious movements, late antique social changes, and finally economic history; my particular focus on the last factor is, I hope, my own little contribution to the greater debate. I also believe there are some answers that can be given from the point of view of Central Asia or East Iran, which is also an area I research.² I have a feeling that when I am 80 and old, and have written many articles and books about the details of this subject, I will finally have something resembling a succinct answer to give to the question of *what happened?* Until then, I intend to avoid giving a straight answer when I am asked the question directly, because I think that our knowledge of the details of the period is quite incomplete. I do have ideas though; but ideas are sometimes mere fancies, and fancies are often wrong, or at least need to be seriously adjusted to be useful as real answers.

However, in the public realm, when the question of *what happened?* is asked, brazen, overconfident answers are often given, without much consideration for facts. Cocksure, self-proclaimed experts provide answers based on hearsay, middle school textbooks, and the words of such and such *Ustād*, or scholars who passed away in the 1940s. Naturally, a great part of the conversation happens in the Irano-Persian milieu, where it takes on a political guise and is made to address contemporary issues. In this setting, part of the problem of giving a proper answer to the question is the unavailability of many of the primary sources and secondary scholarship to Persian speakers, either linguistically or physically. Another part of the problem is the general attitude among said crowd that “History” is something that has happened already, and not much can be added to answer the question of *what happened?* – new sources only serving to re-confirm what we already knew, or any change in the established narrative capable of being dismissed as “revisionism.” Old information is repeated and any voice of dissent is considered treasonous. I have long been labelled a traitor, so I am used to it, but I do get annoyed at being dismissed as a puppet of Western Orientalists (bless Edward Said for giving a catchword to those who don’t actually read [his book](#)).



Sasanian splendor. Among the most enduring symbols of the power, prestige, and wealth of the Sasanian dynasty are the sumptuous luxury goods produced during their reign. Detail of a hunting scene from a silver cup of the 5th or 6th century in a private collection (from R. Ghirshman, *Persian Art: The Parthian and Sassanian Dynasties, 249 B.C.–A.D. 651* [Golden Press, 1962], 249).

So, I think here I may give some of the answers I already have when the question is brought up, and might even dare to suggest some of my ideas (or fancies), with the caveat that I am ready to be wrong about them. Yes, there are sources I have not yet checked, and there are of course many sub-fields in which I am not fully versed. But I like to think that I am at least partially conversant with most of the recent scholarship, and as a trained historian – world historian for that matter – I have some ability to put it all together to see what it might mean. As it stands, I am not giving definite answers; that goal is still several decades away, if it can ever be reached. All I will say is what we know now, and what we might anticipate we might know better in the future.

Who Says What?

So, the question is: how did the fall of the Sasanians happen? The way it is asked is often: *How did the mighty Sasanian Empire fall?* How did the Arabs, from the depths of *Arabia Deserta*, manage to overrun the prosperous Sasanian Empire, convert its (Zoroastrian) population to Islam, take control of its resources, and change its culture and language?

Answers to these questions have come from two main camps. The first group valorizes the coming of Islam, attributing the success of the Muslims' conquest of Iran to the positive, world-changing ideas associated with it. These people tend to care more about modern history, have

sympathies for the religion, and sometimes are even in line with certain political groups or ideologies. The second group is hostile toward the first group, and nostalgic for what they perceive to be the days of Iranian glory before the advent of Islam. They consider the Arab conquest of Iran to be the disastrous intrusion of uncouth nomads who destroyed a glorious civilization. This latter group's answer to the question of what happened, then, is that there was something wrong within the Sasanian system that allowed their downfall. Since the religion of Islam is often the cause of this group's immediate grievances, it is religion that gets blamed here too, except that it is the religion of Zoroastrianism which they tend to fault. Thus, a popular notion among this group says that the Zoroastrian clerical theocracy of the late Sasanian period caused great dissatisfaction among the people, thus handing an easy victory to the invading Arabs who met no resistance from the disenfranchised populace.³ The question of the relationship between this perceived failure of Zoroastrianism's institutions and this same group's nostalgia for Zoroastrianism as a national ideology, acting as a vehicle for a nationalist "Aryanism," is among the many historical contradictions that are not really clearly addressed by the proponents of this explanation.



Detail of a typical map of the Arab conquests. Such graphics encourage the false impression that the Sasanian Empire, the dominant power in the eastern Mediterranean and Near East at the time of the rise of Islam, was rapidly overtaken and collapsed due to overwhelming external pressure, transforming the entire social, political, religious, and cultural order virtually overnight. The colored fields encompassing virtually all of Iran here indicate the supposed Islamization of these areas during the reigns of the second and third caliphs, 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (r. 634-644 CE) and 'Uthmān b. 'Affān (r. 644-656 CE) (from A.-M. Wittke et al., *Der neue Pauly. Historischer Atlas der antiken Welt* [Verlag J.B. Metzler, 2012], 243).

The narrative of both groups, based mainly on accounts of the conquests drawn from standard Islamic histories such as those of al-Balādhurī, al-Ṭabarī, and so forth, considers the fall of the Sasanians to be the result of quick and successful campaigns by Muslim armies. These campaigns, exemplified by the battles of Qādisiyya and Nahāvand, are considered to have caused the near-instantaneous fall of the Sasanians as an imperial and cultural unit. Furthermore, this fall is assumed to be the fall of Iran itself; as a result, it represents no less than a national failure, the beginning of Iran's subordination to Arabia and/or Islam.⁴ I shall refrain here from getting into arguments of why the Sasanian *Ērānshahr* cannot be equated – ideologically, geographically,

psychologically, politically, economically, or culturally – with the current land of Iran, though I will talk about aspects of this later.⁵

Other than the popular understanding of the swiftness and effectiveness of the Arab campaigns, there are two cultural assumptions that are made in this regard. The first is the supposition that the conquests automatically resulted in the conversion of the entire society to Islam. Any survival of pre-Islamic religions, generally put under the overall rubric of “Zoroastrianism,” is assumed to have been an act of resistance and defiance that was heavily suppressed by the new “masters,” i.e. Arab Muslims. The second assumption is that the Arabic language was immediately imposed on the conquered populace as part and parcel of conversion. Consequently, the supposed survival or revival of the Persian language is presented as a miraculous event, a unique phenomenon in the Islamic world, where everyone else *had* to adopt Arabic. This miracle is either ascribed to the persistent and persevering nature of Iranians and the supposedly dominant and enduring culture of Iran. Alternatively, it is credited to Ferdowsī who, allegedly against all odds, composed his great masterpiece of the *Shāhnāme* for the conscious purpose of preserving the Persian language, thus single-handedly “saving” Iranian culture.⁶

Any scholar seeking to respond to all this must inevitably adopt an apologetic tone. This, in fact, has been a major problem, because before any researcher has an opportunity to conduct research on the actual historical events and issues, he or she has to address these misconceptions, dismiss many of them, and then try to bring in enough facts and new interpretations to move the debate forward. The negligible number of people involved in the study of the actual issues means that those who are occupied with it in fact spend a disproportionate number of hours shaking their heads and trying to plough through the misconceptions. In what follows here, I attempt to do the same while presenting some of the new scholarship and narratives of the events. While the following is indeed my own interpretation of the issue, I can assure those readers not intimately involved with the debates that my presentation is not aiming to be revolutionary, and in fact reflects the middle point of current scholarship.

The Late Antique World and Late Sasanian Iran

We first have to view both the late Sasanian realm and the rise of Islam within the framework of a changing world. This is the framework that is now labelled “Late Antiquity,” [which has been the chronological and methodological framework preferred by many scholars for decades now.](#) The term was originally was applied to the Roman Empire, where it served to correct Gibbon’s narrative of the fall of the classical civilization of Rome and the descent into the “Dark Ages” that followed the transformation of Classical Rome into Christian Byzantium. In that context, the late antique framework bridges the gap between the “Classical” and “Christian” by arguing that Christianity in fact modified and adapted many of the institutions of the Classical world, allowing for their application to systems beyond the structure of an empire and creating the familiar institutions of medieval Christendom.⁷ Christianity was thus the means for turning the Roman Empire into a Christian commonwealth that adopted and made use of most of what was bequeathed to it as the Classical heritage.⁸ Since the 1990s, the framework of Late Antiquity and its emphasis on continuity has been adapted to the non-Roman world as well, as historians of Sasanian Iran and Islam have argued for a similarly changing world in West and Central Asia. A major characteristic of this development has been a tendency to see the Islamic conquests not as a radical break with the past, but rather as a transformation due to internal dynamics and phenomena of West Asia, reflecting the continuity of structures and institutions from the Sasanian to the Islamic world.⁹



Detail, [plate with royal hunting scene](#), depicting either Pērōz (r. 459–484 CE) or Kavād I (r. 488–497, 499–531 CE), silver, mid-5th–mid-6th c. CE (34.33; courtesy [The Metropolitan Museum of Art](#))

Apart from Late Antiquity, another framework that needs to be considered – and I have been most insistent on its adoption – is that of world history. The gist of this approach is to ponder a greater, trans-regional context for both the Sasanian Empire and the rise of Islam. This is not to simply consider the broader history of the Mediterranean and West Asia, but to take contemporary political, cultural, and economic forces into account in a serious way. For example, the late antique idea of the rise of the holy man, other than an explanation for the interest in prophethood or sainthood, can also be considered within the context of the changing structure of social support around Eurasia and North Africa. Another example is that economic changes in West Asia, particularly in agricultural production, should be understood within the context of changing political attitudes in Central Asia.¹⁰ We need to be able to understand historical phenomena outside the given boundaries of textual interpretation and archaeological confirmations. Compound histories (e.g. political, economic, cultural, social, or gender history) have to become a reality in the study of periods of history far beyond the pre-modern one, their dominant playground. World history, as a methodology that can act as a cover for all these interdisciplinary approaches to history, needs to be applied so we can properly understand the period under discussion here.

Late Sasanian Iran, essentially the period after 484 CE, is a prime example of how we might put these methodologies to use. This date, chosen only partially at random, is the year in which Pērōz, the Sasanian emperor or *shāhānshāh* (King of Kings), was defeated and killed by the Hephthalites somewhere near Balkh, in present-day northern Afghanistan. The Hephthalites, a newly formed political entity in the region, became masters of East Iran and imposed heavy reparations on the Sasanians. Moreover, for almost two decades, they became the kingmakers of the Sasanians, removing and installing Sasanian claimants to the throne, mostly indirectly. The heavy payments of war damages to the Hephthalites must have drained the Sasanian treasury, although no direct evidence is available for this. It did, clearly, turn the Sasanians into predatory actors in Syria, the eastern territories of the Romans, which Kavād I, the winner of two decades of royal musical chairs, invaded and from which he tried to exact as much cash as possible.

Their financial troubles aside, the defeat and death of Pērōz left the Sasanian court in disarray, and probably devastated its nobility. The reparations to the Hephthalites were almost certainly not all paid from the treasury of the king; the coffers of the nobility and the pockets of the

working man were also undoubtedly tapped. The loss of prestige must have made it quite hard for the nobility to keep a straight face when addressing puppet kings such as Walāsh and Jāmāsp, and Kavād himself in his earlier short reign, as King of Kings. This all resulted in a rebellion, the exact nature of which is not clear. Despite the later insistence of the Islamic sources that this was the initial phase of the rebellion of Mazdak, all evidence suggests that we should see these developments as an earlier reaction to the policies of Kavād himself.¹¹ It seems as if the dissatisfaction of the nobility had forced Kavād, after his first accession in 488, to make certain, perhaps hasty, changes to his administration and court, changes that were not necessarily very popular. This, occurring around 496 CE, caused the removal of Kavād from the throne by his nobles and his quick retreat to the court of the Hephthalites. His restoration, backed by a sizeable Hephthalite army, meant not just a coup against the nobility, but also the beginning of a new regime. This regime must have come along with at least partial agreement of some of the noblemen, since shortly after his restoration in 498 CE, Kavād and his nobles set about on their aforementioned conquest of Roman/Byzantine Syria.

The prolonged war consumed all of Kavād's reign, as well as part of that of his son, the famous Khosrow I Anūshervān (531–579 CE). However, Kavād had enough time to rejuvenate his administration by instituting some reforms. The extent of the reforms is not clear, but it did include a recalibration of the land-tax system, based not on products but on acreage (*kharag*, the later Islamic *kharāj*), and institution of a poll-tax (*gizidag*, the later Islamic *jizya*). It most likely also included a purging of the nobility, as well as military reorganization, which divided the empire into four zones of defense. Kavād and Khosrow's reforms were happening at the same time that Justinian was re-establishing his rule in Byzantium following several early blows, and the two empires were engaged in heavy fighting on their borders. In the east, the Hephthalite power had slowly settled and was less influential in the affairs of the Sasanian court, although the Hephthalites were in charge of most of East Iran.



Drachm of Pērōz (r. 459-484 CE) depicting the King of Kings on the obverse and a fire altar with stylized attendants on the reverse (courtesy [Wikimedia Commons](#)).

Kavād's reign ended with what later historians called the Mazdakite rebellion, a socio-religious uprising that was brutally oppressed by Khosrow I, making him a hero in Zoroastrian texts. The Mazdakite revolt, whatever its religious concerns might have been, was mainly a social uprising. What the rebels actually desired is less clear to us, as we only know the rebellion from the sources hostile to it. The regular charges of the sharing of property and women have given it a proto-socialist overtone, something that was heavily exploited by Marxist historians.¹² It appears, however, that this was only one facet of a larger religious and social movement. Later versions of the same movement, appearing in the Islamic period under the general rubric of the Khurramdīniyya, betray it to be a religious amalgamation, showing characteristics of many different doctrines. From a late antique point of view, alongside the Christian commonwealth, the

Khurramdīniyya/Mazdakite religious movements might have been in the process of creating a socio-religious commonwealth.¹³

In contrast, Zoroastrianism, the dominant state religion of the Sasanians, shows less interest in playing such a role. The common charge of a Zoroastrian religious autocracy, presided over by a dominant priestly establishment and headed by a *mobedān mobed*, is more of a mirage, and based on little evidence. Apart from the absence of a sort of “orthodox” or “mainline” Zoroastrian doctrine in the Sasanian world, there is little evidence of the presence of such dominant clergy.¹⁴ Additionally, late Sasanian Kings of Kings are known for making clear and public overtures to their native Christian communities. In fact, Khosrow II Aparwēz (591–628 CE), the quintessential late Sasanian king, married a Christian wife (perhaps two) and had a Christian chief minister. Likewise, in the course of mustering support for his campaigns against Byzantium, he supported the Eastern Christian community of the Sasanian domains; buttressed the Nestorians of Syria; and, upon conquering and entering Jerusalem, moved the True Cross from Jerusalem to Khūzestān in order to provide much prestige for the Christians of his empire. A theocratic, dominant Zoroastrian religious structure, if it existed, would simply not have allowed the king to have open relations with members of another religion, let alone to promote their interests.

Christians, in fact, were the dominant population in the western regions of the Sasanian realm in this time period. Aramaic-speaking Christians and Jews were the main population of Mesopotamia, the heart of the Sasanian Empire (Middle Persian *dil-i Ērānshahr*). South-western Mesopotamia was the realm of the Arab kingdom of Ḥīra, the land of the Lakhmids, who ruled the Arab tribes of northern Arabia on behalf of the Sasanians. Eastern Arabia was also populated by Arabic-speaking tribes who were controlled via the Sasanian administration of Baḥrayn, including all of Eastern Arabia down to Oman. Southern Arabia, the former kingdom of Ḥimyar, had become part of the Sasanian Empire following its conquest about 570 CE in wars against the Axumites.¹⁵

In this environment, Khosrow II invaded Syria in 602 and defeated the Byzantine armies there. Soon, all of Syria, Palestine, and most of Anatolia had fallen into Sasanian hands. By 615, Egypt was also a Sasanian territory. For over two decades, a whole generation in fact, the Sasanians were masters of all of West Asia, and by having defeated the Hephthalites with the help of the Western Turks in the 560s, they were also in secure control of much of their lost territory in East Iran. When the prophet of Islam was migrating from Mecca to Medina to establish his religious state there, he was living in a world dominated by Sasanian power. The state that he went on to found, and which came to dominate the Sasanian territories, should not be seen as an element external to the Sasanian Empire that caused its “fall.” Rather, we can view the nascent Islamic state as an element internal to the Sasanian order that lent itself to furthering change that was already well underway, as will be discussed in the second part of this essay.

[1] The preference given here to an ethnic adjective in place of the cultural or religious one – i.e. ‘Arab’ conquests vs. ‘Islamic’ conquests – is in accordance with the conventions of contemporary scholarship in designating the earliest stages of the conquests. Neither the pure ethnic identity of the conquering armies in all stages of conquest nor their religious beliefs can be ascertained definitively, of course.

[2] I use the term “East Iran” instead of Central Asia or Transoxiana as a predecessor to the medieval term *Khurāsān*, designating the separate cultural, political, and socio-economic identity of the eastern regions outside the direct control of the Sasanians and *Ērānshahr*. For this, see the introduction to Khodadad Rezakhani, *ReOrienting the Sasanians: East Iran in Late Antiquity* (Edinburgh University Press, 2016) (forthcoming).

[3] This, like many other popular notions coloring this debate, is of course based on some (dated) scholarship, for example R.C. Zaehner, *The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism* (Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1961).

[4] This conception, surprisingly, is shared by some modern scholars as well; see, e.g., the introduction to Patricia Crone, *The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), where she considers the fall of Ctesiphon as a definite end to the Sasanians' rule over their territories and a break in Sasanian defenses, contrary to much evidence including the continuation of Yazdgird's rule in Fārs and the battle of Nahāvand in 642 (on which see the second part of this essay). Ctesiphon, being located on the western edge of the Sasanian Empire, had actually been captured several times before, without this leading to any major collapse of the regime, state, or culture.

[5] This, of course, is first and foremost a problem of equating an empire with a nation-state. However, the issue of historical continuity, and particularly adoption of what are considered to be remnants of a "Sasanian legacy" in matters of culture and socio-economic life, will be the subject of the second part of this essay.

[6] In the narrative that assigns the creation of medieval Persianate culture to the perseverance of an older culture that survived external threats, Ferdowsī and his magnum opus are allocated various enemies, from the Arab administration of the Caliphate to the Turkic dominance of the Ghaznavids. For interesting remarks about this issue, see Mahmoud Omidasalar, "Unburdening Ferdowsi," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 116 (1996): 235–242.

[7] A short introduction to this can be found in Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity, AD 150–750* (W.W. Norton, 1989). More details (but curiously missing a section on the Sasanians) can be found in G.W. Bowersock, Peter Brown, and Oleg Grabar (eds.), *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World* (Harvard University Press, 1999).

[8] I am borrowing this phrase (and parts of the concept) from Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton University Press, 1993), although I do not agree with everything that Fowden says about the Sasanians.

[9] This is probably best discussed by Michael G. Morony, *Iraq After the Muslim Conquest* (Princeton University Press, 1984) and Touraj Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia: The Rise and Fall of an Empire* (I. B. Tauris, 2007); see also Khodadad Rezakhani, "Empires and Microsystems: Sasanian Iran in Late Antiquity, 500–750" (Ph.D. diss., 2010). General studies of the continuities between the pre-Islamic and Islamic Middle East include Robert G. Hoyland, "Early Islam as a Late Antique Religion," in Scott F. Johnson (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 1053–1077 and Hugh Kennedy, "Islam," in Bowersock et al., *Late Antiquity*.

[10] On this, see Rezakhani, *ReOrienting the Sasanians*.

[11] Patricia Crone, "Kavād's Heresy and Mazdak's Revolt," *Iran* 29 (1991): 21–42.

[12] N. Pigulevskaja, *Les villes de l'État iranien aux époques parthe et sassanide* (Mouton, 1963) is a notable example, but see also J. Modi, "Mazdak the Iranian Socialist," in *Dastur Hoshang Memorial Volume* (Fort Printing Press, 1918), 116–131 for a more "native" take on the issue. Extreme cases even go so far as to describe Mazdak as a "Bolshevik" a good 1,400 years before the Russian political party was founded! See Paul Luttinger, "Mazdak," *The Open Court* 11 (1921): 664–685. See also W. Sundermann, "Mazdak und die mazdakitischen Volksaufstände," *Das Altertum* 23 (1977): 245–249.

[13] For the latest scholarly opinion on this issue, see Crone, *Nativist Prophets*, 279–388; see also Ehsan Yarshater, "Mazdakism," in E. Yarshater (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Iran, Volume 3 (2): The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods* (Cambridge University Press, 1983), 991–1024. Zoroastrianism is commonly understood to lack the "universalist" aspirations of Christianity and Islam (see Fowden *op. cit.*, 24–36, with reservations). Instead, Mazdakism shows certain aspirations that can be fit within the general scheme of "universalism" in late antiquity, although it is often ignored because of its failure to attract political patronage. However, Crone argues for the existence of Khurramdīniyya as a larger socio-religious movement that extended beyond Mazdakism or Bābak's revolts and in fact represented an alternative to Zoroastrian formalism, with aspirations to universal justice.

[14] Khodadad Rezakhani, "Mazdakism, Manichaeism and Zoroastrianism: In Search of Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy in Late Antique Iran," *Iranian Studies* 48 (2015): 55–70.

[15] This subject has received a fair amount of attention lately and is one of the more interesting avenues of research. Among others, see Beate Dignas and Englebert Winter, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity: Neighbours and Rivals* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 109–112; George Hatke, "Africans in Arabia Felix: Aksumite relations with Himyar in the Sixth Century C.E." (Ph.D. diss., 2011); and G.W. Bowersock, *The Throne of Adulis: Red Sea Wars on the Eve of Islam* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

Part II - Islam in a Sasanian Context

The Rise of Islam and the Sasanian Imperial System

It was in the context of a West Asian world dominated by the Sasanians that Islam began as a political and religious movement in *Arabia Deserta*. Islamic beliefs were highly influenced by Syriac Christianity, including heterodox forms of that faith – so much so that in retelling many of the devotional stories shared with the Christian faith, the Qur'an in fact alludes to and adapts narratives not included in the canonical scriptures of the major churches. Far from the simple Bedouins disconnected from the world that they are often imagined to be, the Arabs of the Ḥijāz in fact lived fully in contact with, and indeed as an integral part of, the world of Late Antiquity. They were well aware of the Sasanian-Axumite conflicts in Yemen, and knew about the Byzantine defeat and withdrawal from Syria and Egypt. The prophet of Islam, Muhammad, fits well within the pattern of the rise of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity, during which time we see an increasing trend towards, or obsession with, the concept of prophethood and the primacy of revealed scripture. Muhammad was not by any means the only Arabian prophet preaching a version of a “pure” Abrahamic religion, one “untainted” by Rabbinic Judaism or Christianity, in Arabia. The recurring theme of the prophet or holy man disappearing into the desert to contemplate and ponder, reflected in the life of the original Christian monk, St. Anthony the Great, is a blueprint for that of Muhammad. Arab prophets, who are even mentioned in Islamic texts, were a common feature in this society, and a focal point for social movements that wanted to break the geographical and political stranglehold imposed by the state of war dominating the region since the early sixth century.¹



Khosrow II was defeated by Heraclius in 628, in the last phase of the great Roman-Sasanian war that spanned decades from the late sixth to the early seventh century. A few short years later Arab armies engaged the forces of the Byzantines and Sasanians, dealing severe defeats to both. Detail from a gilded and enameled copper plaque, c. 1160, now in the Louvre (courtesy [Wikimedia Commons](#)).

Accustomed to open trade with Roman Syria (perhaps as leather merchants) and easy access to the Red Sea and Indian Ocean trade, the Arabs of the Ḥijāz were now bound by a Sasanian hegemony that stifled their ability to act.² The Sasanians even controlled Najrān, close to the border between Ḥimyarite Yemen and the Ḥijāz, which was the main point of contact for the people of Mecca and Yathrib (later Medina) with the resources of Ḥimyarite Yemen. With the Kingdom of Ḥimyar gone and the Syrian trade interrupted by the Sasanian-Byzantine wars, the sources of the relative prosperity of the Bedouin and their trade city of Mecca vanished. The Sasanians, following their control of Jidda and interruption of Byzantine-Axumite contacts, even tried to impose a ruler on Mecca, although this was unsuccessful.³ It is no surprise that the first foreign relations overture of the new community of Muslims as it sought allies was with the Axumite king, the Negus (Ar. *Najjāshī*).



The wealth, power, and prestige of the Sasanian dynasty reached its apogee during the reign of Khosrow I Anūshervān (531–579 CE). This exquisite drinking vessel, of carved rock crystal, gems, and enamelwork, has traditionally been identified as a depiction of Khosrow I, although in the Middle Ages it was known as the “Cup of Solomon.” According to legend, it was a gift from the ‘Abbāsīd caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd to Charlemagne, though it more likely entered the Frankish Empire in the time of Charlemagne’s grandson Charles the Bald (r. 843–877). It is currently housed in the Cabinet des Médailles of the Bibliothèque nationale de France (courtesy [Wikimedia Commons](#)).

The Sasanian regime, however, was extending itself too far. The cost of the war with Byzantium was mounting, and the task of managing all the new territories was something for which their administration was not ready. At the same time, recent economic growth was largely funding the war and expansion. The reforms of Kavād and Khosrow I had allowed a reconfiguration of agricultural land. Petty landowners, the *dihgāns*, had managed to increase their own wealth by cultivating cash crops such as cotton or sugar cane, or less labor-intensive horticultural activities.⁴ Acquisition of land, as well as utilization of marginal land for production, was a major aspect of the late Sasanian economy. The wealth gained by these means helped to set off the poverty resulting from the imposition of the Hephthalite reparations several generations earlier, but was also destabilizing to the Sasanian administration. This administration, set up for controlling a much slower rate of intensive growth, was now shocked by an unprecedented rate of extensive growth created through increased availability and use of capital, land, and labor. The Sasanian administration was in fact unable to control its own empire. The domain had simply outgrown the administration.

A dominant feature of this growth was the need to absorb labor from beyond the political borders of the empire. The war of 602-628 was perhaps a manifestation of this need. The regular practice of invading Syria and moving large parts of its population to the Sasanian realm, favored by kings from Shāpūr II to Khosrow I, was no longer efficient.⁵ Syria, naturally contiguous with Mesopotamia, needed to unite with the latter, and Khosrow II might have tried to achieve just that.

The End of the Sasanian-Byzantine Wars and the Islamic Conquests

The successful campaigns of the Byzantine emperor Heraclius resulted in the defeat of Khosrow II in 628. The Sasanian King of Kings was removed by his son and the nobility, and was put on trial, records of which provide a fascinating window into the politics of the late Sasanian period. The defense of the king was deemed inadequate and his execution in 628 is probably one of the least studied regicides in history. The reigns of Kavād II and his son Ardashīr III lasted together less than two years. In a sense, the Sasanian dynasty had already fallen with the execution of Khosrow II.⁶

The victory of Heraclius against Khosrow II did not result in much either. The Byzantines recovered Anatolia, and took nominal control of Syria and Egypt too. But by 636, a mere eight years after their success against Khosrow II, the Byzantines were defeated at the Battle of Yarmūk by the Muslim armies. The Battle of Qādisiyya in south-western Mesopotamia also took place in the same year. Both were relatively small battles, but were indeed the first steps in the long march towards ultimate success taken by the Muslim armies.⁷

It would be the task of military historians to study the details of Muslim military successes in Mesopotamia and Syria, but it is not hard to understand the social context. The local population of both areas, fed up with warfare, probably did not mind a change of pace from armies who at least offered to be paid before attempting to violently conquer their cities. Many cities, including Hīra – the capital of the Lakhmids, Arab clients of the Sasanians – capitulated peacefully and with the agreement of a payment. Other cities, garrisoned by imperial troops, had to fight, but eventually became part of the new system.

From a socio-economic point of view, Syria and Mesopotamia were finally united, and they remained united for centuries to come. Viewed within this context, then, the greatest shortcoming of the Sasanian imperial administration had been its failure to unify these areas, hindering the natural integration of these complementary economic zones. In turn, the incoming Islamic Empire managed to preserve the unity of the productive regions on either side of the Euphrates border, and in fact acted directly to facilitate the desired integration. This is demonstrated, for example, by the fact that the Jazīra and Syria were both part of a single district for purposes of administration and taxation under the caliphate, on the basis of their close socio-economic connections.⁸ This, perhaps more than any other factor, marks the main point of divergence between the Sasanian Empire and the Islamic imperial administration, despite the latter's dependence on the institutions of the former. The domain had finally found an administration that could fit it.



The reign of Khosrow II Aparvez (“Victorious”) from 590 to 628 was perhaps the greatest and most tumultuous of the late Sasanian period, and the vicissitudes of his rule lent themselves to dramatization in later Persian literature, in which he becomes a tragic figure. In this detail from [an illustration from an eighteenth-century *Shāh-Nāmah*](#), Khosrow slays the rebel Bahrām Chōbīn, who usurped the Sasanian throne from 590 to 591, in battle (71.54; courtesy [Portland Art Museum](#)).

This is by no means to suggest that there was no resistance, as imagined by those who advance the narrative of a peaceful entry of Islam to Iran, as much resistance was in fact offered. After all, the newcomers came with a religion, although initially it was not clear what their religion was, since it resembled the local Christian/Jewish/Gnostic beliefs so closely. Whatever their early promise might have been, however, when faced with the considerable riches of Mesopotamia and Syria, the greed of the newcomers resulted in resistance. Local *dihgāns* went to great pains to prevent the newcomers from taking over their lands. They apparently were successful, because where we do see Arabs in the sources – interestingly mostly those connected to the Umayyad family – they are trying to reclaim marginal land in the deserts or marshlands of southern Mesopotamia and Khūzestān! The economic flourishing of late antique Syro-Mesopotamia favored the new administration, but little space was available for the newcomers themselves.

Arabs in Sasanian Lands: The Birth of an Islamic Empire

Of course, the new Muslim administration understood that *Arabia Deserta* is not an adequate place from which to run a state. They quickly moved to the new territories, initially setting up camp in Kūfa, just outside the walls of Hīra, and then moved on to Damascus. The garrison towns of Baṣra and Kūfa, housing many newcomers as well as the local populace seeking access to institutions of power, had to be fed from far off places. The *dewān* (administrative coffers) of Kūfa was replenished by the taxes of Dēnāwar, in the extreme west of the Iranian Plateau, and Baṣra’s costs were deferred to Nihāwand, just next door to Dēnāwar.

The new administration initially relied squarely on established systems. In the Sasanian territories, it did not touch the administrative order set up by Kavād and Khosrow I, and even issued coins inscribed in Middle Persian. The same course of action was taken in Syria. More importantly, after the initial phase of conquest, and after securing the eastern borders of Mesopotamia against the Sasanian Yazdgerd III, the conquerors largely settled down.

The last Sasanian king of kings, Yazdgerd III, was defeated by the Muslims in 639 and had to abandon his imperial capital in Ctesiphon. But he probably never was much of a Mesopotamian

king. Member of a junior branch of the Sasanians, he only became the King of Kings after all close relatives of Khosrow II were either murdered or executed. He appears to have lived in Persis/Fārs, the old homeland of the Sasanians in the southern part of the Iranian plateau.⁹ It was to this place that he withdrew following the conquest of Mesopotamia. Here, he called for assistance from all his subjects, and gathered a big army to face the Muslims in a second battle, that of Nihāwand (642 CE). The crushing defeat dealt to him there secured the position of the Muslims in Mesopotamia, Khūzestān, and the Māh (Mād/Media, the name of the western highlands of the plateau). Unlike what is imagined popularly, however, neither the defeat at Qādisiyya nor that of Nihāwand meant a definite end to Sasanian rule over most of their territories east of Mesopotamia; nor did they grant the Muslims a secure passage for marching eastward to India. For over a decade, the Sasanian state co-existed with the Muslim one in Mesopotamia and Syria. Even after the death of Yazdgerd III in 651 at the hand of his own allies, it took the Muslims over seventy years to conquer the rest of the Sasanian territories. Victory did not come easy.

Conversion in the Sasanian Lands

Neither did conversion. The conquered population of Mesopotamia, largely Christian or Jewish and speaking Aramaic, saw no reason to adopt the religion of the newcomers. The newcomers themselves probably had little idea of the differences between their own religion and those of the conquered. Both groups believed in one god, both prayed in largely the same way, and both idealized the same prophets and patriarchs of Israel: Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David, Solomon, and even Jesus.

As the administration matured, however, so did the ideology of the newcomers. The four *Rāshidūn* caliphs gave way to the Umayyad imperial administration, and like all imperial systems, the Umayyads saw the necessity to adopt a clear ideology.¹⁰ Arabism or Arab tribalism was the most obvious choice, and the Umayyads adopted it wholeheartedly. But there were also the increasing benefits to the newcomers of defining their religion. In the late antique world of universal religions, clarifying your beliefs and making it the official ideology of your nascent empire had many benefits, including the ability to tax those who did not fit your definition squarely.

In this system, access to power meant two things: adopting Arabism and adopting the religion. Among the second and third generation of the newcomers, mounting your horse and conquering had less attraction than entering the administration to run what was already conquered by your parents. Arab tribalism and adherence to a particular ideology (i.e. Islam) became the main doors of access to power.



Drachm of the caliph 'Abd Allāh b. al-Zubayr, c. 686 CE. An older Sasanian coin type with legend in Middle Persian is adapted for Muslim use through adding an Arabic phrase signaling obedience to the Creator, *bismillāh rabbī*, 'in the name of God, my Lord.'

Not everyone accepted this, however, and much resistance came from within Muslim society itself. Certain factions rejected Arabism and tribalism, the explicit causes of trouble that had immediately followed the initial successes which had come through the conquests. Instead, they suggested that ideology should be the only way of accessing power, and no tribal affiliation should be put at equal footing with accepting the ideology. Belonging to the community of Muslims should be the only way of gaining full membership of the society. This, the ideology that was seen as the pure message of Islam, of course, was appealing to many, and became popular among many former Sasanian elites who already were outsiders in their own land. Speakers of Middle Persian, on its way to becoming New Persian since the sixth century, the Sasanian elite were already a minority among the majority Aramaic speakers. Becoming a minority of elites among a majority of Muslim Arabic speakers was hardly a shock to them.

As an educated class, these Sasanian elites quickly adopted the new ideology and gained positions of authority. Many of them became early interpreters of the canonical beliefs of the new religion, and emerged as insiders among the community of newcomers. They promoted the choice of religious adherence as the preferred marker of social membership, and alongside Arabic, fitted Persian, their spoken tongue, as the acceptable second language of Islam. Some of them, children of the conquered grandees of the Sasanian administration, became the religious authorities of the new community, using Arabic and Persian side by side to convert the rest of the population. The Sasanian elite, by accepting new socio-political realities and integrating their own culture into it, in fact remained dominant in the same territories, while accommodating a new Arab elite settling in the same area.

These were the actual vehicles of conversion in most of the former Sasanian Empire. Moving alongside the conquering armies and as part of the expanding administration, they used their own version of Persian, the vulgar, almost pidgin, spoken form of the language, instead of the high literate Middle Persian of the Sasanian administration and culture, to spread the new ideology. Just as in Syria, where speaking Arabic and adopting the new ideology, Islam, had become the way to access power, in the former Sasanian territories, speaking Persian and adopting the new ideology became the main way to gain similar power.

Persian as the Second Language of Islam in the East

The new status of Persian (linguistically the same but functionally different than the written Middle Persian of the Pahlavi texts) allowed it to supersede local idioms. The languages of Parthia, Bactria, Sogdiana, and Khwarazmia were pushed aside, becoming the spoken languages of the rural, non-Muslim population. In fact, the future centers of Persophone Islamic culture, the great cities of Khurāsān and Transoxiana, were just entering the cultural world of the Sasanians – following the collapse of the Western Turk power – immediately prior to the coming of Islam and its establishment in the Sasanian heartland of Asūrestān (Assyria, i.e. Mesopotamia). In this environment, the Persian language and the Islamic religion, recently merged in Asūrestān, slowly took over as the dominant cultural markers of the recently converted urban elite. The writing systems of each region were sometimes retained for several generations more to manage the local administration; hence the continued use of Middle Persian Pahlavi, Bactrian, and Sogdian for local affairs. Arabic was also used to keep the central administration in Damascus or Kūfa informed. But slowly, New Persian, initially trying its luck with the Pahlavi script or the Hebrew one, opted for the natural choice of the Arabic script to write down what was being said.¹¹ It took a good two centuries for the majority of the population of the former Sasanian territories to become Muslims, while many in the rural areas continued to practice their local ideologies. It also took two or three centuries for New Persian to emerge as a written tongue, replacing Middle Persian, Parthian, Bactrian, Syriac, Aramaic, and even Arabic itself, as the administrative language of many of the former Sasanian lands. In fact, New Persian had become the dominant language of the east a long time before Ferdowsī was born. Instead of representing a desperate

attempt at saving the language of an oppressed minority, Ferdowsī's mature and heavy prose represented the triumphant success of a new class of literati and the peak of the new language.



Sasanian visual culture had a broad and enduring influence across the Mediterranean and Middle East, spreading as far as Central Europe and East Asia, as can be seen from these adaptations of the classic royal hunting figure so characteristic of high Sasanian style. (L) Detail, Japanese textile housed in the Shōsō-in Imperial Treasury in Nara, 8th c. (from R. Ghirshman, *Persian Art: The Parthian and Sassanian Dynasties, 249 B.C.–A.D. 651* [Golden Press, 1962], 333) (R) Detail, gold vessel from the so-called Treasure of Nagyszentmiklós, Khazar, Hungarian, or proto-Bulgarian culture (?), 8th-10th c. (?), Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (photo credit: Michael Pregill).

Conclusion

It would be repetitive to re-emphasize that the narrative of a quick outpouring of a marginal population, purportedly strangers and outsiders to the Sasanian and Byzantine worlds, and their sudden conquest of these empires is unfounded and impossible to entertain. A gradual process of economic, cultural, and political change has to be considered when looking at the matter of the rise of Islam in the former Sasanian territories. Furthermore, by dismissing the idea of the end of the rule of the Sasanian dynasty as a national failure and the collapse of a supposedly dominant, monolithic culture, we can better understand the process in which the Sasanian administration, having become unsuitable for the administration of its territories, was only gradually replaced by a new system largely based on the same administrative ideas. In this sense, the question of the “fall” of the Sasanians is best viewed from the point of view of the termination of the dynasty, while its consequences need to be studied in a broader context, and perhaps more productively from the point of view of continuity. Conversion in the former Sasanian lands and the rise of New Persian are the two avenues through which this continuity can be observed and further studied. This would then allow us to better perceive the gradual socio-economic and political changes that began in the late Sasanian period and only concluded when the former Sasanian lands emerged as centers of a new medieval culture. In this context, then, we can understand how the late Sasanian state finally became the world of medieval Islam.

[1] On the important issue of the resurgence of prophethood and its importance for the rise of Islam in Late Antiquity, see Michael Pregill, “Ahab, Bar Kokhba, Muhammad, and the Lying Spirit: Prophetic Discourse before and after the Rise of Islam,” in Philippa Townsend and Moulie Vidas (eds.), [*Revelation, Literature, and Community in Late Antiquity*](#) (Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 271-313.

[2] The importance of Meccan trade for the rise of Islam has been assumed by many scholars, and criticized as fantasy by others. Some interesting thoughts on the question were expressed by Patricia Crone in her controversial *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Princeton University Press, 1987). A possibly better exploration of the subject, albeit less well known than Crone’s, is Róbert Simon, *Meccan Trade and Islam: Problems of Origin and Structure* (Akadémiai Kiadó, 1989). Crone’s final statement on the topic is as interesting as her original contribution, though perhaps remaining just as controversial: Patricia Crone, “Quraysh and the Roman Army: Making Sense of the Meccan Leather Trade,” [*Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*](#) 70 (2007) 3-88.

[3] For this rather obscure episode, see M. Mohammadi-Malayeri, *Tārīx o Farhang-e Īrān dar dōrān-e Enteqāl az Asr-e Sāsānī be asr-e Eslāmi (History and Culture of Iran at the Age of Transition Between the Sasanian and Islamic Periods)* (Tūs, 1375 [1996]).

[4] See Richard W. Bulliet, [*Cotton, Climate, and Camels in Early Islamic Iran: A Moment in World History*](#) (Columbia University Press, 2011) and K. Rezakhani, “Empires and Microsystems: Sasanian Iran in Late Antiquity, 500–750” (Ph.D. diss., 2010).

[5] Michael G. Morony, “Population Transfers between Sasanian Iran and the Byzantine Empire,” in *La Persia e Bisanzio* (Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 2004), 161–179.

[6] On this episode, see most recently James Howard-Johnston, “Pride and Fall: Khusro II and His Regime,” in *La Persia e Bisanzio*, 93-113.

[7] Robert G. Hoyland, [*In God’s Path: The Arab Conquests and the Creation of an Islamic Empire*](#) (Oxford University Press, 2014), 52-53.

[8] The consequences of the separation of Syria and the Jazīra is partly explored in the author’s forthcoming article, “Between the Hammer and the Anvil: Syria and Mesopotamia between the Sasanians and Rome,” in E. Sauer (ed.), *Proceedings of Iran and Rome Conference, November 2013* (Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

[9] Touraj Daryaee, [*Sasanian Persia: The Rise and Fall of an Empire*](#) (IB Tauris, 2007), 1-3; al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī, Volume V: The Sāsānids, the Byzantines, the Lakhmids, and Yemen*, trans. C.E. Bosworth (SUNY, 1999), 2-20.

[10] This is the term referring to the first four caliphs following Muhammad, namely Abū Bakr, ‘Umar I, ‘Uthmān, and ‘Alī. The title *Rāshidūn* is commonly translated as “rightly guided.”

[11] Given that the Pahlavi script’s many shortcomings made it quite unsuitable for the writing of the new language, the Arabic script provided a much better system for the recording of the language. This is quite separate from the issue of the obvious prestige of the Arabic script due to its association with Islam and the new social settings.

New Persian had been spoken since at least the sixth century CE. New Persian phrases are mentioned, preserved in frozen form, in Arabic accounts of the early conquests, such as a phrase uttered by the commander of Sasanian forces during the Battle of Qādisiyya, Rostam Farrokhzād, as recorded in al-Balādhurī’s *Kitāb al-Futūh*. Examples of identifiably New Persian writing in scripts other than Pahlavi or Arabic can be seen in early Judeo-Persian documents: see L. Paul, “Jewish-Persian between Middle-Persian and New Persian: Re-examining an Old Hypothesis,” in S. Shaked and A. Netzer (eds.), *Irano-Judaica: Studies Relating to Jewish Contacts with Persian Culture throughout the Ages V* (Ben-Zvi Institute, 2003), 96-104.