



THE OCCUPATION OF IRAN BY THE ARABS AND THE FEATURES OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PERSIAN LANDS IN THE EARLY ISLAMIC ERA

Makhsudova Madinakhon Latibjon qizi

Student of Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a comprehensive examination of the Arab occupation of Iran during the early Islamic era, focusing on the profound transformations that shaped the Persian lands under Islamic rule. It explores the mechanisms of conquest, the integration of Persian elites into the Islamic administrative system, and the cultural synthesis that emerged as a result of this interaction. The study highlights the resilience of Persian identity amidst the challenges of the Arab conquest, emphasizing the significant contributions of Persian culture to the broader Islamic civilization. By analyzing classical Islamic sources such as Tarikh al-Tabari and contemporary scholarship, the article underscores how the occupation, while initially disruptive, led to a period of intellectual and cultural flourishing in Persian lands, laying the groundwork for the Islamic Golden Age. The research adopts a multidisciplinary approach, combining historical analysis, cultural studies, and political dynamics to offer a nuanced understanding of this pivotal period in Iranian history. The findings reveal that the Arab occupation not only reshaped the political and religious landscape of Iran but also fostered a dynamic period of cross-cultural exchange that influenced the development of Islamic civilization as a whole.

Introduction

The Arab conquest of Iran in the 7th century stands as a defining moment in the history of the Persian lands, marking a profound shift in the region's political, cultural, and religious landscape. The conquest began with the decisive Battle of al-Qadisiyyah in 636 CE, where the Arab forces, led by Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas, defeated the Sasanian army under Rostam Farrokhzad. This victory was followed by the fall of the Sasanian capital, Ctesiphon, in 637 CE, and the eventual death of the last Sasanian king, Yazdegerd III, in 651 CE, effectively ending the Sasanian Empire. Driven by the expansionist momentum of early Islam, the Arab forces swiftly brought the Persian territories

under their control, establishing a new political order that replaced centuries of Sasanian rule. This period, often referred to as the "occupation" by historians, was not merely a military takeover but a complex process of integration, adaptation, and transformation that reshaped the Persian lands during the early Islamic era.

The occupation introduced Islam as the dominant religion, replacing Zoroastrianism, which had been the state religion of the Sasanian Empire for over four centuries. However, the transition was far from a simple imposition of Arab rule. The Persian lands, with their rich cultural heritage, advanced administrative systems, and intellectual traditions, played a pivotal role in shaping the trajectory of Islamic civilization. The Sasanian Empire, at the time of its fall, was a sophisticated polity with a well-developed bureaucracy, a vibrant literary tradition, and a complex religious landscape that included Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Judaism, and various syncretic sects. The Arab conquerors, while militarily victorious, lacked the administrative experience to govern such a vast and diverse empire, leading to a pragmatic reliance on Persian elites and institutions.

This article aims to investigate the features of the development of Persian lands during this transformative period, focusing on three key aspects: the mechanisms of conquest and their initial impact, the integration of Persian elites into the Islamic administrative system, and the cultural synthesis that emerged as a result of Perso-Islamic interaction. By drawing on historical sources such as *Tarikh al-Tabari* by the 9th-century historian Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari, as well as contemporary scholarship by historians like Hugh Kennedy and Richard Frye, this study seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of how Persian identity persisted and evolved under Arab rule. The article also explores the broader contributions of Persian culture to the Islamic world, particularly in the realms of administration, science, literature, and philosophy, which laid the groundwork for the Islamic Golden Age.

The significance of this study lies in its exploration of the dual nature of the Arab occupation—as both a disruptive force that dismantled the Sasanian political order and a catalyst for cultural and intellectual development that enriched Islamic civilization. Understanding this period provides insights into the historical dynamics that have shaped modern Iran and the broader Islamic world, offering lessons on cultural resilience, cross-cultural exchange, and the interplay of religion and politics. The article also highlights the relevance of these historical lessons for addressing contemporary challenges, such as the preservation of cultural identity in the face of globalization and the management of religious diversity in the Middle East.

The Occupation of Iran by the Arabs and Its Impact on Persian Lands Mechanisms of Conquest and Initial Disruption

The Arab conquest of Iran unfolded over approximately two decades, beginning with the Battle of al-Qadisiyyah in 636 CE and culminating in the death of the last Sasanian king, Yazdegerd III, in 651 CE near Merv in Khorasan. The Sasanian Empire, which had ruled Persia since 224 CE, was at the time of the conquest weakened by a series of internal and external challenges. Internally, the empire suffered from political fragmentation, with rival factions among the nobility undermining centralized authority. Economically, the Sasanian state was strained by heavy taxation and the costs of maintaining a large military, particularly after decades of conflict with the Byzantine Empire. Externally, the Sasanians had been engaged in a prolonged and exhausting war with the Byzantines, known as the Byzantine-Sasanian War

of 602–628 CE, which left both empires vulnerable to the emerging Arab forces.

The Muslim armies, led by skilled commanders such as Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas and Khalid ibn al-Walid, capitalized on these vulnerabilities, achieving a series of decisive victories that dismantled the Sasanian political order. The Battle of al-Qadisiyyah, fought near the Euphrates River, was a turning point, as the Arab forces, numbering approximately 30,000, defeated a much larger Sasanian army, estimated at 60,000 to 100,000 soldiers, according to historian Hugh Kennedy (2007). The fall of Ctesiphon in 637 CE marked a significant milestone, signaling the collapse of centralized Sasanian authority. The Arab forces captured immense wealth from the Sasanian capital, including the royal treasury, which contained gold, silver, and precious gems valued at millions of dirhams, as recorded by Tarikh al-Tabari (1989). The famous Taq-i Kisra, the grand arch of the Sasanian palace in Ctesiphon, stood as a symbol of the empire's former glory, but its capture by the Arabs underscored the dramatic shift in power.

Following the fall of Ctesiphon, the Arab forces established garrison cities such as Basra and Kufa to administer the conquered territories and facilitate the collection of taxes, including the jizya (poll tax) and kharaj (land tax). The jizya, imposed on non-Muslims, ranged from 12 to 48 dirhams per person annually, depending on social status, while the kharaj was levied on agricultural land, often at rates that were higher than those under the Sasanian system, as noted by Kennedy (2007). These taxes provided the economic foundation for the Arab administration, but they also placed a heavy burden on the Persian population, particularly in the early years of the conquest.

The conquest was not uniform across all regions of Iran. While major cities like Isfahan, Rayy, and Hamadan fell relatively quickly, remote areas such as Tabaristan in the north and Khorasan in the east resisted Arab rule for decades. In Tabaristan, local rulers like the Ispahbads maintained semi-autonomous control, negotiating terms with the Arab conquerors to preserve their authority. In Khorasan, resistance continued under the leadership of figures like Yazdegerd III, who sought to rally support against the Arabs until his death in 651 CE. Historian Parvaneh Pourshariati (2008) argues that the Sasanian-Parthian confederacy, a coalition of noble families, played a significant role in this resistance, particularly in the eastern provinces, where local elites retained their power well into the 8th century.

The initial impact of the conquest was profoundly disruptive, dismantling the Sasanian political structure and challenging the Zoroastrian religious establishment, which had been closely tied to the state. The Zoroastrian priesthood, known as the magi, lost their privileged status, and many fire temples, central to Zoroastrian worship, were either destroyed or converted into mosques. Many Zoroastrian priests and nobles fled to regions like India, where they established the Parsi community, preserving their religious traditions in exile. Others converted to Islam to retain their social status, often under pressure from the new Arab administration. Historian Richard Frye (1963) estimates that by the 8th century, approximately 10% of the Persian population had converted to Islam, with the majority retaining Zoroastrianism until the 9th century, when conversion rates increased due to social and economic incentives.

The decision to retain Persian administrative systems mitigated the potential for widespread unrest, setting the stage for a gradual integration of Persian elites into the Islamic system. The Arab conquerors, recognizing the complexity of governing a vast empire, relied

on the existing Sasanian bureaucracy, particularly in the early years of the occupation. This pragmatic approach ensured a degree of continuity, allowing the Persian population to adapt to the new political order while preserving elements of their cultural and administrative heritage.

Integration of Persian Elites into the Islamic Administrative System

A key feature of the development of Persian lands under Arab rule was the integration of Persian elites into the Islamic administrative system, a process that ensured the stability of the conquered territories and facilitated the governance of a diverse empire. The Arab conquerors, while militarily victorious, lacked the experience to govern a vast and complex empire like that of the Sasanians, which had a well-developed bureaucracy, a sophisticated tax system, and a network of local administrators. To address this challenge, the Arabs relied heavily on the existing Sasanian administrative infrastructure, retaining Persian *dehqans* (landed aristocracy) in their positions as local administrators, provided they paid the *jizya* and acknowledged Arab authority.

The *dehqans* were a class of Persian landowners who had served as the backbone of the Sasanian administration, managing agricultural estates, collecting taxes, and maintaining order in rural areas. Under the Arab administration, they continued to perform these roles, acting as intermediaries between the Arab governors and the local population. This arrangement allowed the Arabs to govern effectively while minimizing resistance from the Persian populace, as the *dehqans* were familiar with local customs and traditions. Historian Richard Bulliet (1972) notes that the *dehqans* played a crucial role in the early Islamic administration, particularly in the collection of the *kharaj*, which became a major source of revenue for the Umayyad Caliphate (661–750 CE).

The integration of Persian elites became particularly evident during the Umayyad Caliphate, when Persian administrators began to play a prominent role in the caliphal court. The Umayyads, based in Damascus, adopted many Sasanian administrative practices, such as the use of the *diwan* (administrative office) to manage finances and correspondence, a system that had its origins in the Sasanian bureaucracy. Persian scribes, fluent in both Middle Persian (Pahlavi) and Arabic, were employed to translate Sasanian records and assist in the administration of the empire. This reliance on Persian expertise ensured the continuity of administrative traditions, which were later refined and expanded under the Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258 CE).

The Abbasid period marked the zenith of Persian influence in the Islamic administration, as the new caliphate, based in Baghdad, embraced Persian culture and governance models on a grand scale. Baghdad, founded in 762 CE by Caliph al-Mansur near the former Sasanian capital of Ctesiphon, became a center of Persian cultural and intellectual life, reflecting the deep integration of Persian traditions into the Islamic world. The Abbasid court was heavily influenced by Persian elites, with families like the Barmakids rising to prominence as key administrators. The Barmakids, originally a Buddhist family from Balkh in modern-day Afghanistan, converted to Islam and became trusted advisors to the Abbasid caliphs. Yahya ibn Khalid al-Barmaki, who served as vizier to Caliph Harun al-Rashid (r. 786–809 CE), was instrumental in managing the empire's finances, infrastructure projects, and diplomatic relations, earning the Barmakids a reputation as the "Medici of the Islamic world," as described by historian Hugh Kennedy (2007).

The integration of Persian elites ensured the continuity of Sasanian administrative traditions, which were adapted and refined by the Abbasids. For example, the Sasanian system of tax collection, known as the *asbaran*, was incorporated into the Islamic *diwan*, providing a framework for managing agricultural revenues across the empire. The Abbasids also adopted Sasanian court rituals, such as the use of elaborate ceremonies and the title of *Shahanshah* (King of Kings), which was adapted into the Islamic concept of the caliph as the "Shadow of God on Earth." Historian Patricia Crone (2012) argues that this adoption of Persian traditions was not merely a matter of convenience but a deliberate strategy to legitimize Abbasid rule in the eyes of the Persian population, who constituted a significant portion of the empire's subjects.

The integration of Persian elites had a profound impact on the Islamic administration, ensuring its stability and efficiency while allowing Persian culture to exert a lasting influence on the Islamic world. By the 9th century, Persians constituted approximately 40% of the administrative elite in the Abbasid Caliphate, according to Bulliet (1972), a testament to their indispensable role in the governance of the empire. This collaboration not only facilitated the administration of a diverse empire but also laid the foundation for the cultural synthesis that characterized the Islamic Golden Age, as Persian traditions in governance, literature, and science became integral to the Islamic civilization.

Cultural Synthesis and the Flourishing of Persian Identity

Despite the Arab conquest, Persian culture demonstrated remarkable resilience, leading to a period of cultural synthesis that enriched both Persian and Islamic civilizations. The early Islamic era saw the emergence of a hybrid Perso-Islamic culture, as Persian traditions in literature, art, science, and philosophy were integrated into the broader Islamic framework, creating a vibrant and dynamic cultural landscape. This synthesis was not a one-sided process of Arabization but a mutual exchange, with Persian culture absorbing Islamic influences while simultaneously shaping the trajectory of Islamic civilization.

The Persian language, while initially overshadowed by Arabic, which became the *lingua franca* of the Islamic world, experienced a revival with the rise of the Samanid dynasty (819–999 CE) in Khorasan and Transoxiana. The Samanids, a Persian dynasty that ruled under the nominal authority of the Abbasid Caliphate, actively promoted Persian literature and poetry, fostering a cultural renaissance that reasserted Persian identity. The Samanid court in Bukhara became a center of literary activity, attracting poets and scholars who composed works in Persian, often drawing on pre-Islamic Persian themes and motifs. The most notable achievement of this period was the *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings) by Ferdowsi, completed in 1010 CE. This monumental epic poem, containing over 50,000 couplets, preserved Persian history, mythology, and cultural values, serving as a powerful assertion of Persian identity in the face of Arab dominance. Historian Richard Frye (1963) describes the *Shahnameh* as "the national epic of Iran," noting its role in preserving the memory of the Sasanian past while integrating Islamic elements, such as references to the Prophet Muhammad and the early caliphs.

The early Islamic era also saw significant Persian contributions to science and philosophy, which played a pivotal role in the Islamic Golden Age. Persian scholars, working in cities like Baghdad, Nishapur, and Rayy, made groundbreaking advancements in various fields, often building on the knowledge of Greek, Indian, and Sasanian traditions. Al-

Khwārizmī (c. 780–850 CE), a Persian mathematician from Khwarazm, developed algebra, introducing systematic methods for solving equations in his work *Kitab al-Jabr*, which later gave the field its name. His contributions to mathematics, including the use of Arabic numerals and the concept of algorithms (derived from his name), had a lasting impact on global science, as noted by Hugh Kennedy (2007). Another prominent Persian scholar, Al-Biruni (973–1048 CE), made significant contributions to astronomy, mathematics, and anthropology, producing works like *The Chronology of Ancient Nations*, which provided a comparative study of calendars and cultures across the world.

The translation movement, centered in Baghdad's House of Wisdom (Bayt al-Hikma), was another key aspect of this cultural synthesis, with Persian scholars playing a leading role. Established under the patronage of Caliph al-Ma'mun (r. 813–833 CE), the House of Wisdom facilitated the translation of Greek, Indian, and Persian texts into Arabic, making knowledge from these traditions accessible to the Islamic world. Persian scholars like Hunayn ibn Ishaq (809–873 CE), a Nestorian Christian from a Persian family, translated works by Aristotle, Plato, and Galen, while also producing original works on medicine and philosophy. This translation movement not only preserved ancient knowledge but also fostered a culture of intellectual inquiry that defined the Islamic Golden Age, with Persian scholars contributing to over 30% of the scientific texts produced during this period, according to Kennedy (2007).

Persian art and architecture also flourished during this period, blending Sasanian and Islamic elements to create a distinct Perso-Islamic aesthetic. The Abbasid capital of Baghdad, with its circular design inspired by Sasanian urban planning, featured architectural elements like the *iwan* (vaulted hall) and intricate stucco work, which were derived from Sasanian traditions. Persian miniature painting, which later became a hallmark of Islamic art, had its origins in this period, with early examples found in manuscripts produced in Khorasan and Transoxiana. The Samanid dynasty also patronized the production of ceramics and textiles, which combined Persian motifs like the *simurgh* (a mythical bird) with Islamic geometric patterns, creating a visual language that reflected the cultural synthesis of the era.

The cultural synthesis of the early Islamic era was a two-way process, with Persian traditions enriching Islamic civilization while also absorbing Islamic influences. The adoption of Arabic as the language of administration and scholarship did not erase Persian identity but rather provided a new medium for its expression. Persian poets like Rudaki (d. 941 CE), often called the "father of Persian poetry," composed verses that blended Persian themes with Islamic spirituality, setting the stage for later poets like Rumi and Hafez. This period of intellectual and cultural flourishing demonstrates that the Arab conquest, rather than erasing Persian identity, provided a new context for its development, contributing to the broader Islamic world and laying the foundation for the Islamic Golden Age.

Conclusion

The Arab occupation of Iran in the early Islamic era was a transformative event that reshaped the Persian lands in profound ways, leaving a lasting legacy that continues to influence the region today. While the conquest initially disrupted the Sasanian political order, dismantling a centuries-old empire and challenging the Zoroastrian religious establishment, it also set the stage for a dynamic period of development characterized by the integration of Persian elites into the Islamic system and the emergence of a rich Perso-Islamic cultural synthesis. The resilience of Persian identity, as evidenced by the revival of the Persian

language under the Samanids and the contributions of Persian scholars to the Islamic Golden Age, underscores the enduring legacy of Persian culture amidst the challenges of Arab rule.

The mechanisms of conquest, while initially destabilizing, paved the way for the integration of Persian administrative traditions into the Islamic system, ensuring the stability of the conquered territories. The Arab forces' reliance on Persian *dehqans* and the adoption of Sasanian bureaucratic practices allowed for a smooth transition of power, minimizing resistance and fostering collaboration between the conquerors and the conquered. The Abbasid period, in particular, marked a high point of Persian influence, with figures like the Barmakids playing a central role in the administration of the empire and the city of Baghdad becoming a symbol of Perso-Islamic cultural synthesis.

The cultural synthesis that followed the conquest was a testament to the adaptability and creativity of Persian culture, as it absorbed Islamic influences while simultaneously shaping the trajectory of Islamic civilization. The revival of the Persian language, the contributions of Persian scholars like Al-Khwārizmī and Al-Biruni, and the development of a distinct Perso-Islamic aesthetic in art and architecture all highlight the profound impact of Persian culture on the Islamic world. The *Shahnameh* by Ferdowsi, completed in 1010 CE, stands as a monument to this cultural resilience, preserving Persian history and mythology while integrating Islamic elements, ensuring that Persian identity remained a vibrant force in the Islamic era.

The historical lessons from this period provide valuable insights that can be applied to contemporary challenges in Iran and the broader Islamic world. The ability of Persian culture to adapt and thrive under foreign rule highlights the importance of cultural resilience and dialogue in addressing modern geopolitical tensions, such as the preservation of cultural identity in the face of globalization. The integration of Persian elites into the Islamic system also offers a model for managing diversity in multi-ethnic societies, demonstrating the benefits of collaboration and mutual respect. Future research should explore the long-term impacts of this period on Persian identity and its role in shaping the modern Middle East, particularly through comparative studies with other regions that experienced similar processes of Islamization, such as Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent.

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