

Narrative to go with the Week 3 PPT.

1. Iran Week 3: Iran from the Sassanid through Abbasid Rule (200s bce-900s ce)

Themes that come up today – The very different views on Middle Eastern history from the Western, Arab and Persian traditions; the important but overlooked role of tribes in history, and the constant “Persianization” of invading tribes

2. Slide 2. Here is a breakdown of some major eras of Iranian history (a vast simplification here):

- 550s-330s bce Cyrus and the Achaemenid Empire
- 312-224 bce Greek Period” from Alexander through the Seleucid Empire
- 200s ce-630s bce Tribal Confederations under Parthian, then Sassanid Empires
- 650s ce -900s The Arab/Islamic empires
- 1000s – 1500 ce Turkic tribal dynasties come and go...Seljuks, Mongols, Ghaznavids...
- 1500 – 1722 Safavid Empire
- 1700s -1900 Qajar Empire
- 1900s “Modern Iran” under the Pahlavis, but Tribal influence in politics only disappears gradually by mid century

As I am reading I notice three themes that are really apparent in this week’s material. First, historiographical differences. Historians in the West tend to emphasize the clash of West vs East in looking at the history here. They see the Greek vs Persians, the Romans vs the Sassanids, and perhaps more recently, Europe vs the Middle East. But that historiographical view overlooks the constant interchange of culture between the two realms, as well as the common challenges that the empires faced over the years. In many ways the conflict built each power. Greece without the Persians, or Rome without the Sassanids (or the Sassanids with no Rome) would have been very different entities.

The second historiographical theme is found in the Arab world and carried over into the British and French tradition as they were preoccupied with Arab sources. The Arabs see the major historical divide not in terms of East/West, but in pre 610 (Jahaleyya, the time without divine guidance) and post 610 – the abode of Islam. Pre Islam is seen as an age devoid of values, and chaotic because of human frailty. In contrast the emergence and spread of the new Arab/Islamic culture brings order and *Pax Islamica*. (The Persians don’t see it his way at all, but rather as a violent conquest that did not follow Islamic values).

Finally we get to the Persian view of history. The Persian view sees a world of chaotic tribes on the edges of civilization, and as they become civilized (Persianized) they enter the tradition. The Arabs are seen as one of these tribal challenges, the same as the Central Asian turks, and they also must be Persianized to become civilized.

Of course, those are vast oversimplifications.

The other thing I want to talk about on this page is the hidden tribal factor behind the terms “empire”. The term, empire, is a lovely unit for putting the past in categories, but these are not monoliths. They are largely tribal confederations and constantly renegotiating the relationship of

the center to the units. The “imperial” categories of history erases the tribes and their roles, although the Shahnameh certainly reveals the roiling political life beneath the label of “empire.”

3. This is where we left off last week. Alexander the Accursed had crashed through Persia – burning Persepolis and upending life before dying in 323. His empire in Persia taken over by a Greek general and for two hundred years a supposedly “Hellenistic” empire rules Persia. The map exemplifies this problem of essentializing complex politics with one label. Beneath the surface was a varied confederation of tribes, with many Greeks intermarrying with Persians, and employing Achaemenid officials. There were Greek style cities established, but the Greeks also carry home culture like Mithraism.
4. And beneath the surface – constant resistance. Here is a coin from the 200s celebrating the revolt of an Achaemenid looking figure who is dispatching a Greek soldier client.
5. Resistance in Parthia to the north succeeds in replacing the Seleucids. The Parthians mpart of that tribal, silk road world. There is still cultural exchange with the West though. For example Persia becomes a refuge for religions persecuted by Rome in the 100s Christianity and Judaism. Also Parthian folklore eventually incorporated in songs, Shahnameh, carried back to Europe.
6. The Parthians are challenged by a group under their control – the Sassanians, who rule from the 200s-650, when the Arabs invade. Despite being long time favorite opponents of Rome, with constant war, they also are enmeshed in Roman culture and share learning, techniques and populations back and forth.
This map shows the Capital, Ctesiphon, (near where Baghdad is today), and the palace town of Bishapur – near Persepolis. Deriving some legitimacy by establishing capitals near ancient centers?
In addition to making Zoroastrianism the state religion, but tolerating others including Manicheanism, the Sassanid era saw the emergence of a landed, feudal like class, the Dehqans, who would remain influential through the 20th century.
7. Shapur clearly gleeful about his victory over the Roman Emperor Valerian, (whom he made his personal slave for the rest of his life), but he also brought Roman engineers and thinkers into his world. His wife purportedly a roman daughter of a later Emperor Aurelius (I can’t find any info on how that happened – was she ransom for hostages? Part of a peace deal?) but she did bring roman doctors and others with her to the palace at Bishapur. It’s also significant that Shapur built his tomb at the Achaemenid necropolis, Naqsh e Rostam, near Persepolis. He was clearly framing the Sassanids as the heirs to Cyrus.
8. Shapur also presided over Gondashapur (the city of Shapur), that was the intellectual center. Nestorian Christian refugees from the school of Edessa were expelled from the Byzantine world and set up a monastery and libraries in gondashapur. They were joined

by scholars from Persia, the Arab world, India and china, and translated from Greek, Latin, Sanskrit, etc., works of philosophy and science.

The Persians claim that the later “House of Wisdom” in Baghdad, which the Arabs claim as Arab culture, actually modeled on Gondashapur.

9. The Palace town of Bishapur was one place that showed evidence of Roman engineering and art.
10. Another place that, a bit ironically, shows roman influence is the arched design of the fire temples built by the state. The Brick arch was a Roman engineering technique. Why did Shapur privilege Zoroastrianism (to the extent of giving Magi – the Zoroastrian priests – the ability to collect tribute and also building state fire temples? Shapur allowed other religions to be practiced also. One theory is that he did it to try and link the Magi, a powerful group, to the state.
11. Shapur’s tolerance of Mani, the founder of Manicheanism, might be a sign of his tolerance or his practical attitude to having some leverage against the Zoroastrian magi. The Magi were not fond of Mani and his mix of Christian, Jewish, Buddhist elements in his Gnostic view. Born in Baghdad, Mani traveled to India as a young man and shared his revelations in art (here he is sharing with Shapur at court).
12. After Shapur’s death he was arrested and later executed, but his influence spread from the Mediterranean (St Augustine was a Manichean before he was a Christian) along the silk Road.
13. Ctesiphon, the capital of the later Sassanian world, also shows the influence of the roman engineers in the great arch and windows of the royal reception hall. Here you can see individuals daringly standing on the roof – I imagine they are some pesky British adventurers, checking out trade opportunities in Persia.
14. The layout of Ctesiphon’s streets was also planned in Roman style. This is a great piece of public theater here – dignitaries would enter the city along this royal road to the arch.
15. Today Ctesiphon is about 20 miles outside Baghdad, which was only constructed in the 800s There have been efforts to stabilize the site to get ready for tourism – but there haven’t been many tourists lately.

I want to stop here a minute and think about the way Persia borrows from Rome (intermarriage for political legitimacy, influence of scholars, engineers, etc., and the way invaders, including the Greeks and non Persians like the Parthians – all become Persians (intermarriage with powerful local actors, use of older officials from local “Persian” officeholders, use of Persian court rituals and adoption of Persian culture. The term “Persian” is confusing here because in the history of the Iranian plateau we have many

many different actors that take power, but eventually they seek legitimacy through adopting Persian ways. Persian culture persists, and is even carried on by non Persians!

16. The Sassanids were one of many empires that moved populations about to suit their needs. Conquered populations might be moved if they had useful skills, or were thought to pose a danger where they were (ie, no one wants a 5th column on the frontier). One legacy of this can still be seen in language maps of the region. There are Persian language communities in old Roman regions, and Arabic populations in Sassanid regions. Today, the presence of Persian speaking populations on the south side of the Gulf (which had once been part of the Sassanian world) does not make the Arab population – which controls the State – happy. Especially now that they can listen to Persian satellite TV from Iran.
17. The language and cultural ties influenced who adopted Shiism after the Safavids in Iran made it the official religion in the 1500s. this is another sensitive area today – most of the Gulf Arab states are sunni royal families ruling over shia populations, which partly explains their concern with Iranian influence in the area. Iran’s Shia theologians see monarchy as an un-islamic form of government.
18. In the 600s Khosrow II finally triumphs in pushing the Roman Byzantines out of the Levant. The byzantine world had been in decline, with revolts, mobs, etc., and Khosrow seized the chance to conquer the Mediterranean coast and humiliate them by taking the “True Cross” back to Persia in 614. Yet within a few years Persia would also collapse.

Why?

This is where we can contrast the Arab and Persian historiographies. The Arabs see the moral bankruptcy of the Byzantine/Persian world, and attribute the absolutely unanticipated success of the Arabs to their character. They see the tribes on the peninsula accepting Islam freely, and portray the expanse of Islam as the peaceful roll out of *a pax islamica* carried by Arabs.

19. The Persians certainly don’t see it that way. They recall the violence of the Arab conquests, and find them incompatible with the values of Islam. Certainly, many of the invading tribes were clients of the arabs, representing other groups and other religions who may have been motivated by less than religious goals. But mostly, the Persians see the arab conquests as one of a long series of tribal conquests in which barbarians threaten civilization. (Perhaps a typical view since most histories written by the urban areas being conquered, not the tribal conquerors)
20. This quote really sums up the Persian view. It is written much later – 10th century by a muslim, but the Arab conquest is portrayed as a tragedy for the Persian world.

21. The Persians are certainly partly right – the invasion of Arabs was a part of a Tribal moment that really surrounded them. In fact, part of the reason Rome was losing its Levant territories is because it was pulling troops out to fight tribes in the North. From the Persian perspective the arabs were just another tribal group, of which they had faced many in history – and in the Persian view all had no culture to offer, and would eventually admit to the superiority of Persian culture and adopt it. But in the meantime, they were destructive...

(I love this idea of the “Acme Nomads” but it isn’t mine. I heard it described in a podcast as a good way to imagine the overproduction of nomads every few hundred years, when they just spill out of Central Asia and appear at the edges of Europe, or Persia, or the Great Wall....)

[I spent a little time talking about the bad reputation nomadic tribal cultures have in histories written from the urban cultural view. It is easy to dismiss them as uncivilized since they don’t seem to have the monuments or wealth of settled peoples, but is that the only way to measure civilization? Tribal cultures all over the planet have egalitarian cultures – both in terms of economics and politics – for practical reasons. There isn’t a lot of reason to store up physical wealth if you are nomadic – there are limits on what you can carry or how many animals you can feed and water. Its better to put your investment into the tribe and share with others. That is your safety net, when you have tough times there is a tribe you can rely on.

Also, tribal cultures chose leaders based on their ability to run tribal councils and help the tribe reach a consensus. If some members of the tribe aren’t in agreement with a decision, or if they disagree with the chief, they can just leave and the tribe would be weaker. People in settled communities might have to abide by decisions of the group even if they dislike them, but nomads can leave more easily. Chiefs have to prove they deserve the tribe’s confidence every day.

Tribes did have justice systems in many ways similar to ours. They believed that if you caused harm you should pay the victim. Negotiations between the victim’s family and the perpetrator might determine if recompense should be made with a life, or a payment, or service, or expulsion, depending on the context of the crime. Tribes also had an education system (oral history) sharing their past and values, and while they may not have had Palaces, they also didn’t have slaves building them.]

22. Of course, the Arabs were really not just interested in spreading Islam, but in controlling the Silk road, just as the romans had hoped to do.

Ok, next week we will look at the way Islam gets Persianized!