

Iran, Week 4 Narrative to go with the PPT “Persianizing Islam and the Arabs”

Last week we talked about the arrival of the Arabs in the 650s, this week we will continue to look at the Arab era (650s-900s), but concentrate on the way in which Persian culture altered Islam.

2. During Mohamad’s life after the revelations began (610 ce) and the move to Medina (622 ce) until his death in 632 ce, Islam spread within the Arabian peninsula. After his death the religious movement became more like an expanding state, and quickly moved into the territory of the collapsing Byzantine Empire in the eastern Mediterranean. By the 650s the Arab tribes and were moving into the Tigris-Euphrates Valley and the Sassanid territories. Arabs remember the expansion as peaceful acceptance of Islam, but Persian memory sees it as a conquest.

3. The goal of the Arabs, just as it had been for the Greeks, Romans and Byzantines, was control of the Silk road.

4. The conquest was slow, in part due to the presence of Sassanid castles like this. I put this in partly to emphasize that the Arabs were not moving into empty territory, but into a highly cultured state. Its not surprising that Arabs were intimidated and impressed by Sassanid culture.

5. In the early years the Arabs, accompanied by allies in the conquest, paid little attention to proselytizing. But they did find converts among the Bazaar merchants. Under Zoroastrianism, which praised Agriculture, merchants were held in low esteem. But the Arabs focused on regulating and controlling trade, and intermarried with Bazaar merchants.

The House of Wisdom, a library and educational system centered in Baghdad during the Abbaside Dynasty (750s-900s) has been a source of pride for Arabs through centuries, but Persians argue it was modeled on the Sassanid library and scholastic centers, where scholars found state support. They translated texts, pursued astronomy, philosophy, medicine, engineering ...

The Arabs relied on the old Sassanid administrators to run the empire, collect taxes, they adopted Sassanid patronage of the arts and court etiquette.

In other words, the Persians see much of what Arabs claim as Arab heritage, to be extensions of the Sassanid/Persian culture.

6. As Persians adopted Islam they reshaped it. They became involved in codifying Shariah in reaction to the Arab practice of appointed Qadis, judges who often applied tribal laws. The Sassanid scholars drew on their heritage of codified law to collect and arrange the hadiths in collections.

Persians also note that the Zoroastrians had a text in the Avesta that described a visit to heaven, and strongly resembles the “Night Journey” of Mohamad. The Night Journey is not

described in the early hadiths, and Persians it was a response to contact with Zoroastrianism, as was the 5 times a day prayer.

7. Another thing that carried into Arab culture was the Sassanid tradition of court education literature (Mirrors for Princes) which were written to either guide or ingratiate the author with a new ruler. Macchiavelli adopted the format for his work, *the Prince*.

8. Folktales from the pre Arab era found their way into the Baghdad tradition. The collection, 1001 Arabian nights, associated with the Arab ruler Harun Al Rashid in Baghdad. The stories were from many cultures, but the “frame story” of a woman telling an unending tale to save her life, was a Persian tale.

9. In the mid 700s, the Eastern end of the Empire centered on Damascus revolted. They felt that the Arabs dominated the empire, although Islam promised equality. After the revolt the new Dynasty, the Abbasids moved the capital to a spot near the old capital of Ctesiphon and built a new city Baghdad. This slide shows a recreation of the ancient city, built in a Persian city plan of a round city. Baghdad really marked the resurgence of Persian culture under Islam.

10. We don't have the actual walls of Baghdad anymore (the city was destroyed by the Mongols in 1258), but you can see the ruins of another round, Persian-style city at Merv, now in Turkmenistan. Merv was also brutally destroyed by the Mongols.

11. 900s a Dark Age, or “Late Antiquity?”

By the 800s the Abbasid Empire fragmenting into competing local dynasties, often led by Turkic elite. The era of 900-1300s portrayed as a catastrophe in Arabic histories, but not entirely empty of value. There was not merely political decline, but the emergence of new agricultural patterns, a wave of holy men challenging the elitism of the clerics, religious coexistence (or confusion), a lively time for art and science – not a wasteland at all.

Persian, now the language of administration, to spread and replace older regional languages as Persian scholars served the successor empires to the Abbasids.

A good article for looking at the era: <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/arab-conquests-and-sasanian-iran>

12. An example of the creativity of the era can be seen in the emergence of Sufism, in some ways a reaction to the materialism of court life in the era. Sufism described by some as a style of religious life. Sufi lodges became places of refuge, where adherents sought a deeper communion with god through music, song, dance, or prayer and study. A mystical relationship the goal.

Some of the Sufi lodges became very influential, some operated lodges stretched along trade routes.

13. Whirling Dervishes the most famous Sufis, but most lodges had other manners of seeking mystical union.
14. The Naqshabandi Mausoleum in Bukhara a center of one of the most powerful lodges.
15. The era was also known for its poets – many of whom were also Sufis. The language of poetry thrived with Sufi allusions to nature and beauty. The poetry of Rumi is still popular, but some see his metaphors as religious, others as more literal.
16. Sufis came in many varieties. The Dervish was a wandering teacher who would be known by his animal skin sleeping mat, his begging bowl, his stick or weapon to protect himself from animals....Here we even have Jewish brothers who followed the Sufi tradition.
17. Another poet with a Sufi background is Hafez, who lived in the 1300s in Shiraz. His poetry collection, the Diwan, is still found in almost every home and his mausoleum a popular site still.
18. -19. One Persian tradition is to look into the Diwan for a prediction for the year ahead. I love this photo of President Khatami and the actress Fatima Motamed-Aria celebrating the winter solstice by looking in the Diwan on an Iranian talk show.
20. Omay Khayyam another poet (as well as an astronomer and scientist) who remains popular. Many of the works attributed to him are likely by others. But he became wildly popular in Britain in the 1800s.
21. This was also a time of incredible fluidity. The Barmacids, an influential family in the Buyid court, were once Buddhist priests from Balkh (now in Afghanistan) before migrating to the center of power.
22. This is the ruin of a Buddhist monastery outside of Balkh. It is carved straight into the ground, with monk rooms beneath.
23. A slightly different view. The site was also a caravan stop on the Silk road.

In conclusion, the 900s witnessed the breakup of the Abbasid dynasty and the end of the Arab era, but what followed was hardly a dark age. Persian language and culture was adopted by the following empires and it was a rich era of poetry and science as the new dynasties adopted the Persian tradition of patronage over scholars.