

## *Translator's Prologue*

The definite collapse of the Sasanian Empire in 651 CE and subsequent effects of this major event in the late antique era through the transition of power from the last pre-Islamic Iranian dynasty to the Islamic supremacy, successive shifting of the ideology and religious belief, as well as societal, demographic, cultural and linguistic changes, together created such an immense fracture and frustration in the cultural memory of the Iranians and the Persianate world that its unforgettable reminiscences are still resonating in almost every aspect of people's life after one and half millennia.

For those who either voluntarily or 'obediently' identify themselves with the Islamicized cultural mosaic of contemporary Iran this *transition* might not be seen as suffering, catastrophic or even negative. There are also compelling reasons for this kind of perspective. In the course of the past millennia the people of the conquered territories — Iran in particular, learned how to put up with the new order and became even proud of this phenomenal *mélange* through compromises, assimilations, and absorption of so-called *Iranian-Islamic cultural heritage*. However, for some Iranians with a nationalistic, non-Islamic *weltanschauung* a narcissistic wound that has no immediate remedy, an injury is still omnipresent which cannot be easily healed by grasping on this *mélange* and indulging or nourishing the Iranian-Islamic heritage.

For the very same reason scholars and interested individuals are constantly searching for satisfying answers as to why and how an antique superpower such as the magnificent Sasanian Empire was defeated by some Arab Bedouins with no competitive military, human and cultural resources. Hence, there are still some doubtful and obscure corners regarding the last years of the Sasanian Empire preceding the Arab invasions. Multiple theories and assumptions have been presented during the last one and half centuries in particular on behalf of the western scholars to explain how such a mighty kingdom surrendered to a presumably small number of Muslim invaders.

This and many other related questions create the main focus of the present monograph. The author Shahin Nezhad, a passionate and dedicated researcher of Iranian history, tries to analyze and pathologize the main causes and consequences of this event from different perspectives within and outside of the Sasanian kingdom. For this aim cultural, religious, monetary, territorial as well as expansionist aspects and incentives of Arab attackers have been examined one by one.

Nevertheless, even if it seems difficult to find a satisfactory answer in some areas, through the brainstorming and provocative hypothesis the author creates new horizons, ideas and conclusions that come to light for the reader. On the other hand, by presenting a meticulous observation of socioeconomic, demographic and cultural situations as well as strategically relevant positions of Iranian cities and provinces at the eve of the Arab invasions the reader gets a vivid and multifaceted image of the ongoing situations of *Irānshahr* in the mentioned *zeitgeist*.

Examining and discussing the status of different groups of people and ethnicities including non-Muslims, *Ahl al-kitāb*, *Dhimmis*, Arab migrants, *Mawālī* and slaves, newly converted Muslims of Zoroastrian origin, soldiers, twilight mercenaries etc. during the early years of Arab invasions to Iranian plateau is a further elucidating approach of the author that provides an authentic and relatively precise picture of these denominations and their impacts—as well as their affectedness—in seventh century Iran.

The relation of different nobles and elders of the Sasanian dynasty towards each other, internal conflicts, envies, homicides and noble killing—in the words of the author “*era of fratricide and elite assassination*”—hidden compromises and collaborations with new rising Arab masters, and Iranians’ partial betrayals for sake of their personal advantages are other impactful elements discussed in this book which in turn gives an insight into the complex circumstances of Sasanian aristocrats and their contributions to the power transition.

Some statistics and censuses on population numbers, different modalities of taxations and their amounts as well as overall economic situations discussed in the work are useful for everybody who is interested in gaining an idea about the socioeconomic conditions of *Irānshahr* before and during the Arab invasions.

Towards the end of the final chapter the book also provides a concise synopsis on main causes of the collapse of the Sassanids in a conclusive way which could be studied independently from the previous parts of the work.

I believe the present book fills some serious discursive gaps on late Sasanian era and the early years of Islamic Iran, and serves as a useful manual for all individuals who are interested in gaining an insight into the admittedly fascinating history of late Iranian antique, its societal mosaic and cultural–religious complexity.

#### *Notes on Technical Aspect of the Translation*

For the transcription and transliteration of proper names and toponymics I followed the popular method of *Encyclopædia Iranica* except for those specific lexemes

which do not appear in the aforementioned reference. In this case I tried to reproduce the pronunciations as close as possible to the Iranian, Persian or Arabic originals.

The diction and language of the author Shahin Nezhad in the original Persian manuscript (Persian title: *Našībī derāz ast piš-e farāz, negāhī dīgar beh forūpāšī-ye Īran-e Sāsānī*) is complex and highly sophisticated. In the English version the aim was to focus on the content and therefore, the language in the translation is relatively simplified and smoothed for the sake of easier conveyance and transmission of the intended idea. Most of the rendering footnotes and some of the bibliographical references from the translator have been added with consensual agreement on behalf of the Persian author.

Farshid Delshad  
Los Angeles, Winter 2022

## *Author's Note*

Many years ago, as a teenager, when I learned about the defeat of the Iranians against the Arabs at the end of the Sassanid period in history and related books, I, like many of my peers, looked with disbelief and regret at the reasons for this event. It was a tragic failure that stuck like a thorn in the eyes of many Iranians. Despite our way of thinking about and examining the social and political issues of Iran, our ancestors' subordination to the Arab people has nurtured such hatred and humiliation within the Iranian majority that it can no longer be ignored. In particular, recent events such as the 1980 Iraqi invasion against Iran, which was supported by the Arab–Muslims, as well as Muslim attitudes regarding the Persian Gulf's name have added to the depth of this pessimism and anti–Arab resentment.

Conquests by no other nation have plunged Iranians into such an identity crisis as did the Arab invasion of the seventh century. Furthermore, few historical events can be found that have received so much academic and popular attention, including many contradictory analyses and interpretations, such as the event of Arab invasions in Iran. These often–times controversial and conflicting writings highly confuse readers who are interested in finding the reasons behind the Sassanids' downfall. Hence, when I saw myself capable of critically reading historical writings, particularly the primary sources of accounts on the Muslim conquest of Iran by the Arabs, I decided to do my own scholarly research.

After several years of extensive research in this discipline, I have the impression that I have found a more or less enlightening answer regarding the background of the collapse of the Sasanian Empire. The results of these investigations have been recorded and reflected in this book. I hope that what I have included in this research reflects a little bit more of the truth of what happened to Iran at the dawn of the Arab invasions.

This work, in its original version in Persian, was first published in 2011. Since then, there have been several revised, respectively extended, published versions of the same manuscript in Iran and abroad. I have felt the need to make the English version of this work available to non–Persian readers who are interested in this subject, so I am happy that the revised version of the original Persian work has been released in English.

Shahin Nezhad  
Austin, Texas, Sommer 2022

## *Introduction*

The Arab invasions of Iran, and other events of the seventh century CE which led to the occupation of Iran, created the most important milestones in Iran's history. Despite the magnitude of these events and their profound impact on Iranian lives in the past fourteen centuries, a clear answer to the question of how the Sasanian Empire collapsed has been missing for curious truth-seeking individuals. The defeat in al-Qādisiyyah and the gradual occupation of Iran by Muslim Arabs in subsequent years not only had a huge impact on the culture of Iranian people, but also commenced dramatic changes in the sociocultural, economic, and even demographical mosaics of Iran. The downfall of the Sasanian Empire forced Iran to pay tributes to Muslim Arab caliphates for almost six centuries. Moreover, it paved the way for the invasions of nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes of Central Asia from the tenth to fifteenth centuries. Iran's defeat against Arabs has remained as an old wound on the Iranian soul, which festers and opens from time to time. In his work *Al-Milal wa al-Nihal*, Ibn Ḥazm, the Andalusian Muslim historiographer of the eleventh century, precisely highlights this nagging pain of Iranian people:

[...] Iranians due the immensity of their country and superiority over all nations and people of the time, and for the greatness of their dignity, called themselves 'noble' and other people their 'servants'. [...] Once their government was destroyed by Arabs—and since they considered Arabs as the most inferior nation—it affected them severely and their grief enhanced. [...] As a result, they revolted repeatedly to liberate themselves by instigating war and quarreling.<sup>1</sup>

Scholarly work of this episode, which indeed is the most striking of Iranian history, has been predominantly treated with expediency and even self-censorship until recently. In addition, some of the research done in this area has been heavily influenced by researchers' religious beliefs, ideological and political inclinations, and their attempts to choose specific evidence and documents which best served their predetermined conclusion. From all studies on the event of Sassanids' collapse and dominance of Muslim Arabs in Iran, three types of traditional approaches can be witnessed.

<sup>1</sup> IBN ḤAZM, 2007: *Muslim Understanding of Other Religions; A Study of Ibn Ḥazm's Kitāb Al-Fasl Fi Al-Milal Wa Al-Ahwa' Wa Al-Nihal*. G. HAIDER AASI (ed.).

The first approach is the analysis of left-wing movements and scholars with Marxist tendencies, built upon the idea of major disparity amongst existing social classes and strata in the Sasanian Empire, and the lower classes' dissatisfaction with the government at the time. Leftists' response to the question of how the mighty Sasanian Empire was defeated by desert-wandering, hungry Arabs is simple: Proletariats who were extremely discontent with heavy taxes, class differences, and the ever-growing oppression of the Zoroastrian clergy had no incentive to fight to the benefit of aristocrats and great landowners, and would not guard them against this new enemy. Based on this approach, if instead of Muslim Arabs, any other nomadic people had attacked Iran, the people's response would have been the same. I.e., they would not have shown any resistance, as they only wanted to escape the oppression of Zoroastrian clerics, major landowners, and Sasanian princes. In other words, what happened with the Muslim warriors could have occurred with any other invader as well. According to this perception, only after Iranians fully recognized the Arab domination, exploitation of their homeland, and racial discrimination between Arabs and Iranians (including Muslim Iranians), did they realize that there was "no new thing under the sun," and that their master had merely switched places with an alien one.

This type of stereotypical analysis, which comes from the analyses of socialistic historical researchers, blames the Sasanian Empire and Zoroastrian priests for the people's oppression as well as the dissipation of the country's foundation, leading to Iran's open borders for the Arabs. While it is the most convenient answer, it is not the correct one. If cleric and elite tyranny had truly caused the defeat of the Sasanian Empire by primitive Arab tribes, how did the Romans—despite being subject to cruelty, slavery, and oppression—not only withstand repeated attacks from European savage tribes, but also defeat them several centuries before Islam? How is it that the Muslim army could not infiltrate China, and was forced to retreat to Transoxiana after being defeated by the Chinese? At the time, there was more autocracy, class deference, and religious deception in China compared to Iran at the end of the Sasanian era. To explore further, Iran was not the only country defeated by the Muslims. Muslims succeeded in occupying regions of the Eastern Roman Empire including Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Lebanon, and large parts of Anatolia (modern-day Turkey). In the Byzantine Empire, social status and class differences were not as defined and established as they were in the Sasanian Empire. If this is so, how did Arabs conquer the Byzantine Empire?

In addition, Nasir al-Din al-Tusi (1201–1274 CE), the Persian polymath and theologian, wrote in his book *Nasirean Ethics* (Pers. *Akhlāq-e Nāserī*) that even during

Muslims' governance, the class structure of the Sasanian Empire was still intact. People were divided into four major groups: priests, warriors, secretaries, and commoners. Therefore, even though the Sasanians' social system had some deficiencies, the Arab occupation of Iran did not fully remove their class structure. The partially racial-based Arab society had its own resentments towards other ethnicities. Furthermore, hundreds of farmers who worked in fields or had businesses in urban areas lost their freedom after the Arabs' attack. They were demoted from the *petit bourgeoisie* to slaves, and were sold in markets of Medina, Kufa, and Basra to serve Arab rulers<sup>2</sup>.

It is obvious that the news from occupied territories of the Arabs, their plunders, and the enslavement of local people had a sobering effect on Iranians' hopes of a savior invader establishing a just and classless society.

There is another example in *The Book of Government* (Pers. *Sīyāsat-nāmeḥ*) by Nizam al-Mulk (1018–1094 CE), the Persian scholar and vizier of the Seljuk Empire, who defends the theory of existing class differences. He concludes that the endurance of social classes for centuries after the Sasanians' collapse shows how deeply traditions were rooted in Iran. Even after Islam replaced Zoroastrianism as the official religion, people were still loyal to old social structures and considered them efficient.<sup>3</sup>

The second approach is the Islamist approach, based on their ideological and doctrinal considerations. They believe that the Muslims' defeat of the Sasanian Empire was largely due to the universal message of Islam, which was "heard and faithfully embraced by Iranians."<sup>4</sup> According to their belief, Islam brought monotheism and fraternity to Muslims. Therefore, when Islam came to Iran, this religion should have been welcomed by crowds of people and accepted with open arms. Before the Islamic Revolution of 1979, individuals like Jalal Al-e-Ahmad, Ali Shariati, and Morteza Motahhari supported this thesis. After the revolution, due to the religious rulership in the country, the mass media—which included textbooks, newspapers, and particularly broadcast media—was entrusted with instilling this idea into the consciousness of the new generation.

This belief is so heavily influenced by religious and political tendencies that it requires no argument to rule it out. One must simply examine the way Iranian cities were captured, how Muslims treated Iranians in their plunder, and how they enslaved women

<sup>2</sup> Cf. FRYE, N. RICHARD (1993): *The Heritage of Persia*, p. 233.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. FRYE, N. RICHARD, (1988): *The Golden Age of Persia: the Arabs in the east*. p.65.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*