

The New Muslims of Post-Conquest Iran: Tradition, Memory, and Conversion

Sarah Bowen Savant

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Perhaps no single historical occurrence looms larger in the imagining of contemporary Iranian identity than Islam's rise and the ensuing widespread conversions on and around the Iranian plateau. Of course, as with any events occurring over a millennium ago, not to mention events that have shaped their heirs' confessional commitments, one encounters a gulf between how Iran's Muslim conversion is written in the popular imagination and how historiographical studies attempt to make sense of such complex transformations. Nonetheless, Sarah Bowen Savant's *The New Muslims of Post-Conquest Iran: Tradition, Memory, and Conversion* might ultimately shape Iranian and Is-

lamic studies not only by contributing novel scholarship to the field, but also by speaking to non-specialists' interests as well.

As evidence of popular interest, one need only note the continual reprints of Abd al-Husayn Zarrinkub's seminal 1957 study, *Dū Qarn Sukūt (Two Centuries of Silence)*, which considers the period following the Islamic conquest and the Sasanian Empire's collapse. Savant's study picks up where Zarrinkub's ends, arguing that post-conquest Iranians experienced a twofold conversion during the ninth to eleventh centuries: becoming both Muslim and Persian. And while the author disavows simplistic notions like historical silence or static national identities, her book, like Zarrinkub's, sheds new light on Persian Muslim identities in a particular historical context and suggests how they are formed, negotiated, contested, and transformed over time and space.

The New Muslims of Post-Conquest Iran considers how Arabic (and, in a few cases, Persian) histories, compendia, and religious documents inform our understanding of how Iranians came to identify as members of a Persian Islamic civilization. As the subtitle suggests, the concepts of tradition and memory play a central role; tradition here refers to common features among any reports on the past and memory refers to shared convictions in a given society about the past. Both concepts guide the methodological approach, which Savant, following Jan Assmann, defines as mnemohistory (i.e., the study of how a society or individuals remember their collective past).

Thus she studies traditions and memories on Persian history not to determine the veracity of the events or conditions depicted, but rather to gain insight into the societies in which such memories circulated. In other words, Savant is interested in comparing, for example, descriptions by Muslim authors of the Sasanian capital at Ctesiphon (Mada'in) to understand how each author's emphases or omissions suggest his particular formulations of an Islamic Persian identity; the information's historical accuracy regarding the Ctesiphon of prior centuries remains irrelevant. In fact, to use a different example, the author notes that for the mnemohistorian a forged historical document holds even greater importance than an "authentic" one, since the forgery affords insight into the forger's motivations, revealing just how he intended the past to be remembered.

One of course cannot study remembering without the antithetical concept of forgetting. Thus Savant likewise considers how her sources omit or "forget" certain aspects of the Persian past. The book is divided neatly into two parts. Part I (chapters 1-3), "Traditions for Remembering," focuses on the "sites of memory" – a term applied from Pierre Nora's work – that allowed new Iranian converts to situate themselves within a Muslim historical consciousness. Part II (chapters 4-6: "Traditions for Forgetting," considers the elements of Iran's past that were excluded from traditions and thus from collective memory.

Rather than mining her sources for verifiable information, her approach requires a great deal of interpretation and extrapolation as to what motivated an author to privilege certain memories, for such an approach “is more art than science” (p. 27).

Nonetheless, her work benefits historical studies broadly by submitting well-trodden texts like al-Tabari’s history to fresh readings. The introduction provides a thorough overview of each chapter and the overarching methodology, while also contextualizing Savant’s work among such pioneering historians of memory as Maurice Holbwachs and the aforementioned Assmann and Nora.

Chapter 1, “Prior Connections to Islam,” contends that traditionists wrote Iranians into a state of “primordial continuity” wherein their ancestry and some geographic locales shared, with the Arabs, the same history of monotheistic prophecy that culminated with Prophet Muhammad (p. 60). Individual traditionists – the chapter pays special attention to al-Tabari but also compares accounts by Hamza al-Isfahani, Bal’ami, al-Mas’udi, Ibn Qutaybah, Ibn al-Faqih, and al-Istakhri – disagreed over which prophets or sons of prophets the Persians could claim as their forebears or which historical sites played a role in prophetic history. Nonetheless, Savant maintains, revisiting the ways in which traditionists tried to do this reveals both their complex reconciliation and negotiation with the few existing pre-Islamic Iranian accounts and, more significantly, the spaces carved out for new converts in the collective memory.

Chapter 2, “Muḥammad’s Persian Companion, Salmān al-Fārisī,” traces the evolution of this early convert as a “site of memory for Persians and particularly for the people of Iṣfahān” (p. 62). Savant maintains that for earlier biographers like Ibn Hisham and Ibn Sa’d, Salman’s non-Arabness signified the early Muslims’ diversity and egalitarian ethic. Thus he necessarily shed his Persian identity to join the community. Only during the mid-tenth century did biographers begin to detail and emphasize his specifically Persian and Isfahani origins. Relying primarily on texts by Abu al-Shahykh al-Isfahani and Abu Nu’aym al-Isfahani, Savant reveals how this later generation of biographers depicted Isfahan as a center of Islamic civilization and ascribed special importance to the well-known Pleiades Hadith as evidence of the Persians’ leading role in Islamic history. Thus Salman’s recast identity suggests that “Persian Muslims [from the mid-tenth century onwards] were more confident in themselves and conscious of their shared history” (p. 81).

Chapter 3, “Finding Meaning in the Past,” considers how depictions and memories of the Arab conquest evolved from a military defeat to a more complex social transformation in which the Persians played an active and constructive role. According to this latter view, the Persian Sasanian legacy shaped

early Islamic history in two ways: the second caliph, Umar, adopted the Persian practice of keeping a register (*dīwān*) and the daughter of Yazdagird III, the last Sasanian emperor, married the Prophet's grandson al-Husayn so that the fourth Imam, Ali Zayn al-'Abiddn, had mixed Persian-Arab ancestry. Savant draws primarily from accounts by al-Dinawari, al-Baladhuri, and al-Suli to illustrate these revised memories. The chapter then compares two eleventh-century local histories to show how "local Iranian sensibilities" shaped memories of the conquest (p. 91). She cautiously acknowledges mnemohistory's limitations in the chapter's conclusion; nonetheless, comparing the two local histories reveals how the authors "give more texture to the subjective experience and concerns of Iranian readers and audiences" (p. 129).

Chapter 4, "Reforming Iranians' Memories of Pre-Islamic Times," considers three editorial strategies by which traditionists omitted or diminished knowledge of the Persians' pre-Islamic past: (1) writers like al-Biruni, al-Ghazali, and Firdawsi rewrote the Persians' universal histories as local accounts (e.g., one people's version of the past), which undermined their authority by anthologizing them among groups or emphasizing their specificity to the Persians and their supersession by Islam; (2) erasing national or ethnic lines in pre-Islamic history. Considering al-Dinawari's history at length, Savant alleges that his intentional blurring and melding of Near Eastern mythologies creates "a narrative in which local heroes and villains are just so many figures in a drama common to all Muslims" (p. 156); and (3) emphasizing or inventing deeply negative associations with Persian history: the Qur'anic Pharaoh as Persian, Gayūmart as a false prophet, and Zoroastrian fire worship as murder and evil doing. Of course such traditions are, "in hindsight, ridiculous" (p. 160). But they fulfilled their purpose: undermining the authority of the Iranians' royal or religious traditions while reinforcing an Islamic heritage that subsumed those remnants that it could not – or need not – forget.

Chapter 5, "The Unhappy Prophet," identifies four "filters" used to create an unfavorable view toward Sasanian history (p. 171). The traditionists (1) affixed "labels" to heterogeneous phenomena, referring to the Arabic past as *jāhiliyah*, which acquired a nostalgic (if historically inaccurate) connotation of cohesion among pre-Islamic Arabs, or, conversely, referring to Persian epic with Qur'anic terms like *asāṭīr al-awwālīn* (fables of the ancients) and *lahw al-ḥadīth* (diverting tales) to assert their essential fictiveness and fallacy (pp. 171-76); (2) created "homologies" (exaggerated similarities) between groups (p. 178): equating the Makkan polytheists with the Persians, although this view grew more complex as more Iranians converted; (3) fashioned icons, defined as "anything visually memorable" (p. 183): Kisrā tearing up the Prophet's letter, an image that still resonates; and (4) "gendering" history, as

with Kisrā's daughter who served briefly as the Sasanian monarch during the Prophet's lifetime. Later traditionists focused on her as one of many signs that the Sasanians were doomed. In this context, Savant provides a rich overview of contemporary interpretations and debates on the tradition in which the Prophet stated: "No people shall prosper if a woman rules over them" (p. 191).

Chapter 6, "Asserting the End of the Past," argues that traditionists often related a simplistic or inaccurate view of the defeated Iranians in large part because their narratives emphasized the Sasanian's "ignominious departure from the world stage" (p. 229). In such portrayals, writers neglect or "forget" such details as the identities of al-Qadisiyya's residents (while remembering the military commanders who fought the famous seventh-century battle there), the presence of Christian residents in conquered cities like Tustar, and the influence of powerful families like the Mihrans in Rayy, who fell from grace as other local noble families collaborated with the conquering Arabs. In all of these cases, she argues, the careful reader can discern how the traditionists actively seek to erase certain elements of the Sasanian, Christian, and Zoroastrian past as they assert the rise of a new, Muslim present.

Savant's scholarship, finally, contributes to the dialogue among historians like Parvaneh Pourshariati and Richard Bulliet who have helped shape our understanding of early Islamic Iranian history. New Muslims should undoubtedly be required reading for specialists and will likely interest other historians or textual scholars who seek a model of how to conduct careful, interpretive readings of narrative sources. One even hopes that the study will attract a few non-academic readers as well.

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