Book Review

Scott Savran, *Arabs and Iranians in the Islamic Conquest Narrative: Memory and Identity Construction in Islamic Historiography, 750–1050*. Culture and Civilization in the Middle East, 57 (London: Routledge, 2018), x + 248 pp. ISBN 978-0-415-74968-8. Price: $145 (cloth).

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The last decade has seen a considerable increase in studies focusing on the issues of identity and identity formation in the early Islamic period. To this valuable and growing number of studies, we can add Scott Savran's *Arabs and Iranians in the Islamic Conquest Narrative*. It is important to note that Savran defines the Islamic conquest narrative in a broader than usual way. Rather than simply concentrating on the Arab-Islamic conquests themselves, the book dedicates the bulk of its attention to the pre-Islamic past and the buildup to the first/seventh-century conquests through a focus on the Sasanian state. The modern analysis of the events sees the movement begin late in the career of the Prophet Muḥammad. Although there is often a discussion of the late antique milieu in which the conquests began and the long-standing conflict between the Roman/Byzantine and Sasanian Empires, the spotlight has been firmly on the first–second/seventh–eighth centuries.[1] Many of our surviving sources, however, are written centuries after the events they purport to describe and do not begin their historical recollection with Muḥammad alone. Instead, a large number of Arabic and Persian sources also recall the pre-Islamic period and highlight the inevitability of the conquerors' success over the Sasanians. They reflect on Sasanian rule and the foreshadowing of what was to come following the rise of Muḥammad's community. Yet this material is often omitted from modern reconstructions, and Savran seeks to place the period of the conquests themselves

1. See, for instance, the coverage of the conquests in Robert G. Hoyland, *In God's Path: The Arab Conquests and the Creation of an Islamic Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Hugh Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquests: How the Spread of Islam Changed the World We Live In* (Philadelphia: Da Capo Press, 2007); and Fred McGraw Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981).

within this wider recollection of events. He puts forth the idea of two distinct phases of Islamic historiography that are identifiable in the surviving sources from the period between 132 and 442 AH/750 and 1050 CE, a notion that fits in well with the recent work of Sarah Bowen Savant.[2] He ultimately argues that in this wider Islamic conquest narrative, Iran and the Persians were cast as part of a salvific process. In this story, Iran needed to fall to the Arab-Islamic conquerors before it could rise, as God had intended, in an "enlightened Islamic form"; it underwent a process of defeat and the cleansing of hubris that strengthened the greater whole.

The introduction and chapter 2 provide a strong theoretical framework for the larger issues of identity construction and collective memory that the book tackles. Additionally, there is a detailed contextual discussion of the Persian-influenced court culture of the Abbasid state and the shift it reflected against the earlier *akhbāriyyūn* and their focus on justifying the rise of the Arabs over the non-Arabs (*ʿajam*). Initially, in the first phase of this two-phase process, we find accounts that promoted a unified and noble Arab identity even during the *jāhiliyya*, and the Iranians depicted in these sources serve as little more than foils to further highlight the positive qualities of the Bedouin and the inevitability of their success. In the second phase, later Iranian-descended writers combined these traditions with the material of the Sasanian royal chronicles to highlight how the depravity of their ruling ancestors led to their demise "in order that [Iran] might be purified of the imperial arrogance which had marred the Sasanians" (p. 26). As Savran argues, the "Arab versus *ʿajam*" literary discourse thus played out through an evolving narrative that saw Iran ultimately reborn in a stronger Islamic context and in which the Iranians were one of the primary audiences of the texts rather than the subject alone.

From chapter 3 onward, Savran traces these two phases chronologically through the Islamic historical record, utilizing a wide variety of sources in both Arabic and Persian. He begins with the first instances of interaction between the Arabs and the Persians in the narrative sources, with particular emphasis on the reign of the Sasanian ruler Shāpūr II. He highlights the discrepancy between the harshness of Shāpūr's punishment of Arab transgressions and the overall positive recollection of his reign. Two reports of Shāpūr's interaction with selfless Arab elders provide "a kerygmatic conversation between representatives of Arab and Persian civilization" (p. 67); Shāpūr reveals a prophecy that the Arabs would come to rule over the Persians, and the severity of his retaliation against the Arab raiders is aimed at preventing this outcome. Savran then moves into the fifth century CE, with a discussion of the Lakhmids of al-Ḥīra and of the ways in which the rearing of the legendary Sasanian ruler Bahrām Gūr by these Arabs contributed to his positive qualities as reflected in the sources. It is through the figure of Bahrām, Savran contends, that "the destinies of the Arabs and Sasanians… begin to converge" (p. 91). He continues by discussing the defeat of the later ruler Pīrūz by a central

2. Sarah Bowen Savant, *The New Muslims of Post-Conquest Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

Asian confederation, which served as a forewarning of the vulnerability of the Sasanians to a smaller force—like the Arabs—that occupied a moral high ground. Moving into the sixth century, the focus shifts to Khusraw Anūshirwān's reign, which tends to receive noticeably more coverage in early Arabic sources than do the reigns of other Sasanian rulers. This discussion furnishes an opportunity for Savran to introduce the "audience trope" that is such an integral part of the depiction of the Sasanians in Islamic sources (and a key part of the book's final three chapters). Here, he considers multiple instances in which Arab emissaries arrive to the court of the Sasanians for an audience with the *shāhānshāh*. The Arab dignitaries resist the pomp of the court and the disdain of the Bedouin on behalf of the Persians, and the Arabs grow in standing as time (and each chapter) passes, first in the form of the Yemenis, then as the Lakhmids, and finally, as the Arab Muslims on the eve of the Battle of al-Qādisiyya. Savran articulates the differences in the appearances, characteristics, and attitudes of these Arab emissaries at the times of Anūshirwān, Parvīz, and Yazdagird and the literary role these accounts play in the Arab-versus-*ʿajam* theme.

It is only the final chapter that concerns the Islamic period proper, addressing the Arab-Muslim victory over the Sasanians and the replacement of the dynasty. This is also the chapter that is the most limited in its conclusions. Many of the narrations discussed here—including the qualities of the Persian Salmān al-Fārisī (the Companion of Muḥammad) and the decisive Battle of al-Qādisiyya—are more than competently discussed. They have already been thoroughly covered in recent years, however, by Savant (rightly relied upon by Savran throughout the book) and Gershon Lewental.[3]

This widening of the definition of "Islamic conquest narrative" makes Savran's work unique in the field of early Islamic historiographical studies, and it is where the greatest value in his work lies. Savran builds on the scholarship of people such as Albrecht Noth, Lawrence Conrad, and Tayeb El-Hibri, who have previously reviewed the later narrative sources' depiction of the foundational period of Islamic history in order to identify a literary editorial process at work.[4] Savran continues this approach in convincing ways by looking beyond the Abbasid, Umayyad, and *Rāshidūn* periods to apply this analysis to the pre-Islamic era. In the process, he integrates this earlier era more fully into the wider arc of the Arab-Islamic conquests. He treats the entire narrative as a literary-historical process whose earlier content should not be passed over in our modern analyses, but rather, should be more fully appreciated as part of the wider recounting of Abbasid-era authors. Through such an approach, this material is intricately linked to the Abbasid context in which earlier accounts were being compiled, redacted, and

3. Savant, *New Muslims*; D. Gershon Lewental, "Qādisiyyah, Then and Now: A Case Study of History and Memory, Religion, and Nationalism in Middle Eastern Discourse" (PhD diss., Brandeis University, 2011).

4. Albrecht Noth and Lawrence Conrad, *The Early Arabic Historical Tradition: A Source-Critical Study* (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1994); Tayeb El-Hibri, *Parable and Politics in Early Islamic History: The Rashidun Caliphs* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); and Tayeb El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography: Hārūn al-Rashīd and the Narrative of the ʿAbbāsid Caliphate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

published in an intentional form, and we can consequently identify more clearly the authorial processes involved in the creation of the narrative. Savran's analysis and identification of these phases of the historiographical process is compelling, and it reminds us that authors bring certain traditions together as coherent works for a reason.

This book might have benefited from a chapter that more fully addresses the challenges of early Arabic and Persian historiography. Further discussion of the limitations of identifying these two phases of writing within the historical record would have been especially useful, given how little survives in an unredacted form from the first phase. Chapter 2 serves as a very useful thematic and contextual overview, but there are only some three pages dedicated to direct discussion of the sources in the introduction (pp. 14–17) with a brief return to the infamous *akhbārī* Sayf b. ʿUmar in chapter 7 (pp. 161–162). In a book that is so focused on the issues of memory and almost exclusively on the historiographical tradition, this would have been a valuable opportunity for expansion. This is not to disparage the use of sources within the monograph, however, as the author makes excellent use of a substantial swath of both Arabic and Persian writings to considerable effect. But there are also a number of occasions on which greater analysis of the transmission of and variation in the accounts used would have been meaningful for the reader. For instance, in discussing accounts of the Yemeni Arabs' coming to Khusraw for aid against the Abyssinians (pp. 109–110), the author notes differences in the narratives of al-Ṭabarī and Balʿamī. He does not explain, however, why these differences might matter and what they might say about the form and content of these texts in comparison to one another. Might such differences not point to underlying variations in approach or the sources that these compilers used in creating their texts and narratives? Separately, Savran does an admirable job of discussing collective memory and the significant contributions to memory studies made in recent years in the introduction, but it then largely fades into the background for the rest of the book, appearing as something of an afterthought.

Our understanding of what it meant to be "Arab" or "Persian" in the pre-Islamic and early Islamic periods has been augmented by important new research over the last several years. The growth in studies of epigraphic evidence from Arabia and portions of the Levant continues to be hugely enlightening, and Peter Webb's recent study on the making of Arab identity has been greatly instructive, too.[5] We can confidently add *Arabs and Iranians in the Islamic Conquest Narrative* to the ongoing discourse concerning Islamic identity formation and early Islamic historiography more generally.

5. Peter Webb, *Imaging the Arabs: Arab Identity and the Rise of Islam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).