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978-1-107-01408-4 - The New Muslims of Post-Conquest Iran: Tradition, Memory, and Conversion

Sarah Bowen Savant

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## The New Muslims of Post-Conquest Iran

### *Tradition, Memory, and Conversion*

How do converts to a religion come to feel an attachment to it? *The New Muslims of Post-Conquest Iran* answers this important question for Iran by focusing on the role of memory and its revision and erasure in the ninth to eleventh centuries CE. During this period, the descendants of the Persian imperial, religious, and historiographical traditions not only wrote themselves into starkly different early Arabic and Islamic accounts of the past but also systematically suppressed much knowledge about pre-Islamic history. The result was both a new “Persian” ethnic identity and the pairing of Islam with other loyalties and affiliations, including family, locale, and sect. This pioneering study examines revisions to memory in a wide range of cases, from Iran’s imperial and administrative heritage to the Prophet Muḥammad’s stalwart Persian companion, Salmān al-Fārisī, and to memory of Iranian scholars, soldiers, and rulers in the mid-seventh century. Through these renegotiations, Iranians developed a sense of Islam as an authentically Iranian religion, as they simultaneously shaped the broader historiographic tradition in Arabic and Persian.

Sarah Bowen Savant is a historian of religion and an Associate Professor at the Aga Khan University, Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations in London. Her publications include *Genealogy and Knowledge in Muslim Societies: Understanding the Past* (2013), co-edited with Helena de Felipe, as well as book chapters and journal articles treating early Islamic history and historiography.

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*Tradition, Memory, and Conversion*

SARAH BOWEN SAVANT

*Aga Khan University*

*Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations*



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## Preface

For the period of this study, the primary language of our written sources is Arabic. I follow the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*' (*IJMES*) transliteration system for Arabic; accordingly, I do not indicate final *tā'* *marbuṭa* or distinguish between *alif mamdūda* and *alif maqṣūra*. Technical terms and place names used in English appear without transliteration (e.g., vizier, Baghdad), as do Anglicized derivatives of Arabic words and dynasties (e.g., 'Ajam, 'Abbasid). From the fourth/tenth century onward, a few, albeit culturally significant, Persian sources enter circulation, with more in the centuries that follow. My transliteration of Persian texts generally reflects that of *IJMES*, but where Persian words appear in Arabic texts, I give priority to Arabic transliteration. I hope I will be forgiven for this choice by Persianists, and by all for any inconsistencies.

For the Qur'an, I draw primarily on the English translation by Alan Jones (Cambridge: Gibb Memorial Trust, 2007).

For dates, I generally use those in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed.; *Encyclopaedia Iranica*; and Tarif Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 235–42.

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## Acknowledgments

Although this book is not a revision of my Ph.D. dissertation (which I now see as heavily circumscribed by time and circumstance), the seeds for it were first planted while I was a Ph.D. student, so I would like to start by acknowledging with gratitude the insights and guidance of Roy Mottahedeh at Harvard, without whom this study would never have been conceived. At Harvard, I also benefited from the advice of William Graham, Wolfhart Heinrichs, and Charles Hallisey, among other members of the faculty, and the fruitful companionship of fellow students who remain important interlocutors and among whom I would single out Kristen Stilt, Raquel Ukeles, Joseph Saleh, Greg White, Christian Lange, Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, and Bruce Fudge. At an early stage, I also profited from reading courses with Ahmad Mahdavi-Damghani. Harvard, the Fulbright-Hays Commission, and the Social Science Research Council funded work on the Arabic sources in Egypt with two extraordinarily helpful teachers from Cairo University, Rida al-‘Arabi and ‘Abd al-Hamid Madkour. The University of California, Berkeley, was a second home to me for much of the dissertation-writing process as well as afterward, when I was a Sultan post-doctoral Fellow at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies. John Hayes, Emily Gottreich, Nezar AlSayyad, Wali Ahmadi, James Monroe, and Fred Astren welcomed me and offered key expertise and friendship. It was at Berkeley that this book began to take shape.

The more recent environment in which it developed was London, and its progress was helped by the opportunities I have had since joining the faculty of the newly established Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations of the Aga Khan University. Abdou Filali-Ansary, the Institute’s founding director, and Farouk Topan, its director since 2009, deserve

## xvi Acknowledgments

special mention, as do now five cohorts of our students from across the globe who have sensitized me to the ways in which early Islamic history can today be interpreted in different Muslim-majority contexts. At an early and critical stage, I benefited from stimulating conversations with colleagues, including Stefan Weber, now of the Pergamonmuseum in Berlin. Rebecca Williamson aided me with research for an important year, which freed me to read widely and to think. Fasih Khan has throughout provided unstinting support in all matters technical, and likewise, in our library, Waseem Farooq, Jessica Lindner, Walid Ghali, and Shah Hussain. The U.K. has generally proved an exciting environment for work on historiography. I have particularly benefited from collaboration with Konrad Hirschler and James McDougall in a now annual workshop on “Arabic Pasts: Histories and Historiography.” Hugh Kennedy, an early supporter of “Arabic Pasts,” has been a generous friend and commentator on my work.

Several parts of this study have been presented in public talks and at conferences, and I would like to thank these audiences. *Comparative Islamic Studies* has kindly permitted me to reproduce in Chapter One material from my 2006 article, “Isaac as the Persians’ Ishmael: Pride and the Pre-Islamic Past in Ninth and Tenth-Century Islam,” *Comparative Islamic Studies* 2, no. 1 (2006): 5–25, © Equinox Publishing Ltd 2006. I would like to thank *Annales Islamologiques* for permission to use in the Introduction a few paragraphs from my article “‘Persians’ in Early Islam,” *Annales Islamologiques* 42 (2008): 73–91, in which I explored ideas relating to Persians, memory, and forgetting.

Many friends read drafts at various stages of the project. Dealing with a significant variety of fields, genres, and languages was a risky endeavor requiring some familiarity with a wide range of specialist scholarship. I have often drawn on the expertise and guidance of others, who should not, however, be held responsible for the book’s shortcomings. I would like to thank in particular Zayde Gordon Antrim, Fred Astren, Patricia Crone, Touraj Daryaei, Robert Gleave, Mohammadreza Hashemitafta, John Hayes, Stefan Heidemann, Karim Javan, Wadad Kadi, Aptin Khanbaghi, Majid Montazer Mahdi, Raffaele Mauriello, Christopher Melchert, John Nawas, Farid Panjwani, Richard Payne, Parvaneh Pourshariati, Kathryn Spellman Poots, Khodadad Rezakhani, Andrew Rippin, Fatemeh Shams-Esmaeli, Maria Subtelny, and Raquel Ukeles. Antoine Borrut, Peter Webb, Philip Wood, and Travis Zadeh have especially enriched this study through fruitful discussions about Arabs, Persians, memory, narrative, and historiography and through their insightful feedback on the entirety of the manuscript.



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MAP 0.1. The Great Empires on the Eve of the Arab Conquests

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MAP 0.2. Historical Iran

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FIGURE 0.1. Relief figure of an individual dressed in a kaftan. Nizamabad (south-east of Tehran), Iran, seventh–early eighth century. © Museum für Islamische Kunst, Berlin State Museums. Photo by I. Geske. (Inv. no. I.4591b.)