

IRANIANS UNDER THE SASANIAN RULE VERSUS EARLY ARAB RULE

Dr. Kersey Antia, Jan 16, 2020

The paradigm employed implicitly or explicitly, for the post-Sasanian history of Iran follows the rise of Islam, followed by the golden age of the caliphate and then by decadence, disruption of urban life which reached its zenith during the Mongol invasions. However, Peter Christensen vehemently challenges every aspect of this received wisdom (*The Decline of Iranshahr: Irrigation and Environments in the History of the Middle East, 500 B.C. to A.D. 1500*; translated by Steven Sampson, University of Copenhagen, Museum Tusulanum Press, 1993).

Christensen does not perceive the concept of “decline” in terms of the fortunes of empires and local states but primarily in terms of the basic index of agricultural production as it is apparently the most significant economic activity in most pre-industrial societies. His findings relegate political history to a subsidiary, almost negligible role. They indicate that the decline in his region occurred due to environment factors, natural disasters, diseases or mismanagement of resources rather than due to grand political and cultural upheavals such as wars, invasions and the increasing “bedouinization” of society.

Expanding on the findings of R. McCormick Adams in his book, *Land Behind Baghdad*, Christensen reveals that agricultural productivity in Iraq reached its zenith in the late Sasanian period. In the seventh century however, the complex and sensitive hydraulic system built by the Sasanians was ruined by wars which led to flooding, which in turn led to decimation of the population necessary for maintaining it, it never recovering fully since.

Moreover, Christensen refutes the notion of an Islamic “green revolution” in Iranshahr advanced by A.M. Watson and maintains that no significant technological change or no new crops were brought on by the Arabs and they did little to repair the agricultural infrastructure of canals.

Due to the Caliphs diverting funds to meet expenses of military excursions and imposing extremely heavy taxes, they actually contributed to their further deterioration. For the flood plains of Iraq therefore, the early Islamic era “did not usher in an era of growth and prosperity, but one of contraction and decline” (p. 73). However the crisis in other areas of Iran was not extensive as the Sasanians had stimulated settlement and economic development there also.

Christensen therefore concludes it is difficult to see the Arab conquests and rise of Islam as as a key event. He attributes the golden age of Iranshahr to the Sasanian period and the silver age not to the Abbasids but to the era of the regional dynasties.

As the well-known Iranist, Elton L. Daniel concludes his review of Christensen's book, "It provides a welcome and long overdue corrective to the pro-caliph and Iraq centered bias so pervasive in both textual sources and the traditional accounts of early Islamic History" (*Journal of the American Oriental Society* 116.2, 1996, p.338). It is thus difficult to hold that the Iranians felt any relief or progress under the early Arab rule. Rather, Christensen's painstaking research clearly shows that they were better off under the Sasanians.