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Fluffing peacock feathers

Cotton, Climate and Camels In early Islamic Iran: A Moment in World History, by Richard Bullet, New York: Columbia University Press, 2009. PP22

"The rise and fall of bourgeois Iranian society does not feature in anyone's narrative of world history," notes Richard Bullet, author of *Cotton, Climate and Camels In early Islamic Iran*. "Should the extraordinary flourishing of Iran's highland plateau be ascribed to the Arabs who invaded or to the native Iranians? To Muslims exclusively or to the society as a whole? Is the cultural dynamism to be read only in Arabic texts or in Persian writings as well? Only books by Muslims or also in the writings of Zoroastrians, Christians and Jews?" Pertinent questions, indeed.



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Two non-Persian peoples have profoundly shaped the modern national identity and medieval economic fortunes of Iran -- the Arabs and the Turks. The Arabs brought with them Islam and cotton, the Turks the two-humped camels more suited to the Iranian topography and climate.

The legendary Barham Gur astride a dromedary on Seljuk pottery and on two-humped camel on Sasanid silver plate

Today, Iran is an Islamic Republic, and ethnic Turks constitute the second largest group in the country after the Persians. Like the Arabs, Turks have intermingled and inter-married extensively with the Persians, so that a clear ethnic distinction is often blurred and profusely confusing.

"The practice of historians has long been to subordinate the story of Iran in this time period to the story of Islam," Bullet observes. Be that as it may, what is less acknowledged is that the Arabs who overran Iran instituted a farming system that was set up to fail. The result was that Iran became a Muslim nation, but was never Arabised in the sense that Syria, Iraq, Egypt or even Algeria and Sudan were. The author contends that the introduction of cotton by Arab settlers and merchants from Yemen, even though initially a rather profitable enterprise, ultimately led to soil erosion which coincided with, or precipitated, a considerable cooling of the climate, drawing thousands of Turkish nomadic tribesmen into the country from Central Asia. The Turks came with their two-humped camels and hybrids that replaced the dromedaries introduced by Arabs. To bring such quaint neatness to Iran's medieval history is not entirely an egregious fabrication I suspect.

This is an analysis not of the roots of the Islamic Revolution of Iran, nor of the wonders of the fabulous *Taxt-e-Tavus*, the Peacock Throne. And neither is it a study about the exotic Iran many Western Orientalists have in mind. It is about how Iran became a Muslim nation, about how the Arabs -- many from Yemen -- introduced a new crop, cotton, that was to become king of the Iranian medieval economy, and about how climate change killed "King Cotton", and ushered in the invading hordes

of Turkish tribes from Central Asia with their peculiar camels, the hardy two-humped beasts of burden and a host of hybrids.

Nader Shah Afshari of Persia invaded the Mughal Empire of India in 1738. A year later he returned triumphantly to Persia with his chief trophy, the Peacock Throne, featuring two exquisitely chiselled birds standing behind a *takhteh*, bed or platform, their tails fluffed out and inlaid with sapphires, emeralds, rubies, diamonds and pearls. He was re-enacting the ancient Sassanid flair for luxury that the Arabs temporarily expunged from Iranian culture.

The austere Arabs despised the ostentatious extravagance of the Sassanid aristocracy they toppled. The stoical Muslim zealots of Arabia abhorred silk, favoured by the Sassanid elite. The newcomers preferred cotton. But as the fortunes of cotton dwindled primarily because of soil erosion and climate change, so the Persians reverted to their ancient conspicuous fashion of consumption. The ancient Silk Road flourished once again and such flamboyance heralded the triumphant return of the Peacock Throne.

But as this, the best historiography of the drama elucidates in highly readable prose, long before that triumphal return to the capricious tastes of the pre-Islamic Persians, the Arabs themselves had become infatuated with Persian decadence. And no more so than in Baghdad -- the dreamlike capital of the Abbasid Arab overlords of a sprawling, predominantly non-Arab domain. The question is: where the Abbasids actually Arabs, or where they Arabised Persians?

"The militant movement that overthrew the unimpeachably Arab caliphal dynasty of the Umayyads in 750/108 came from Iranian territory and engaged many Iranian converts to Islam in both its leadership and its soldiery. Yet it is represented primarily as a turning point in the history of Islam."

The authentic and resplendent Persian traditions were irresistible, though -- even to the puritanical Arabs. "The Abbasid dynasty that was the beneficiary of this movement gradually adopted many of the ceremonial, administrative, and cultural practices of the Iranian Sassanid regime that had succumbed to the Arab invaders a century earlier. Yet this is most often seen as symptomatic of Islam's capacity for absorbing and breathing new life into the traditions of its diverse peoples." Islam, Iranian-style, triumphed and the fortunes of cotton waned.

Silk, the Sassanid brocade of the pre-Islamic Iranian and Arab aristocracy made a triumphant comeback. Shahrezade's Thousand and One Nights were enacted in Baghdad, but they were as much Persian as they were of the Arabs.

Persians played politics in the Caliphate of the Arabs. Indeed some would argue that the Abbasid Empire was only Arab in name, but was essentially Persian in accoutrement and substance. The Persians upstaged the Arab conquerors, but only after accepting the religion and writing system of the Arabs. Yet Iran remained Persian, Mesopotamia predominantly Arab.

"The personalities, forces and controversies that shaped the developing institutions of the Islamic religion did not just play out on the Baghdad stage, but also in burgeoning cities throughout Iran."

The author highlights "an era that is commonly given short shrift by historians." However, as he so eloquently observes "even though a change in climate brought an end to Iran's agricultural prosperity and exuberant urban society, the land itself was left with a memory and a template of urban life that served as a base for revival in later and more propitious times."

Bullet's book is a captivating investigation of how Arabs profoundly influenced Iran's national identity, primarily through Islam, but also because of the cultivation of cotton. There was, however, no special Arab strategy for the conquering of Iran. "When the Arab invasions brought the Sassanid Empire to an end, the invaders had no particular plan for what would come next."

However, the Arabs soon realised the economic potential of strategically- located Iran. "The fact that the Arab armies campaigned as far east as Kyrgyzstan, more than 2000 miles from their desert homeland, while elsewhere stabilising their borders much closer to familiar territory indicates that the new rulers fully understood the importance of the Silk Road trade."

And, to compare with the stark wilderness of Arabia, the arable areas of the Iranian piedmont were gardens of Eden. "In Qom, one of the smaller Arab settlements, the question of how to adapt life in Iran found an answer that seems to have reflected conditions in the piedmont districts more generally. Looking for a place to invest their money (my apologies for the anachronistic modern terminology) , certain Arab entrepreneurs, almost certainly Yemeni by origin, hit on the idea of digging artificial irrigation waterways or *qanats* and creating new villages devoted to the cultivation of cotton."

The Arabs were better acclimatised to Iran's scorching summers than some earlier invaders such as Alexander the Great. True, but here again the author is particularly perceptive in two critically important respects. And the two are inextricably intertwined. First, is the fact that the distinctions between Arab and Persian in the medieval Muslim world were not as pronounced as it is today. "Specialists on matters Arabian frequently forgot to mention how many of the most prominent authors of medieval works in Arabic grew up in Persian-speaking homes." Second, and no less poignant is the realisation that the Persian capital city in pre-Islamic Iran was often located not in the Iranian Plateau, but in Mesopotamia -- present-day Iraq.

"Comprehensive histories of Iran through the ages lavish attention on a series of pre-Islamic empires: Achaemenids, Seleucids, Parthians and Sassanids, But, in every one of these instances, the capital province of the empire was Mesopotamia, usually around the Baghdad area." In other words, the vicinity of the contemporary Iraqi capital occupied the pride of place in ancient Persian empires, and hence cultures, that say ancient Memphis occupied in ancient Egypt.

Now that is a telling revelation. It explains simultaneously how and why the Persians succumbed relatively smoothly to the Muslim culture imparted by the Arabs who had

an ancient ethnic affinity with the peoples of Mesopotamia, and why the geographical proximity of the Arabs to the Persians of Mesopotamia facilitated the spread of Islam into Iran.

Still, the transition from the complex mishmash of Nestorian Christianity and Zoroastrianism of pre-Islamic Iran to Islam was not entirely unrelenting. "In two important areas of daily urban life, clothing styles and dining styles (the different vessel shapes surely imply different dinner menus) there was a clear clash between a Sassanid visual aesthetic and an Islamic visual aesthetic. As the politically dominant minority, Arabs and Muslim converts sought to assert their place in the public arena through visual symbolism. For Muslims to preserve with their distinctive look they had to institute changes in production, marketing and technology."

It shouldn't have worked, but it did. And, Bullet's book explores precisely why and how. "In Sassanid times cotton farming and cotton cloth had been virtually unknown in the plateau region, although it had already been introduced into Central Asia on a fairly minor scale through contacts with India."

The luxuries the Sassanid aristocracy once loved were gone. The Iranians, too, changed, but not beyond recognition. The Iranian society became more egalitarian, at least in the sartorial sense. And, even the tastes of the rulers became less conspicuously lavish. Decadence was frowned upon.

When the ancient Persian ways blazed back into life, the Arabs had already succumbed to the temptations of the corruption of courtly Sassanid lifestyles. "By the ninth/third century cotton was already developing into the economic mainstay of an Arab-Muslim society that no longer occupied itself primarily with military operations."

The author notes the great stylistic and technical differences between pre-Islamic Sassanid and Islamic ceramics in Iran. But as this book makes abundantly clear, the real impetus of the Arab invasion of Iran was the amalgamation of Arab and Persian cultures under the pennant of Islam.

"Despite the silken luxury of the caliphal court, in Iran Islam meant cotton, and cotton meant Islam." To this day, the clerics who rule the Islamic Republic wrap themselves in the simple, muted colours of the Islamic dress code. The temporal rulers of Iran, however, fancied the more flamboyant opulence of their Sassanid ancestors.

Silk became synonymous with sin. "At the same time cotton acquired a strong doctrinal association with Islam."

The introduction of the new religion was tantamount to a revolution in the mode of production, and a profound change in consumption patterns.

"To dress, eat, and ornament their homes in the Muslim style, the Arabs and Iranian converts of the ninth/third and, to a lesser degree, tenth/ fourth centuries both fostered and patronised new forms of agricultural and industrial production. In the process they transformed the Iranian highlands from a rural land of autarkic villages traversed by luxury trade routes from China to a land of burgeoning cities producing

cloth and high quality ceramics for local consumption and export. The profits of trade financed the development of a distinctively Islamic urban society."

The onus was on the peasants of the Iranian Plateau to eschew the excesses of their feudal overlords and adopt the more sober fashions of Islam. "In Iran there is a strong likelihood that the entrepreneurs who created new villages for growing cotton saw their own villagers as potential customers."

An explicit connection developed between Islam and textile preferences. Wearing cotton fabrics was a sartorial statement that indicated piety and modesty. "Sassanid-era silk brocades remained popular among the elite strata of the majority non-Muslim population. Silk also came into fashion among the Muslim civil elite, particularly in Baghdad."

Cotton, the staid and subdued, yet sober and sublime textile of Islam represented the no-nonsense Islamic ideal. Silk suddenly became the hallmark of the craven and unmanly. Silk metamorphosed into the temptress of textiles.

And thus, Muslim Arabs and Arabised Persians in Iran popularised anti-silk, pro-cotton teachings. "Some of these prescriptive hadith they traced directly to Mohamed and others to early Arab responses to encounters with the defeated Sassanid elite."

So enough of the cotton and the conundrum of bankrupt agricultural practices. Let us now turn to climate change and camels. Here the author's story veers sharply from Arabs to Turks. Like the Persians, the Turks, too, adopted Islam. But there was a perceptible difference in perspective between Persian and Turk. Prissy Persian aristocrats adorned in silk were the very antithesis of the hardy nomadic Turks draped in the shaggy hides and skins of the animals they tended in the harsh environments they hailed from. Here the author turns the twists of Iranian history as one darn textile after another into a fantastic tale, a coherent narrative of climatic and climacteric change.

Butler provides a sharper contemporary edge to readings in the history of Muslim Iran. With the Copenhagen Climate Summit came a clearer conception of the close connection between human activity, especially in the economic sphere, and climate change. Politics, too, comes into play.

"The questions climate historians ask go beyond establishing local weather facts. Given the globally interconnected character of certain weather cycles, they want to know how broadly the effects of the Medieval Warm Period and Little Ice Age were felt. If they could be conclusively shown to be global, or even hemisphere-wide, such a finding would bear on the general hypothesis that human activities have a recurrent history of affecting world climate. The human search for such broad interconnections has led climatologists to combine and weigh data of many different sorts from many different areas, and this has introduced complexity into what began as local, and seemingly clear-cut historical indications of warmer times giving way to colder times, and vice-versa," the author contends. Butler believes that the politics of climate change was as pertinent in medieval Iran as it is in the contemporary international political arena.

"Our approach here departs from this analytical trend. It is local, at least in comparison with hemisphere-wide projections, and it concerns a single weather system, the Siberian High, and its effect on the modern Middle East. It also relies on a single scientific indicator, Mongolian tree rings." Butler corroborates his arguments with innovative quantitative research and recent scientific discoveries. But getting to the heart of the author's arguments in "Chapter Three: The Big Chill" is a daunting task for the unscientifically minded.

"Yet the broad Medieval Warm Period hypothesis remains important for us because our proposal that there was a century of persistent cold winters in at least some regions affected by the Siberian High system apparently contradicts it. In Europe, evidence for a Medieval Warm Period is diverse and persuasive. Purely scientific indications aside, ordinary historians put great store on textual evidence of Viking settlement in Iceland and Newfoundland, monastic wine production in England, and the expansion of grain farming in Estonia."

"What has come into question with the accumulation of data from other parts of the world, and with an ever-greater diversity and sophistication of scientific indicators, has been how widespread this European warm period was."

The welding together of such information mirrors the primary objectives of Butler's project. He rarely meanders or digresses. Whether this reasoning provides a blueprint for Iran's history is debatable.

"The consensus view is that Iran in the ninth/ third century saw a rapid growth of Islam but was very far from being a predominantly Muslim country until the very end of the century. Even then, large Zoroastrian populations persisted in some rural areas."

The challenge to the historian is to write about Iran's Islamicisation in its spirit, which is precisely what Butler has done. He has, however, focussed on tangible evidence. Take the humble camel, for instance. One kind of camel came to Iran with the Arabs. Another beast adapted to cooler climes arrived with the Turks. The medieval Arab historian Al-Jahiz summarised the breeding as follows: "When [male] two-humped camels (Al-Fawalij) are bred with [female] Arab camels ([Al-lbil, Al-lrab]), you get these noble [Karima] bukhts and jammazas that combine the virtues of the Arab with the virtues of the bukht [here meaning two-humped camels]. For the conformation of these two species does not get any nobler, more glorious, more pleasing, or more costly. But when you mate the Arab stallions with the females of the bukht [apparently meaning the first generation hybrid], you get the buhwaniya and [sarsaraniya] camels. In appearance they are uglier than their two parents and in tightness of conformation [asran] more crabbed [ashadda]. Camels, unlike humans, are not subjected to hybrid acculturation.

"According to a number of sources, when a hybrid was bred with either a one-humped or two-humped mate, the configuration of the offspring, at least with respect to the number of humps, reverted to that of the non-hybrid parent. And when hybrids were mated with each other, the offspring were not viable. For this reason, hybrids were never part of breeding herds," Bullet explains.

The Turks were traders, travellers who traversed a vast stretch of territory from the Balkans to the western reaches of China, from Russia to India. The Ottoman Turks even got as far as North Africa and down the Red Sea from Arabia into the Horn of Africa. Iran was the geographical centre of their exploits. And yet ironically Iran, in spite of the influx of great hordes of Turks over the centuries remained essentially Persian in orientation and political outlook.

And why so? The answer lies in the occupational preferences of the Turkish nomadic immigrants and their Persian agrarian hosts.

"The abundance of trade lent an aura of glittering prosperity to an empire whose agricultural sector was suffering badly." The Turks who chose to settle down and cultivate the land soon adopted the lifestyle, language and religion of the indigenes. Modern Iran was in the making.

Reviewed by Gamal Nkrumah



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