

The Last Battle: The Dēnkard and the Post-Zoroastrian World

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The Dēnkard is a compendium of Zoroastrian knowledge compiled in the ninth century CE.¹ The Dēnkard was written in what was the Sasanian Empire, an empire whose government constructed a primordial Zoroastrian past based on the Avesta and the mythical Aryan homeland², written in this paper as Ērānšahr to properly reflect the Middle Persian, two hundred years after the early Islamic conquests and Roman-Sasanian War of the Seventh Century CE. Because of the time in which the Dēnkard was produced, a number of interesting things occur in the text that demonstrate an attempt by the compilers of this text to erect strong borders around Zoroastrians who did not convert when in a time when most Zoroastrians were converting to Islam, the religion of the Arab conquerors of Ērānšahr.³ In a time of religious decay, in other words, the Zoroastrians of former Ērānšahr struggled to define what constituted being a member of the good religion entailed. The Dēnkard is a structure of habitus that kept alive the memory of the Sasanians defeat by the Romans in a holy war in the seventh century CE and the Arab conquests and it formed a communal bonding agent – an agent that kept together the Zoroastrian community in Abbasid Caliphate in a time of decline.⁴

¹ Farhang Mehr, *The Zoroastrian Tradition: An Introduction to the Ancient Wisdom of Zarathustra* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, Inc., 2003), 13.

² See Touraj Daryaee, "National History or Keyanid History?: The Nature of Sassanid Zoroastrian Historiography," *Iranian Studies* 28, no. ¾ (Summer-Autumn, 1995): 134-35, 137-41; Touraj Daryaee, "Kingship in Early Sasanian Iran," in *The Sasanian Era: The Idea of Iran, Volume III* ed. Vesta Sarkhosh and Sarah Stewart (London: I.B. Taurus, 2008), 62; Touraj Daryaee, "The Construction of the Past in Late Antique Persia," *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 55, H. 4 (2006): 496-503.

³ For a memory of the past being shaped by the present, see Flora A. Keshgegian, "Finding a Place Past Night: Armenian Genocidal Memory in Diaspora," in *Religion, Violence, Memory and Place* ed. Oren Baruch Stier and J. Shawn Landres (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), 102; Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* vol. 1 trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1983), 18-9.

⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 81-7; Jan Assmann *Religion and Cultural Memory* trans. Rodney Livingstone (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 5; Fredrik Barth, "Boundaries and Connections," in *Signifying Identities: Anthropological Perspectives on Boundaries and Contested Values*, edited by Anthony P. Cohen (New York: Routledge, 2000), 23-4; Margaret



What is more, the memory of the Christian and Muslims waging holy war against Zoroastrianism produced strains of anxiety in the *Dēnkard*, but also as a power Zoroastrians would use when they had their revenge on their tormentors at the end of time.⁵ Thus the religious borders of the text were created in stark terms that did not allow for the few Zoroastrians who remained to cross religious boundaries.⁶ The Zoroastrians knew who they were, even as apostasy decimated their numbers.

Besides apostasy from Zoroastrianism, there is another reason why ninth-century CE Zoroastrians strove to erect strict boundaries around themselves: according to Zoroastrian dogma, the forces of Ohrmazd would defeat Ahriman, but Zoroastrians must adhere to Zoroastrian rituals and custom and think good thoughts and performed good deeds since Zoroastrians were fighting along the forces of the Light against the Dark One.⁷ Moreover, Sasanian people who remained with the good religion after Ērānšahr suffered defeat at the hands of the Romans and Arabs while their compatriots converted to Islam would have the last laugh. They would benefit from the final renovation after Ohrmazd's defeat of Ahriman after having suffered through the disastrous seventh century CE.

After the seventh century CE, Ērānšahr was in shambles. The Romans defeated the Sasanians, and Sasanians suffered a tremendous loss of life during the course of the war.⁸ Soon after, the Arab armies united under the banner of Islam began their assault on the Roman Empire and Ērānšahr. After the Arabs defeated the Sasanians, the last Sasanian emperor Yazdgird III (r. 632 CE – 651) became a beggar king, roaming from province to province of his former empire in an

Somers, "The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A Relational and Network Approach," *Theory and Society* 23, no. 5 (October 1994): 614, 618-19.

⁵ For power and memory, see Roger Friedland and Richard D. Hect, "The Powers of Place," in *Religion, Violence, Memory and Place* ed. Oren Baruch Stier and J. Shawn Landres (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), 30.

⁶ For the construction of static boundaries in a multiethnic world, see Fredrik Barth, "Introduction," in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, ed. Fredrick Barth (Boston, MA: Waveland Press, 1969), 16-7, 19, 32-3; Barth, "Boundaries and Connections," 21; Somers, "Narrative Construction of Identity," 621.

⁷ See, for instance, *Dēnkard: Acts of Religion* 3.49, 3.192 ed. and trans. Peshotun Dastoor Behramjee Sanjana, (Bombay: D. Ardeshir & Co., 1874); Aturpāt-I Ēmētān, *The Wisdom of the Sasanian Sages (Dēnkard VI)* 6.77 trans. Shaul Shaked (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1979); Mehr, *The Zoroastrian Tradition*, 95-6; James Howard-Johnston, "The Two Great Powers: A Comparison," in *East Rome, Sasanian Persia, and the End of Antiquity* (Aldershot: Variorum, 2006), 226; Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (London: Routledge, 1987), 20; Jes P. Asmusen, "Some Remarks on Sasanian Demonology," in *Hommage Universel* (Leiden: E.J. Brill), 237-38.

⁸ A point to which I shall return.

attempt to rally men to his cause. He even went to the Chinese for military support.⁹ In the end, Yazdgird III was murdered and thus ended the Sasanian dynasty.

Because of these defeats, the Sasanians went into shock and this began to culturally decline. When I say culturally decline, I do not mean that after the Arab conquest Sasanian culture disappeared, although the Arab invasion resulted in many destroyed Sasanian libraries;¹⁰ nor am I saying that as Sasanians converted to Islam that Sasanian culture disappeared nor the Sasanians allowed the Arabs to invade Ērānšahr without putting up resistance.¹¹ I say culturally decline to denote that Zoroastrians interpreted apostates to Islam as damaging Sasanian culture. The reality of the situation is that Zoroastrian converts to Islam were in fact nominal Muslims who still retained strong ties to the Sasanian and Zoroastrian community. In the eyes of Zoroastrians who did not convert to Islam, however, these conversions were further proof that the world was broken, and that each person who left Zoroastrianism were abandoning the fight against Ahriman, as noted earlier. Every person who converted from Zoroastrianism was aiding Ahriman's fight against Ohrmazd, in other words.

Zoroastrianism was a religion that was connected to the divine, and was imbued with intelligence, and was devoted to the creator Ohrmazd while the "bad religion" (i.e. non-Zoroastrian religion) was allied with Ahriman.¹² Non-Zoroastrian religions were filled with evil and kept people in torment to demons and praised the demons with sorcery. The author of the Dēnkard considered Zoroastrianism to be the true religion that was aligned with Ohrmazd, while a false religion was aligned with demons and condemned men who followed it to hell without the chance of redemption¹³.

Throughout the Dēnkard we see that people who did not follow Zoroastrianism were seriously misguided. Take for instance how other religions are portrayed in the Dēnkard: the Jewish faith will ultimately harm the world, and one must (as in the case of this example the Sasanian emperor) should stay away from Judaism and strictly adhere to Zoroastrianism.¹⁴ The presence of Judaism even strengthened Ahriman.¹⁵ And then, the authors of the Dēnkard also advised that Zoroastrians should strive to stop the spread of Judaism, Christianity, and Manichaeism in order that these religions do not pollute Zoroastrianism, which in the texts was pointed out as being older than Christianity, the religion of the Romans.¹⁶ These religions, in the minds of the

⁹ Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian Writings in Early Islam* (Princeton: Darwin Press, Inc., 1997), 243; Boyce, *Zoroastrians*, 145.

¹⁰ Mehr, *The Zoroastrian Tradition*, 12.

¹¹ James Howard-Johnston, "State and Society in Late Antique Iran," in *The Sasanian Era: The Idea of Iran, Volume III* ed. Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis and Sarah Stewart (London: I.B. Taurus, 2008), 128-29.

¹² *Dēnkard: Acts of Religion* 3.59 and 3.190.

¹³ *Dēnkard: Acts of Religion* 3.78.

¹⁴ *Dēnkard: Acts of Religion* 3.197.

¹⁵ *Dēnkard: Acts of Religion* 3.198.

¹⁶ *Dēnkard: Acts of Religion* 3.29.

compilers of the Dēnkard, proved to be a threat to Zoroastrianism and the whole world, for those who turned to the false religions because of them not being educated in the correct religion strengthened Ahriman and his battle against Ohrmazd.¹⁷ Additionally, these other religions were also demon worshipping false religions;¹⁸ and it was also only through impurity of religion that demons became manifest.¹⁹ Strength for Ohrmazd to fight against Ahriman came in the form of the existence of as many good Zoroastrians as possible, and people who followed false religions were aiding Ahriman against Ohrmazd.²⁰ Then, perhaps more chillingly in the mind of a ninth-Century Zoroastrian, the followers of a bad religion are in league with Ahriman, the greatest source of evil.²¹

Eternal combat between Ohrmazd and Ahriman is the central tenant of Zoroastrianism in the Dēnkard and each person on earth is expected to be a pious Zoroastrian in order to fight against Ahriman.²² As time marched on after the defeats suffered by the Sasanians in the seventh century CE and more Zoroastrians converted from the religion, language in the Dēnkard became more absolute in regards to the need of good Zoroastrians to fight the Dark One.

The examples listed thus far in this essay thus suggest that only pure Zoroastrianism was strong enough to defeat Ahriman. This assertion is not particularly illuminating when one considers that indeed, the central tenant of Zoroastrianism was the defeat of evil through the worship of Ohrmazd. What is illuminating about this assertion is that the memory of the troubles of the seventh century CE fueled the authors of the Dēnkard to create rigid boundaries between true Zoroastrians and the other, “bad” religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Manichaeism. When we pause to consider what happened in the seventh century CE, we begin to realize that there is a real reason why Zoroastrians in the ninth century CE felt the need to erect borders around themselves and people from the other religions. Zoroastrians living in former Ērānšahr were not experiencing a resurgence of nationalism; they were reacting strongly to their world being shrunk by Islam and the memory of a violent century that decimated the people of Ērānšahr. It is now necessary to survey the events of the seventh century and how they shaped Zoroastrian *mentalité* for the next two centuries. Then, what we discover, is that the memory of trauma indeed made Zoroastrians build rigid borders around themselves, but also this memory also gave

¹⁷ *Wisdom of the Sasanian Sages* 6.C76. 6.12.

¹⁸ *Dēnkard: Acts of Religion* 3.190.

¹⁹ *Le Cinquième Livre du Dēnkard* 5.24.17 trans. Jaleh Amouzgar and Ahmad Tafazzoli (Paris: Association Pour L’Avancement Des Études Iraniennes, 2000).

²⁰ *Dēnkard: Acts of Religion* 3.150.

²¹ *Dēnkard: Acts of Religion* 3.58.

²² Peter Clark, *Zoroastrianism: An Introduction to an Ancient Faith* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 1998), 33, 66-7; Jamsheed K. Chosky, *Purity and Pollution in Zoroastrianism: Triumph over Evil* (Austin: University of Austin Press, 1989), 5-6, 15. For the universal aspects of Zoroastrianism, see Shaul Shaked, “Esoteric Trends in Zoroastrianism,” in *From Zoroastrianism to Islam* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1995), 177; Shaul Shaked, “Some Notes on Ahreman, The Evil Spirit, and his Creation,” in *From Zoroastrianism to Islam* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1995), 230-31; Beate Dignas and Engelbert Winter, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity: Neighbors and Rivals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 213.

the Zoroastrians hope of the eventual reemergence and revival of Zoroastrianism and defeat of Ahriman. But first, let us start at the nadir of Ērānšahr and how that empire suffered through two holy wars, one carried out by Christian Romans and by Muslim Arabs.

The seeds of the Roman-Sasanian War of the Seventh Century CE were planted when the Roman emperor Maurice (r. 582 CE – 602 CE), had aided the Sasanian emperor Xusrō II (r. 590 CE – 628 CE) with military aid when he lost his throne. Then, when Maurice was deposed and executed by Phocas (r. 602 CE – 610 CE), Xusrō II invaded the Roman Empire under the pretext of avenging the man who had helped him regain power.²³ Xusrō II defeated any army sent by Phocas to halt the Sasanian advance and captured Syria and Mesopotamia.²⁴ Then during the conflict, Heraclius (r. 610 CE – 641 CE) rebelled and usurped Phocas from the throne. It was during this stage of the war Xusrō II's army made striking gains against the Romans. The Sasanians managed to capture Jerusalem (and with it the True Cross of Jesus Christ's crucifixion), Amida, Edessa, Egypt, and Anatolia.²⁵ Clearly Xusrō II was almost at the crux of his real desire to wage war against the Romans: the liquidation of the Roman Empire.²⁶

Heraclius, however, managed to consolidate his power, reorganize his army, and invaded Ērānšahr,²⁷ much like how Scipio Africanus invaded Carthage during the Second Punic War. Heraclius' invasion was a violent one, and yet there was an even more violent undercurrent to his invasion of Ērānšahr. Heraclius used the Christian religion as a rallying cry for his men; and he promised his soldiers a heavenly reward for fighting against the Sasanians. Heraclius, in other words, used Christianity as a weapon against the Zoroastrian Sasanians. If we look upon Theophanes the Confessor's account of the Roman-Sasanian War of the Seventh Century, we see that Roman propaganda projected Xusrō II's invasion of the Roman Empire as a holy war on

²³ Christensen, *L'Iran sous les Sassanides*, 447; Daryaei, *Sasanian Persia*, 32; Dignas and Winter, *Rome and Persia*, 43-4; McCullough, *Short History of Syriac Christianity*, 44; Treadgold, *Byzantine State and Society*, 230-2, 236-9; Zeev Rubin, "Eastern Neighbors: Persia and the Sasanian Monarchy (224 – 651)" in *The Cambridge History of the Byzantine Empire c. 500 – 1492* ed. Jonathan Shepard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 154; Touraj Daryaei, *Sasanian Iran (224-651 CE): Portrait on a Late Antique Empire* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, Inc., 2008), 83; Walter E. Kaegi, *Heraclius: Emperor of Byzantium* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 37.

²⁴ Theophanes the Confessor, *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor: Byzantine and Near History* AM6098.293 trans. Cyril Mango and Roger Scott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 422.

²⁵ Christensen, *L'Iran sous les Sassanides*, 448; Daryaei, *Sasanian Persia*, 33; Daryaei, *Sasanian Iran*, 87; Dignas and Winter, *Rome and Persia*, 45; McCullough, *Short History of Syriac Christianity*, 45; Treadgold, *Byzantine State and Society*, 241, 287-9; Kaegi, *Heraclius*, 50-1.

²⁶ This is of course if Theophanes the Confessor *The Chronicle of Theophanes* AM6106.300 is any indication. See also Howard-Johnston, "Two Great Powers," 164; Dignas and Winter, *Rome and Persia*, 45, 116-18.

²⁷ Treadgold, *Byzantine State and Society*, 293-8; Kaegi, *Heraclius*, 153; see *ibid.* 156-75 for the mechanics of the invasion

Christianity: “In this year Herakleios... sent ambassadors to Persia to ask Chosroes for peace, but Chosroes dismissed them again with the words ‘I will not spare you until you renounce the Crucified one, whom you call God, and worship the sun.’”²⁸ This passage demonstrates that Theophanes portrayed the Zoroastrian “holy war” against Christianity. Theophanes then quoted Heraclius speaking to his army “you see... how the enemies of God have trampled upon our land, have laid our cities waste, *have burnt our sanctuaries and have filled with the blood of murder the altars of the bloodless sacrifice; how they defile with their impassioned pleasures our churches.*”²⁹

Roman interpretation of Xusrō II’s invasion of the Roman Empire was undoubtedly one of Zoroastrianism versus Christianity. I doubt the aim of Xusrō II was to annihilate Christianity, since he worked closely with the Nestorian Church in Ērānšahr³⁰ and his favorite wife, Šērīn, was a Christian,³¹ but the Romans portrayed the Zoroastrian Sasanians as trying to destroy Christianity as a way to explain the Sasanians’ gains in the war. Heraclius had little recourse but to use religion as rallying cry for the army, and the results of this were tragic for the Sasanians. After the speech quoted above, Heraclius continued and roused his soldiers by saying “men, my brethren, let us keep in mind the fear of God and fight to avenge the insult done to God. Let us stand bravely against the enemy who have inflicted many terrible things on the Christians... the Lord our God will assist us and destroy the enemy”³² Moreover, Heraclius promised his soldiers that “when God wills it, one man will route a thousand. So let us sacrifice ourselves to God for the salvation of our brothers. May we win the crown of martyrdom so that we may be praised in the future!”³³

As Heraclius and his reinvigorated army slashed and burned their way across Ērānšahr, they were trying to annihilate the Sasanians and their culture as payback for the perceived attempt by the Sasanians to attack Christianity;³⁴ thus the Romans’ invasion of Ērānšahr was violent and

²⁸ Theophanes the Confessor *The Chronicle of Theophanes* AM6109. 301 in Mango and Scott, 433.

²⁹ Theophanes the Confessor *The Chronicle of Theophanes* AM6110.303-4 in Mango and Scott, 436, emphasis added; Kaegi, *Heraclius*, 126.

³⁰ Daryaee, *Sasanian Iran*, 86-7. For Sasanian emperors working with the Nestorian Church, see Michael G. Morony, “Religious Communities in Late Sasanian and Early Muslim Iraq,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 17, no. 2 (May, 1974): 117-18; Sebastian Brock, “Christians in the Sasanian Empire: A Case of Divided Loyalties,” in *Syriac Prospectives on Late Antiquity* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1984), 4-5.

³¹ Daryaee, *Sasanian Iran*, 90.

³² Theophanes the Confessor *The Chronicle of Theophanes* 6114.307, 439.

³³ Theophanes the Confessor *The Chronicle of Theophanes* AM6115.310-1, in Mango and Scott, 442-43; Kaegi, *Heraclius*, 129.

³⁴ Kaegi, *Heraclius*, 127; James Howard-Johnston, “Al-Ṭabarī on the Last War of Antiquity,” in *East Rome, Sasanian Persia, and the End of Antiquity* (Aldershot: Variorum, 2006), 6; James Howard-Johnston, “Heraclius’ Persian Campaigns and the Revival of the East Roman Empire, 622-630,” in *East Rome, Sasanian Persia, and the End of Antiquity* (Aldershot: Variorum, 2006), 5, 16, 39-40.

Zoroastrian fire temples were destroyed. Theophanes related that Heraclius destroyed the city of Thebarmias, including the fire temple in the city.³⁵ Perhaps the biggest blow to Zoroastrians was the sack of the sacred Zoroastrian fire temple Atur Gušnap, where Sasanian emperors would make pilgrimages and ordinary Zoroastrians would make devotions to Ohrmazd, in retaliation for Xusrō II having “stolen” the True Cross.³⁶

While it was shocking to Zoroastrian Sasanian culture to have fire temples destroyed, the memory of the Romans’ violent invasion of Ērānšahr remembered by Zoroastrians in the ninth century CE. As mentioned above, Heraclius and his army burned and destroyed cities during their march across Ērānšahr, but Eutychius of Alexandria took special note of Heraclius’ use of Biblical cultural memory when he encountered people in Ērānšahr. For instance, Heraclius would decapitate Sasanian men, women and children when he encountered them on a road. What is more disturbing, and was thus etched in Zoroastrian memory when they erected the rigid ethnic borders around themselves in the Dēnkard centuries later, was that Heraclius would slash open the bellies of pregnant Sasanian women and dash the fetuses on rock while exclaiming that he was the one who was foretold by David in the Psalms.³⁷ Perhaps the compilers of the Dēnkard had Heraclius’ actions in mind when they wrote, “This is non-Iranian behaviour: a man who smites and robs every one over whom his is victorious.”³⁸ The memory of Heraclius’ violence and the reaction in the Dēnkard was a projection of Zoroastrian ethnic identity; the compilers

³⁵ Theophanes the Confessor *The Chronicle of Theophanes* AM614.308. For the destruction of more fire temples, see Howard-Johnston, “Heraclius’ Persian Campaigns,” 17.

³⁶ Daryaei, *Sasanian Iran*, 87-8; Boyce, *Zoroastrians*, 142; Howard-Johnston, “The Official History of Heraclius’ Persian Campaigns,” in *East Rome, Sasanian Persia, and the End of Antiquity* (Aldershot: Variorum, 2006), 58; James Howard-Johnston, “Pride and Fall: Khusro II and His Regime, 626-628,” in *East Rome, Sasanian Persia, and the End of Antiquity* (Aldershot: Variorum, 2006), 106-7. For Atur Gušnap being a Zoroastrian holy site used by Sasanian emperors and ordinary folk alike, see Boyce, *Zoroastrians*, 124-5; J. Christoph Bürgel, “Zoroastrianism as Viewed in Medieval Islamic Sources,” in *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 207.

³⁷ Thomas Sizgorich, “Sanctified Violence: Monotheist Militancy as the Tie That Bound Christian Rome and Islam,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 77, no. 4 (Dec. 2009): 905. See also Walter E. Kaegi, *Heraclius: Emperor of Byzantium* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 113-14 for Heraclius’ invocations of David before he and his army invaded Ērānšahr.

³⁸ *Wisdom of the Sasanian Sages* 6.256, 101. For the concept of non-Iranian behavior being synonymous with non-Zoroastrians, see Shaul Shaked, “Religion in the late Sasanian Period: Eran, Aneran, and other Religious Designations,” in *The Sasanian Era: The Idea of Iran, Volume III* ed. Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis and Sarah Stewart (London: I.B. Taurus, 2008), 111. For an alternate narrative revealing “alternate values,” see Somers, “Narrative Construction of Identity,” 631.

saw themselves at the receiving end of Heraclius' sword thrusts, and thus a bridge to the past was formed.³⁹

The trauma of the Christian's holy war against, the destruction of Zoroastrian holy sites, and the violence tinged with religious fervor was one reason why, when the *Dēnkard* was compiled, the Zoroastrians were keen on keeping their ethnic borders strong to prevent Zoroastrians from slipping and straying from the good religion. But the traumatic memory of the Roman-Sasanian War was not the only thing that influenced the Sasanians to erect such a rigid boundary. After the Battle of Nineveh (627 CE), the Sasanians returned to the Romans all the lands gained during the conflict. If that was all to the story, then perhaps Zoroastrianism would have continued to exist as a major religion *vis-à-vis* the Christian Roman Empire. There was, however, something that threw the late ancient world in disarray: the coming of Islam and the conquest of Ērānšahr by the Arab Muslims. The Arab Muslim conquest of Ērānšahr precipitated the world in which the *Dēnkard* was produced, a world of Zoroastrians converting to other religions, and this apostasy caused alarm in the minds of Zoroastrians in the ninth century CE. If we look at the sources on the Arab conquest of Ērānšahr, we see that the Arabs stressed certain aspects of the conflict, and these aspects were not lost upon the Sasanians who adhered to the Zoroastrian religion after the fall of Ctesiphon.

The history of Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī demonstrates how Muslim Arabs interpreted the war against the Sasanians in the ninth century CE. In his history, al-Ṭabarī wrote that the Arabs fought against the Sasanians "like a lion who struggles with his prey and attacks time and again" and "the Persians were stricken with awe and fear."⁴⁰ Clearly, according to al-Ṭabarī, the Sasanians were only able to hold back the Arab advance with difficulty, and the Arabs kept pressing forward. In the ninth-century world, in other words, the cultural environment was that Arabs were the lions, the beasts of the jungle, while the Sasanians were the lions' prey, and these lions did not falter in the hunt.

The theme of Arab hunter versus Sasanian prey was repeated once more in al-Ṭabarī's work. In a report to the Sasanian emperor Yazdgird III, the general Rastam described the Arabs as attacking the Sasanians like "a pack of wolves, falling upon unsuspecting shepherds and annihilating them."⁴¹ The tenacity of the Arabs manifested itself as being described as being animal-like, while the Sasanians, no matter what, could not stop the beast that wanted, in the words of an Arab told to Rastam: "Your land, your sons, and your blood, if you refuse to embrace Islam."⁴² This quote suggests that indeed, at least in the minds of the Arabs, spreading Islam is what drove the Arabs to conquer Ērānšahr like lions and wolves. Indeed, the compilers of the *Dēnkard*

³⁹ Roger Friedland and Richard D. Hect, "The Powers of Place," 29; Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* vol. 3 trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1985), 114, 119-21.

⁴⁰ Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī *The History of al-Ṭabarī: An Annotated Translation: Volume XII, The Battle of al-Qādisiyyah and the Conquest of Syria and Palestine* XII.2215 trans. Yohanan Friedman (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), 7.

⁴¹ Al-Ṭabarī *The History of al-Ṭabarī* XII.2247, 43.

⁴² Al-Ṭabarī *The History of al-Ṭabarī* XII.2254, 50.

referenced the Muslim invaders as being merciless.⁴³ The Muslim holy war was more successful than Heraclius' vengeful acts of violence upon the Sasanians. And indeed, the Arabs viewed Heraclius' victory over the Sasanians as the god of Abraham triumphing over filthy polytheism.⁴⁴ The Muslims, at least in the early formation of their communal identity, celebrated the victory of Christianity over Zoroastrianism; thus episodes of violence were linked together when the *Dēnkard* was compiled. Zoroastrians, in other words, were reacting to two cultures that embraced militant piety.⁴⁵ And in the minds of Zoroastrian communal memory, this militant piety was directed towards wiping out the "good religion."

In the seventh book of the *Dēnkard*, for instance, there is reference to the stages of the Islamic invasion, and these references suggest that the compilers of the *Dēnkard* felt that the Arab invasion of Ērānšahr was violent and that Zoroastrianism was under threat. The compilers wrote that during the invasion, the magi could no longer speak the truth about Zoroastrianism and that the sacred fires burning in temples were disturbed.⁴⁶ The Arab invaders were called evil and it was written that they spread misery, pestilence, strife, and demon worship into Ērānšahr.⁴⁷ Based on the violent events of the seventh century CE, it is not hard to see why the compilers of the *Dēnkard* would portray their world in stark terms. But this is not to say that the Sasanians allowed to Muslims to advance unobstructed, as is evidenced by the fierce resistance of the people of Ctesiphon to the Arab siege of the city after the decisive Arab victory at the battle of al-Qādisiyyah (637 CE),⁴⁸ but the Muslims kept pressing their advance through Ērānšahr without pause.⁴⁹

A memory of violence is not the only traumatizing part to Zoroastrian identity in the ninth century CE. It was after the death of Yazdgird III, the Arab conquest was complete, and thus began the decay of Zoroastrianism when Zoroastrians began to convert to Islam whether by force, or what was perhaps more likely, voluntarily in order for Sasanians to align themselves with their Arab conquerors to better their position in life.

Despite Peter Clark's assertion that Muslims persecuted Zoroastrians, the former Sasanian world was not entirely one of forced conversion to Islam and there was toleration of non-Muslims in

⁴³ *Dēnkard: Book Seven: Wonders of Zoroastrianism* 7.7.29 trans E.W. West 7.7.25 in *Sacred Books of the East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1897).

⁴⁴ Al-Ṭabarī *The History of al-Ṭabarī* 5.1006; Nadia Maria El-Cheikh, *Byzantium Viewed by the Arabs* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 26-30; James Howard-Johnston, "Al-Ṭabarī and the Last Great War of Antiquity," in *Al-Ṭabarī: A Medieval Muslim Historian and His Work* ed. Hugh Kennedy (Princeton: Darwin Press, Inc., 2008), 74.

⁴⁵ Thomas Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity: Militant Devotion in Christianity and Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 159-60.

⁴⁶ *Dēnkard* 7.7.32.

⁴⁷ *Dēnkard* 7.7.36.

⁴⁸ Daryaee, *Sasanian Iran*, 96-7; Dignas and Winter, *Rome and Persia*, 48; Jonathan P. Berkeley, *The Formation of Islam: Religion and Society in the Near East, 600-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 73.

⁴⁹ For the advance of the Arabs, see Daryaee, *Sasanian Iran*, 98-101.

the centuries after the conquests,⁵⁰ but the new world order was clearly pro-Muslim. Indeed, while the public use of most fire temples was prohibited, private Zoroastrian worship was still allowed. But the fact remains that Islam became the grease that lubricated the wheels of the Abbasid Caliphate. In order to get ahead in the world, in other words, one had to be Muslim, and that required conversion from Zoroastrianism in order to do so.⁵¹ And the process began even before the conclusion of the Islamic conquest of Ērānšahr, Zoroastrians began to convert to Islam. Most converts in this period were Sasanian prisoners of wars captured in battle, and al-Ṭabarī, if he is to be believed at all, reported that after one battle, 120,000 men converted to Islam.⁵² These conversions only accelerated as time marched on, and more and more Zoroastrians apostatized to Islam and thus we see statements such as the followers of false religions only end up in hell.⁵³

These voluntary conversions were the cause for alarm in the compilers of the Dēnkard. As more people converted from Zoroastrianism to Islam, the loss of followers of the good religion who voluntarily left was the shock that forced Zoroastrians in the ninth century to reevaluate their position in the world. As more and more people converted to Islam, the scenes described by Thomas the bishop of Maraga became commonplace: the fire temple, not used by Zoroastrians because of the dual hits by the prohibition of public Zoroastrian worship and the decline of private worship by ordinary people, was left on the side of the road, decaying while housing only ravens (a sure sign of the Dark One) instead of the eternal fire, lit in honor of Ohrmazd.⁵⁴ Or, what was probably the most common, the fire temples, where people honored Ohrmazd and where Sasanian emperors celebrated their coronation, being converted into mosques, one temple at a time.⁵⁵ This is perhaps the reason why the compilers of the Dēnkard wrote, “the adversary of

⁵⁰ For Clark’s view, see *Zoroastrianism*, 89-90; Mehr, *The Zoroastrian Tradition*, 17. For the alternate view, see especially Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief*, 233; Boyce, *Zoroastrians*, 149-50; Berkeley, *The Formation of Islam*, 91. Indeed, the Muslims during this time were more concerned with combatting Manichaeism, not Zoroastrianism. See Berkeley, *The Formation of Islam*, 32.

⁵¹ For the marginalization of Zoroastrians, see Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 241. For people crossing ethnic borders, see Barth, “Introduction,” 24-5; Barth, “Boundaries and Connections,” 19, 26.

⁵² Al-Ṭabarī *The History of al-Ṭabarī* XII.2264, 60.

⁵³ Dēnkard: Acts of Religion 3.78

⁵⁴ Thomas, Bishop of Maraga 6.6. *The Historia Monastica of Thomas Bishop of Maraga A.D. 840 Volume II* trans. E.A. Wallis Budge (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2003), 599; Morony, “Religious Communities in Late Sasanian and Early Muslim Iraq,” 121-22.

⁵⁵ For the slow process of Muslim authorities confiscating fire temples, see Bürgel, *Zoroastrianism as Viewed in Medieval Islamic Sources*, 203; Berkeley, *The Formation of Islam*, 100-1; Boyce, *Zoroastrians*, 147. For fire temples used as coronation of Sasanian emperors, see Matthew P. Canepa, *Two Eyes of the Earth: Art and Ritual Kingship Between Rome and Sasanian Iran* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2009), 16-7.

religion is bad religion and non-Iranian behavior.”⁵⁶ The compilers were responding to an environment tainted with holy war and conversion by creating strong communal ties within the Zoroastrian community.⁵⁷

Again, if we look to Arab sources we see that the Zoroastrians’ worst fear to be true. Muslim thinkers such as Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal became upset when his students asked him if non-believers were a part of Muḥammad’s community. Ibn Ḥanbal’s reaction that no one should ask this question leads one to believe that indeed, non-believers, especially Christians and Jews and perhaps were in Muḥammad’s community.⁵⁸ The world of Ibn Ḥanbal was one of communal mixing, and thus we can see that indeed, the Zoroastrians were mixing with Muslims during the ninth century CE. Indeed, this example suggests the length Zoroastrians mingled with Muslims. A question was posed to Ibn Ḥanbal concerning Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians who took part in raids against the Christian Roman Empire. Were these people allowed booty? If so, how much? Ibn Ḥanbal replied that these people were allowed only a small share of booty.⁵⁹ Then after Ibn Ḥanbal’s death, it was reported that Muslims, Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians all mourned.⁶⁰ Clearly Zoroastrians were interacting with Muslims in the ninth century CE. While Ibn Ḥanbal was concerned with maintaining religious boundaries, the Zoroastrians reacted with horror since every Zoroastrian who apostatized or interacted with a non-Zoroastrian, then the good religion was deprived of someone to aid in the battle against Ahriman.⁶¹ If we glance at another Zoroastrian text compiled in the ninth century CE, the *Arda Viraf*, the souls of apostates would be sent to hell and be tortured until the renovation.⁶² Then in the eighth book of the *Dēnkard*, the book concerning Zoroastrian religious law, there is a reference to specific modes of action to be taken to erase the “deceptions” of apostates, although we are left wondering what these actions may be.⁶³ The post-Sasanian world of Zoroastrianism is a stark one indeed.

While the memory of trauma coupled with the reality of Zoroastrians converting to Islam had an effect on how the *Dēnkard* was compiled, it is also important to realize that many groups of

⁵⁶ *Wisdom of the Sasanian Sages* 6.246, 97.

⁵⁷ Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory*, 10, 38; see also 24 and 91-100, for the use of traditions and writing as a communal bonding agent; Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* vol. 1, 57-8. For the use of trauma as a communal agent, see Bernard Giesen, *Triumph and Trauma* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2004), 48-54.

⁵⁸ Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief*, 244.

⁵⁹ Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief*, 253.

⁶⁰ Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief*, 245. For more on the blending between Muslim Arab and Zoroastrian cultures, see Hoyland, *Seeing Islam and Others Saw It*, 20.

⁶¹ Shaked, “Esoteric Trends in Zoroastrianism,” 190. See Barth, “Introduction,” 20 for two ethnic groups competing for the same niche.

⁶² *Arda Viraf* 36.5 and 47.1 trans. Martin Huag *Sacred Books and Literature of the East, Volume II: Ancient Persia* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1917). For supernatural reward and punishment before the renovation, see Clark, *Zoroastrianism*, 64.

⁶³ *Dēnkard: Book Eight: Contents of the Nasks (Ancient Canon of Zoroastrianism)* 8.5.58 trans E.W. West 8.5.58 in *Sacred Books of the East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1897), 31.



people who undergo traumatic events tend to refashion the trauma and manufacture triumph from it. Zoroastrians in the ninth century CE are not different; in the Dēnkard, in keeping with the Zoroastrian theme of eschatology and the last battle with Ahriman, the Islamic invasion and the apostasy, war, discord, misery, demon worship, and other base behaviors brought with it was all part of Ohrmazd's plan against Ahriman.⁶⁴ The Millennium of Zoroaster was to end with a cataclysmic event (the Islamic invasion) that foreshadowed marvelous things to come during the renovation of mankind when Ohrmazd, with help of pious Zoroastrians, will destroy Ahriman,⁶⁵ and that the emperors of Iran would one day convert the Arabs to Zoroastrianism.⁶⁶ What is important here is that after the terrible events of the seventh century CE and living under Islamic rule characterized by Zoroastrians converting to Islam, the world will become a heavenly place and all of Ohrmazd's devotees will be bestowed with purity and power.⁶⁷ This purity and power enables Zoroastrians to march triumphantly, destroying all the wicked people and followers of false religion.⁶⁸ It is during this last battle between good and evil when the Zoroastrians will have the power, since they will be none to "smite [them], and none are smiting them."⁶⁹ And it is Ohrmazd who made the renovation and will allow Zoroastrians to smite because he heard the pleas of his devotees for the renovation.⁷⁰

All the horrors and pain of the memory of the Roman and Arab invasions of Ērānšahr were poured into the Dēnkard, and this memory was like a "phantom limb," still agitating victim long after the separation of the limb.⁷¹ An act of remembering and the recitation of a memory is an act of not forgetting;⁷² and the stories of Heraclius mutilating pregnant Sasanian women and the Christians' holy war against Zoroastrianism and the destruction of Atur Gušnap and the Arabs' relentless assault and their holy war against Zoroastrianism were all indelible and emotional visions seared in the Zoroastrians' cultural memory.⁷³ Indeed, these memories were violent, but many cultural memories are memories of violence.⁷⁴ Despite this memory of violence, Zoroastrians felt that they would have the last laugh and would one day would smite the unbelievers, just as they smote and converted Zoroastrians. According to Pierre Bourdieu, this mechanism is a habitus formed to cope with changing circumstances, although it might not have

⁶⁴ Dēnkard 7.8.1, 7.8.5, 7.8.19; Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 27, 326-27.

⁶⁵ Dēnkard 7.11.7; Clark, 73-5; Chosky, *Purity and Pollution*, 129-31.

⁶⁶ Dēnkard: Acts of Religion 3.176.

⁶⁷ Clark, *Zoroastrianism*, 29, 71-2.

⁶⁸ Dēnkard 7.11.8.

⁶⁹ Dēnkard 7.11.9 in West, 40.

⁷⁰ Dēnkard 7.11.11. Moreover there is a Middle Persian poem that also hints at the rise of Zoroastrians after the Arab invasion, see Daryaei, *Sasanian Iran*, 103-4.

⁷¹ Friedland and Hect, "The Powers of Place," 32-4.

⁷² Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory*, 29, 38-9; Giesen, *Triumph and Trauma*, 55-6.

⁷³ Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory*, 3, 7; Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, 10.

⁷⁴ Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory*, 88-9; Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* vol.3, 188.

been an explicit strategy of the compilers of the Dēnkard.⁷⁵ Although, the compilers of the Dēnkard did not explicitly reference Islam in their works (they instead criticized the Jews and Christians and other non-Zoroastrian religions due to ninth-century political realities, but really the Arabs were their target⁷⁶), they still fought like hell to erect borders around a shrinking Zoroastrian world.⁷⁷ The memory of trauma in Zoroastrian cultural memory was also one of triumph over the evils of the world, and as stated by Paul Ricoeur, “there are crimes that must not be forgotten, victims whose suffering cries less for vengeance than for narration.”⁷⁸ The narrative of the seventh century CE and the promise that the Zoroastrians will have revenge was perhaps more comforting to Zoroastrians in the ninth century CE than any actual acts of vengeance.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 72-3, 76. See also Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* vol. 1, 11, 81, 144, 150-2.

⁷⁶ Berkeley, *The Formation of Islam*, 173; Shaked, “Religion in the late Sasanian Period,” 105.

⁷⁷ For the security an ethnic identity can provide a group under siege, see Barth, “Introduction,” 36-7.

⁷⁸ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* vol. 3, 189.

⁷⁹ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* vol. 1, 44, 49-50.