

# TWO CENTURIES *of* SILENCE

**Abdolhossein Zarinkoob**



**translated by:**

**AVID KAMGAR**

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After Two Hundred Years  
A Panorama

### **Picture on the cover**

**Tagh-e Kasra** also called **Eyvan-e Madā'in** (Khosro's Gallery) is an Iranian monument from the Sasanian era—built in 540 CE— presently located in Iraq. It is the only visible remaining structure of the ancient city of Ctesiphon/Tisfun.

The 37 meter (121 feet) high archway, is the largest single-span vault of unreinforced brickwork in the world.

By Unknown: United States Library of Congress, prints and photographs

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=2281009>

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**To my mother, Nezhat Rahnema, and the memory of my father,  
Mehdi Kamgar-Parsi**

## TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

I arrived at the Dulles airport, Washington, DC, in September 1966, to begin my graduate studies at the University of Maryland. It was exactly half a century ago, a time when Iran was scarcely known in the States, or mentioned in its media. And on the rare occasions that it was, the news focused on Iran's oil, carpets, cats, or gossiped about the Shah and his family. Then, most Americans believed Iranians were Arabs.

Today—50 years later—not a day goes by that we do not hear something about Iran, albeit mostly negative. And although by now most people know that Iranians are not Arabs, Iran and Iranians remain in most part an enigma.

Of course it is not easy to understand a nation so remote and so different by looking at it through the news media's smeared glass. Some may know about Persia's glorious past, about its ancient great kings, Kurosh and Dariush, or about the Sasanian Empire, but it is difficult to make a connection between the great Persian Empire and the emerging country that is now. In between there is fourteen centuries of history when much happened—some fifteen different dynasties ruled Iran, the country fought many different aggressors, it occupied and was occupied, it was conquered, dismembered, and came back together many times as a sovereign country—among which the most astonishing and momentous were the two centuries immediately following the Arab/Muslim conquest of Iran. I like to quote Goethe who in his famous *West-östlicher Divan* [West-Eastern Divan] wrote:

*“When we turn our attention to a peaceful, civilized people, the Persians, we must—since it was actually their poetry that inspired this work—go back to the earliest period to be able to understand more recent times. It will always seem strange to the historians that no matter how many times a country has been conquered, subjugated and even destroyed by enemies, there is always a certain national core*

*preserved in its character, and before you know it, there re-emerges a long-familiar native phenomenon... .”*

This book is the saga of 200 years of struggle by Iranians in order to free themselves from the yoke of Muslim Arabs—elegantly and passionately told by Professor Zarinkoob. For its readers, this book will hopefully bring a little more grasp of Iranians and their culture and what forms the foundation of today’s Iran. The book begins by elucidating the key reasons for the success of Muslim Arabs in their assault on Iran; a fact that was not written in the stars, nor was it an act of God. One critical element in the Arab victory was the weakness of both the Sasanian and Byzantine empires, at the time, caused by the wars they had waged against each other in the past decades. But there were other factors—within Iran’s government and society—that brought about the defeat.

The Sasanian Empire (Ērānshahr in Pahlavi language/Middle Persian: from 224 to 651 CE), was the last Iranian empire before the rise of Islam. It succeeded the Ashkanian (Parthian) Empire, and established an empire roughly within the borders achieved by the Hakhmaneshian (Achaemenids). Iran was respected as a leading world power alongside its neighbor and adversary the Roman Byzantine Empire, for over 400 years. At its greatest extent, the Sasanian Empire encompassed all of today’s Iran, Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Lebanon Jordan, Israel, Egypt, Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Dagestan, South Ossetia, Abkazia, large parts of Turkey, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Yemen, Bahrain, Kuwait, and other Persian Gulf States.

During the Sasanian period not only the Persian culture impacted the Roman culture considerably, but its influence reached as far as Western Europe, Africa, China and India, and played a prominent role in the formation of both European and Asian medieval art. And then much of what later became known as Islamic culture in art, architecture, music as well as math, medicine, sciences and other subject matters was the transfer from the Sasanians to the Muslim world, through the efforts of Iranians.



Sadly, the rise of Muslim Arabs in mid-7<sup>th</sup> century came at a time when Persia had exhausted its human and material resources, due to decades of warfare. Already in late 6<sup>th</sup>-century, the Sasanian reign, in spite of its apparent majesty and splendor, was on a path to decline and chaos. At the end of the Khosro I period, the army was disobedient, the clergy corrupt, and the country unstable. The corruption had its roots in the power of the Zoroastrian priests. Dispersion and disagreement in the opinions and choices were becoming visible, and the clergy were awash in hypocrisy, bigotry, lies, and bribery.

Mazdak, and before him Mani, tried to bring a transformation to the spiritual and religious state of affairs but did not achieve their goals. Mazdak faced resistance from the clergy and opposition by the army, which brought about revolt and destruction. Khosro I's prudence and decisiveness—which came with extraordinary harshness—suppressed this revolt on the surface, but could not uproot this injustice and corruption, and with his death, in 579, the clergy and the army resumed their treasonous acts.

His successor's, Hormozd's reign was cut short by opposition from the clergy and the army. And the excessive pleasure seeking of the next heir, Khosro II, (r. 590–628) did not put him in a position to bring order to the chaos. Even though he achieved some military success, his futile wars, and all the luxury that he amassed, did nothing but drain the country's coffers and lifeblood. The treasonous act that sullied Kavadh II (r. Feb. 628–Sept. 628) hands with the blood of his father was the act of the army elites and the clergy. From then on these two classes of the society turned the government—which by then was merely an empty name—into a circus. The army high commands such as Shahrbarāz, Pīrūz and Farrokh Hormozd took the same road that Bahram Choobin had taken before them, and each for a day or two usurped the crown and the throne. Ardashīr, Kavadh's infant son, and Khosro II's daughters Pourāndokht and Āzarmidokht, who succeeded Ardashīr one after another—none had the power to contend with the army's influence and greed. And a few others who came to this shaky and unstable throne were either killed or deposed. Yazdgerd III (624–651), the last

surviving royalty from the Sasanian stock—an 8-year old minor—who occupied the throne in 632 could not accomplish anything either, and became victim to an inauspicious end that destroyed the Sasanian Empire, when a year later the Arabs attacked.

In the years leading to the Arab invasion, the rebellious army and the corrupt clergy cared not about the country and had no intention beyond seeking profit and pleasure. The artisans and the farmers, who carried the heavy burden of providing for the elites, had nothing to gain from defending the status quo. Moreover, the country found itself on the verge of annihilation and it took only one blow, in this case by the Arabs, to throw it into a catastrophic storm. The country was unable and to some degree unwilling to fight the new religion. With that, a populous country that was cultured, civilized and orderly became the arena of a most heart-rending tempest for two centuries.

With the Arab conquest and occupation, Iran ceased to have a national identity and its own language. However, as Edward G. Browne has eloquently scripted, this two century period is:

*“not a blank page in the intellectual life of its people. It is, on the contrary, a period of immense and unique interest, of fusion between the old and the new, of transformation of forms and transmigration of ideas, but in no wise of stagnation or death. Politically, it is true, Persia ceased for a while to enjoy a separate national existence, being merged in that great Muhammadan empire that stretched from Gibraltar to the Jaxartes, but in the intellectual domain she soon began to assert the supremacy to which the ability and subtlety of her people entitled her. Take from what is generally called Arabian science—from exegesis, tradition, theology, philosophy, medicine, lexicography, history, biography, even Arabic grammar—the work contributed by Persians, and the best part is gone. Even the forms of State organisation were largely adapted from Persian models, as said in al-Fakhri Islamic History, written in 1302 CE, on the organisation of the diwans or Government offices.”*

To mention a few editorial notes: i) The original book contains no pictures or maps. All the pictures are inserted by the translator to help with visualization; ii) Added comments or references by the translator are indicated by letters TR; iii) Double quotes are used only where the author has indicated. Otherwise a single quote is used to indicate the conversations; iv) The transliteration is simply what sounds closest to an Iranian ear, at the cost of possibly some confusion with what is used in western writing.

In translating the words of Professor Zarinkoob I have tried to stay as close as possible to his style, without making it sound too foreign to the English speaking reader. How successful I have been in this endeavor is a question.

In the course of this work I benefitted greatly from the help of a few. Most and foremost I am indebted to Mary Claire Mahaney for editing a major portion of this book. I would like to thank Mahmoud Fazel Birjandi for his expert help in clarifying some of the Arabic phrases and vague passages. My special thanks go to Soussan Mehrassa who patiently paced the streets of Tehran and Shiraz with me, searching for reference books. I am also grateful to my family for their support, Behrooz, Behzad, and Saman Kamgar-Parsi, Nassime, Kurosh, and Dariush Ruch-Kamgar. Lastly I hope that in my translation I have done justice to the work of the great historian Abdolhossein Zarinkoob.

Avid Kamgar

July 2016 / Tir 1395

## AUTHOR'S PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

*As I've seen it, no one writes a book,  
But to say, when he scans it another day  
Had I said it this way, it would have been better, and  
Had I added that word, it would have rung nicer.*

*By: Emād Kāteb*

Upon revising this book for a new edition, I did not find acceptable publishing it with no additions or deletions. Who amongst us looks at a book that he wrote long ago and does not find in it, gaffes and omissions? It is not only the likes of Emād Kāteb who are griped with this obsession; many others are. But if what drove me were merely such vacillations, perhaps I would be content with changing a few words here and moving a few phrases there—as most do when revising their book. Instead I altered the first book in order and in style, and took it across another path. In the remarks of scholars and critics on the first edition, what I found justified, I accepted with gratitude, deliberated on, and allowed for. When the quest is search for truth, what purpose is served if I become defiant about what I had erroneously assumed hitherto, and to rebel and hold pointless grudges? Thus, I picked up my pen and crossed out what was dubious, dark, and incorrect. Many such instances were occasions that in the past—either due to immaturity or by prejudice, I'm not certain which—I had been unable to rightly acknowledge the faults, iniquities, and defeat of Iran. Those days, my soul, full of epic poems, was bursting with so much passion that I considered all that was pure, moral, and heavenly to be Iranian and whatever that was not of Iran—that is, ancient Iran—I deemed wicked, inferior and dishonest.

In the years that followed the publication of this book—during which not for a moment did I neglect to work and reflect on this period in Iran’s history—doubts rightly set in. I realized the injustice of my opinion, and grasped the culpability of this belief, which had not escaped the notice of the clear-sighted, and put right that mistaken and biased view, with the opportunity that this revision has accorded to me. After all, my obligation to the readers of this book is not to—knowingly or not— paint the ancient history with hypocrisy, lies, arrogance, and deceit. Quite the opposite, my pledge to them is to seek the truth, and divorce it from what is false and deceiving. And so I did not consider possible, to not strike through what I recognized to be untrue or suspicious, a product of my immaturity and quarrelsomeness, and to mislead—along with myself—the readers, who perhaps more than is warranted, trust my word.

This quest for truth, which I held as my maxim, burdened me with yet another onus—that I should, in observance of truth, clarify what I had left vague in that condensed book. The young reader who had read my previous version was left with questions on his mind that I had not addressed there.

What was the reason behind the Sasanian downfall? How did the uncouth Bedouins take in their hand the fate of an immense and glorious civilization such as that? During these two centuries—about which our recent historians have remained silent—why did Farsi, like an invisible lost language, remained obscure and traceless? At the time when Iranian swordsmen revolted against the Arabs by any pretext, and fought the Arabs and Muslims, how did Zoroastrian priests argue and debate against the Muslim faith? Such questions that passed through everyone’s mind, I should have answered there. But in the first edition I had not dealt with these issues, hoping that given the opportunity—in a new edition—I could expand on them. Now that time is here. But why I named a book, which tells the tale of the most turbulent period in Iran’s history, *Two Centuries of Silence*, and not *Two Centuries of Chaos and Uproar*? This question was asked by one of the critics, after the publication of the first edition. Had this dear critic read my book cover to cover—with enough care and patience—he would have found his answer. Was it not that during these two centuries the Iranian

language had chosen to be silent, and did not speak, but with the language of sword? Even so, for the new edition of the book, perhaps it would have been more fitting if I had adopted a new title. But what need is there for a new name? This book, in its infancy, was known by that name. What harm is there to know it with the same name—now that it has grown?

At any rate, what prompted me against reissuing this book without alterations was my obligation to seek the truth. But in this revision did I do my duty properly? I do not know, and I am still of the opinion that the moment a history writer chooses a topic, he has strayed from neutrality, that is integral to truth seeking. However, such cause for deviating from truth, the reader can forgive. And I should be happy, if I have not digressed from it any more than this. All the same, I fear that I may not have been able to avoid bias and vanity. Yet, on this account I have no illusions. I do not claim that in my search I have arrived at the truth, as I do not claim that I have performed my responsibility as an investigative historian. This is my offering before your eye, that I present to you with great humility.

Parvardin 1336 / April 1957

Abdolhosein Zarrinkoub