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The Influence of Iranian Culture on the Culture of Muslim Arabs during the Umayyad Caliphate

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ABSTRACT

The Umayyad Caliphate represents one of the most significant periods in the political and cultural history of Islam, during which the Islamic realm rapidly expanded and evolved into a heterogeneous society composed of diverse ethnicities and cultures. Using a descriptive-analytical method and drawing upon historical sources and contemporary studies, this research examines the influence of Iranian culture on the culture of Muslim Arabs during the Umayyad era. The findings indicate that despite the official Umayyad policy emphasizing Arab superiority, in practice many Iranian cultural, administrative, and political elements penetrated the structure of the government and Islamic society. The transfer of bureaucratic systems, the continuation of the Sasanian taxation structure, the influence of courtly rituals, and the role of Iranian secretaries were among the most prominent manifestations of this influence. This cultural interaction laid the groundwork for the formation of a centralized model of governance within Islamic civilization. The significance of this issue lies in the fact that the Umayyad period constituted an intermediary stage between the simple caliphal tradition of early Islam and the complex caliphal system of later periods, particularly during the Abbasid Caliphate. Examining this period demonstrates how Iranian elements were absorbed, reinterpreted, and institutionalized within the framework of the Islamic Caliphate and what role they played in shaping the civilizational model of Islam.

Keywords: *Iranian culture, Umayyad Caliphate, bureaucracy, political culture, mawālī*

Introduction

The conquest of Iranian territories by Muslim Arabs in the first half of the seventh century CE was not merely a military and political transformation; rather, it marked the beginning of a profound process of cultural, administrative, and civilizational interaction between Iranians and Muslim Arabs. With the establishment of the Umayyad Caliphate (661–750 CE), which is regarded as the first hereditary government in Islamic history based on an Arab tribe-oriented tradition, the need for more complex systems to administer the vast Islamic realm became increasingly evident. This necessity prepared the ground for drawing upon the long-standing experiences of ancient civilizations, particularly Iranian civilization.



Before Islam, Iranians possessed deeply rooted traditions in the fields of bureaucracy, finance, urban planning, governmental rituals, and court culture. After the collapse of the Sasanian political structure, they were not removed from the scene of historical developments; rather, they gradually became one of the effective elements in shaping the cultural and executive structures of the Umayyad Caliphate. The transmission of many Iranian cultural elements, including administrative methods, governmental ceremonies, social customs, and even ethical and political concepts, occurred within the context of daily interaction between Iranian elites and Arab rulers.

From this perspective, the Umayyad period has special significance because, although the Umayyad caliphs ideologically emphasized the superiority of the Arab element, in practice they were compelled to use the cultural and administrative capacities of non-Arab groups, especially Iranians. The extensive presence of Iranian secretaries, scribes, fiscal experts, and officials in the caliphal administration played a decisive role in transmitting and institutionalizing Iranian cultural models in Islamic society. This influence did not occur as mere imitation, but rather in the form of a cultural synthesis that later paved the way for the formation of an Islamic–Iranian civilization in subsequent periods, particularly during the Abbasid era.

Accordingly, examining the influence of Iranian culture on the culture of Muslim Arabs during the Umayyad Caliphate not only contributes to a better understanding of the cultural and political transformations of this period, but also shows that Islamic civilization was, from its earliest stages, the product of interaction and synergy among different cultures; in this interaction, Iranians played a fundamental and enduring role.

Despite the Umayyads' emphasis on Arab identity and the political superiority of Arabs, historical evidence shows that Iranian capacities were used in administrative, fiscal, cultural, and political spheres. The main question of this study is: in which areas did the influence of Iranian culture on Muslim Arab culture appear during the Umayyad period, and what consequences did this influence have for the social and political structure of the Caliphate?

The conquest of Iran by Muslim Arabs not only led to the geographical expansion of the Islamic realm, but also created the conditions for encounter and interaction between two different cultural traditions: the tribe-oriented Arab culture and the state-oriented Iranian culture. With the establishment of the Umayyad Caliphate, the necessity of creating an integrated structure for administering vast and diverse territories became increasingly apparent. Although Umayyad policy was based on the superiority of the Arab element and the preservation of ethnic privileges, historical evidence indicates that in practice, the caliphal administration was compelled to draw upon the administrative and cultural experiences of Iranians in various domains. The fundamental problem of this study lies precisely in this apparent contradiction: how did a government that emphasized Arab identity and ethnic superiority become influenced, in practice, by Iranian culture and civilization? In which areas—administrative, political, economic, and social—was this influence more evident, and what consequences did it have for the transformation of cultural and governmental structures in Umayyad society?

Explaining the manner and extent of Iranian cultural influence on the culture of Muslim Arabs during the Umayyad period can clarify that the formation of Islamic civilization was the result of cultural interaction and coexistence, not the product of a one-sided and independent tradition. Accordingly, the present study seeks, through a historical–analytical approach, a descriptive–analytical method, and library-based sources, to identify and analyze the dimensions and domains of Iranian cultural influence on the culture of Muslim Arabs in the Umayyad era, and to examine the relationship between the official Arab-oriented policy and the executive realities of the Caliphate.

The main objective of the study is to explain and analyze the dimensions and extent of Iranian cultural influence on the culture of Muslim Arabs during the Umayyad Caliphate and to assess the short-term and long-term consequences of this cultural interaction in the history of Islamic civilization.

The main research question is: in which domains did the influence of Iranian culture on the culture of Muslim Arabs during the Umayyad Caliphate appear, and what consequences did this influence have for the cultural and governmental structure of Umayyad society? What was the role of Iranian factors such as secretaries, client groups, and Iranian officials in transmitting cultural and administrative elements to the caliphal administration? What foundations did this influence create for later developments during the Abbasid period?

The theoretical framework of the study is based on Marshall Hodgson's theory of civilizational interaction, combined with "cultural transmission theory" and "historical functionalism." Hodgson regards Islamic civilization as a "multiethnic and multi-origin" phenomenon that, in the process of its expansion, absorbed, reinterpreted, and integrated elements of conquered civilizations—especially Sasanian Iran—into a new structure. Accordingly, the influence of Iranian culture during the Umayyad period cannot be regarded merely as the penetration of a conquered culture; rather, it should be understood as part of the process of "the formation of Islamic civilization."

Cultural transmission theory emphasizes the principle that cultures transmit their elements through institutions, elites, and power structures within the context of political and social interactions. Cultural transmission does not necessarily mean the elimination of the conquered culture; rather, it often occurs through adoption, adaptation, and reconstruction. During the Umayyad period, the conquest of Iran and the integration of Iranian populations into the structure of the Caliphate created the conditions for direct contact between two cultural traditions. The presence of Iranian secretaries, officials, and client groups in the administrative apparatus was the most important channel for transferring Iranian civilizational elements into Islamic society. Therefore, the influence of Iranian culture can be regarded as the result of a gradual process of institutional and social transmission. According to historical functionalism, institutions and social structures persist when they respond to the functional needs of society. The rapid expansion of the Islamic realm during the Umayyad period, the administration of diverse territories, and the management of an extensive taxation system confronted the Caliphate with executive challenges. Under such conditions, adoption from the Sasanian bureaucratic and fiscal system was not merely a cultural influence, but a rational response to the necessities of governance. The continuation of the land-tax bureau, the use of orderly administrative organizations, and the tendency toward centralization of power indicate that the efficiency of the Iranian model played a fundamental role in stabilizing the structure of the state.

Based on this framework, the influence of Iranian culture is analyzed on three levels: institutional, political, and socio-cultural. At the institutional level, the transmission of bureaucratic and fiscal structures is examined; at the political level, the influence on centralization and court culture is analyzed; and at the socio-cultural level, the role of client groups and daily cultural interactions is investigated.

Research Background

Regarding the arrival of Islam in Iran and the influence of Iranian culture on Muslim Arabs and the Islamic world, numerous works in the form of books and articles have discussed the subject in a scattered manner. In classical historical works such as Baladhuri's *Futuh al-Buldan* and al-Tabari's *History of al-Tabari*, there are references to the role of Iranians in the administrative structure of the Caliphate (1, 2). In contemporary research, Zarrinkoub in *History of Iran After Islam*, Mohammadi Malayeri in *History and Culture of Iran During the Transition from the*

Sasanian Era to the Islamic Era, Azartash Azarnoush in *Ways of Persian Influence in Arabic Culture and Language Before Islam*, and Mahmoud Eftekhari Zadeh in *Shuubiyyah and Iranian Nationalism* have addressed the cultural interaction between Iran and Islam (3-6). Nevertheless, an independent and focused study of the cultural influence of Iranians on Arabs during the Umayyad period still requires comprehensive analysis.

The Background of Iranian Cultural Influence on Arabs before Islam

The historical relations between Iranians and Arabs are very ancient and date back to the Achaemenid period. The Achaemenids, who inherited the Assyrians and Babylonians in Mesopotamia, also inherited their rule over Arabia. During the Parthian period, Iranian influence in Arabia expanded and reached the borders of Yemen (4, 7). During the Sasanian period, with the formation of a religious government in Iran and the presence of a powerful rival in the West, namely Rome, Iran's attention to Arabia became much more prominent. Penetration into Arabia led to the dissemination of Iranian culture, customs, and traditions among the people of Arabia.

At the beginning of the Islamic period, four regions of the Arabian Peninsula—Hira, Bahrain and Yamama, Yemen, and the Hijaz—were, in different ways, under the influence of Iranian culture (8). The political dependence of Hira on Iran caused the rulers of Hira to imitate Sasanian methods of statecraft, military organization, and administration; this led them to practice many Iranian customs and traditions that were observed at the court (9). The relationship between the Sasanians and the kings of Hira was so close that during the reign of Yazdegerd I, he entrusted the upbringing of his son Bahram to al-Nu'man ibn Imru' al-Qays, who built the palaces of Khawarnaq and Sadir for his patron (10, 11). During the Sasanian period, Iranian residents in Bahrain increased in number, due to the presence of caravans as well as administrative and military organizations that drew Iranians to these regions (9). Iranian influence in Bahrain, together with Bahrain's proximity to the Sasanian Empire, led to the spread of Zoroastrianism (12). Iranian influence and rule in Yemen, as well as the Iranian style of conduct and governance there, led to the spread of Iranian culture and customs and the expansion of Zoroastrianism in that region (13). Commercial activity in Mecca also contributed to Iranian proximity and influence in Mecca and Yathrib. Historical sources refer to a treaty concluded between Quraysh and Iran through Nawfal, the brother of Hashim (14).

With the Muslim conquest of Iran, the influence of Iranian culture in the Islamic world intensified. Figures such as Salman al-Farsi played a notable role through military theorization, urban engineering, and guidance of the Islamic army during the conquest of Iran; likewise, Hormuzan played a significant role in founding and organizing the treasury bureau, establishing the military register, and introducing calendrical dating into Islam. In addition, the role of Iranian cavalry elites, landed notables, and secretaries in transmitting Iranian culture in the period before the Umayyads was important.

The Umayyads' Influence from the Customs and Rituals of Iranian Kings

The Umayyad government began in Syria in 661 CE under Mu'awiya ibn Abi Sufyan and continued until 750 CE. This government was established in 661 CE by Mu'awiya ibn Abi Sufyan. Mu'awiya founded a purely Arab state in Syria that lasted for ninety years. During this period, fourteen caliphs, who presented themselves as kings, ruled over Islamic society.

Mu'awiya's rule was the first experience of a ruler who, amid religious, political, and occasionally regional and tribal disputes, was able to seize power through force and political stratagems. Mu'awiya was a political and flexible man. Therefore, in order to implement this policy, he relied on his political abilities. In addition, he established certain

social relations to strengthen allies and weaken enemies. He imitated the royal apparatus of the Romans and Iranians, providing himself with luxury facilities and armed guards. He was the first caliph who, in accordance with Iranian and Roman customs, organized governmental offices and a royal seal office (15), began constructing palaces and royal courts, and wore luxurious and splendid garments (16).

Some historical reports refer to Mu'awiya's adoption of Iranian culture; some describe him as the "Khosrow" of the Arabs (2, 17). It is reported that Mu'awiya was interested in hearing stories about the kings of Iran and devoted part of his nights to listening to such stories, while individuals present at his court read these narratives to him (18).

Ya'qubi and some other historians, by describing features of the Umayyad monarchy, present a model of Iranian kingship according to which there were many similarities between Islamic monarchy during the Umayyad period and Iranian monarchy (14). Ibn Khaldun, in his *Introduction*, analyzes that the Umayyad state imitated earlier states, especially Iran, in monarchy and statecraft, and that its rulers consistently followed the habits and customs of Iranian governments. The tendency toward centralization of power and the stabilization of hereditary caliphate during the Umayyad period bears similarities to the Sasanian imperial model. Although this transformation had multiple causes, the experience of the centralized Iranian state was not without influence on the political mentality of rulers (3).

The Transmission of the Bureaucratic System to the Umayyad Era

Many administrative and governmental structures of the Sasanians were used during the Umayyad period. One of the bureaus established during the time of Mu'awiya was the bureau of supervision and seal. This bureau was devoted to registering and recording the decrees issued by the caliph (4). The first caliphal official to establish such a bureau within his administration was Ziyad, Mu'awiya's governor in Iraq (1). The first caliph to introduce it into the caliphal administration was Mu'awiya, who, at Ziyad's suggestion and when he felt the need for it, established it in Syria. In addition to this bureau, Ziyad transferred other bureaus and other administrative customs from the Sasanian court to his own administration in Iraq and to the caliphal administration in Syria (4).

One of the actions of Iranian bureaucrats was the administration of the land-tax bureau in Iraq, which for some time was administered in the Middle Iranian language. This bureau was one of the most important manifestations of Iranian cultural influence and the continuation of the Sasanian bureaucratic structure (1). Considering that the main axis and foundation of Umayyad policy was based on Arab aristocracy and attention to the Arab element in all affairs of the state, the Umayyads were nevertheless compelled, in order to govern their expanding empire, to employ Iranians in their governmental organization. Alongside the Iranian bureaucracy within the administrative organization of the Umayyad Caliphate, the customs and rituals of Iranian kings also entered the Umayyad caliphal court through various channels.

The Role of Officials and Governors of the Eastern Regions in Transmitting Iranian Culture and Civilization to the Umayyad Court

During the Umayyad era, the land of Iran was considered part of the territories attached to the provinces of Kufa and Basra (2). Iran's administrative affairs were managed from Mesopotamia, Kufa, and Basra (19). During the Umayyad Caliphate, governors were appointed from the capital, Damascus, to administer this region. The governors of the Umayyad era were trusted Arabs of the ruling apparatus who were mostly concerned with securing the interests of themselves and their own tribes. Two famous and highly partisan governors in this region who, to

some extent, played a role in introducing certain Iranian customs and traditions into the Umayyad court organization were Ziyad ibn Abih and al-Hajjaj ibn Yusuf al-Thaqafi. Ziyad, following Iranian custom and practice, wore a silk cloak and wore boots made in Basra (16). He was the first to have spears and maces carried before him and to appoint guards for his protection. These guards consisted of five hundred men who did not leave the mosque and remained on guard duty (20, 21).

Ziyad had complete confidence in the abilities of Iranian secretaries and therefore preferred Iranian secretaries over Arabs. One of the famous Iranian secretaries, Zadan Farrukh, was appointed to collect Iraq's land tax and manage its related administrative affairs. This individual became so firmly established in his position that he remained in office until the governorship of al-Hajjaj ibn Yusuf al-Thaqafi (1).

The Umayyad caliphs, who gradually realized the importance of the class of secretaries and their role in administering the country, attempted to benefit from the experience of this group. One of the most famous secretaries who played an important role in transmitting Iranian culture during the Umayyad period was Abd al-Hamid al-Katib. He may be regarded as one of the earliest Iranian secretaries who was a bilingual scribe in Arabic and Middle Iranian. He can be considered one of the agents through whom Iranian customs and traditions penetrated Arab society (22).

Another Iranian group that played a role in transmitting Iranian culture during the Umayyad period was the cavalry elite. These mounted warriors were the pride of the Sasanian army and among its commanders (19). They were considered one of the privileged classes of Iranian society. The cavalry elite played a very important role against the Arab attack; in other words, the fundamental rupture in the Sasanian army occurred when part of this group separated from Rostam's army and joined the Muslim forces (23).

The Entry of Iranian Cultural Elements and Symbols into Umayyad Society

Iranian cultural elements and symbols are important in various dimensions. One of these elements was the tradition of imperial and royal kingship. One aspect of this tradition was the idea of central authority and the display of power, which was transmitted to the Umayyads. Some symbolic features, such as coronation, the special status of the caliph, and formal ceremonies in meetings with the people or representatives of the provinces, were influenced by Iranian royal culture.

One instance of the influence of Iranian court culture on Arab culture was the spread of aristocratic and luxury-oriented lifestyles. The Umayyads went so far in this matter that they surpassed the kings of Iran and Rome in luxury. They showed great interest in wearing costly, luxurious garments made of silk and embroidered fabrics (15).

Among the customs that the caliphs practiced in imitation of Iranian kings was the delivery of an address at the time of coronation or accession to the caliphate. Sasanian kings usually delivered eloquent and detailed speeches on various subjects and themes at the time of coronation. Another custom was the ceremony of royal audience, which during the Sasanian period was highly formal and elaborate; gradually, this custom also became common during the Umayyad period. The first person to adopt this practice from the Iranians was al-Mughira ibn Shu'ba (15). The Umayyads also imitated Iranians in the refinement of foods and drinks. From the time of the Umayyads, Muslims increasingly turned toward luxury, and Mu'awiya was the first to introduce Iranian foods and drinks, after which the caliphs and other people imitated him (15). The tendency toward centralization of power and the stabilization of hereditary caliphate during the Umayyad period bears similarities to the Sasanian imperial model. Although this

transformation had multiple causes, the experience of the centralized Iranian state was not without influence on the political mentality of rulers.

Another cultural and symbolic influence was the practice of gifts during the Iranian spring New Year festival and the autumn festival. It was customary during these festivals for people to present their gifts to the ruler. After Islam, this custom was not much welcomed by the first caliphs; however, with the rise of the Umayyads, it entered the caliphal court through officials and governors of the eastern territories of the Caliphate. Through this custom, substantial revenues were obtained for them; therefore, it was regarded as one of the sources of income (18). The Umayyad statesmen paid attention to these Iranian festivals mainly because of the gifts that Sasanian kings had received from Iranians. When Mu'awiya entrusted the administration of land tax to Abdullah ibn Darraj, he asked the people of the rural districts of Kufa to present gifts to him on the spring New Year festival and the autumn festival, and they did so (15). Mu'awiya wrote to Abd al-Rahman ibn Abi Bakra regarding the rural districts of Basra and ordered them to send the gifts of the spring New Year festival and the autumn festival to him. On each of these occasions, ten million was sent to him (14). Qalqashandi believes that the first person to institutionalize the autumn festival in Islam was al-Hajjaj ibn Yusuf al-Thaqafi (24); Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz refused the gift of that festival (14); and Yazid ibn Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan, in a letter to Umar ibn Hubayra, restored the collection of gifts for the spring New Year festival and the autumn festival (14).

The continuation and acceptance of Iranian festivals in the Islamic realm, such as the spring New Year festival, the autumn festival, the midwinter fire festival, and certain seasonal rituals, were among the clearest manifestations of the influence of Iranian festive culture. Gradually, these festivals moved beyond an ethnic level and acquired a place in the urban culture of Muslims.

The Iranian calendar in the Arab bureaucracy, gifts for the spring New Year festival and the autumn festival, the influence of astronomical families, the land-tax bureau, the correspondence bureau, the supervision and seal bureau, the postal bureau, the chancery, administrative organization, and the fluctuations of the caliphal apparatus were important factors in the spread of the Iranian language within the Umayyad caliphal administration (4).

Another manifestation of Iranian culture that gained prominence during the Umayyad period was urban management, agriculture, and architectural knowledge. Iranians had extensive experience in water engineering and agriculture. The continuation of irrigation networks and agricultural exploitation systems in Iraq and Iran indicates the Umayyads' use of Iranian technical knowledge. Architectural knowledge, which had reached high levels of beauty and excellence in the hands of Iranian master builders, attracted the attention and acceptance of Arabs. The invading Arabs knew no buildings other than tents and clay or wooden huts and lacked architectural knowledge; when they encountered the palaces and massive buildings of the Sasanian kings, they were astonished. Abdullah ibn al-Zubayr invited architects from Iran to repair the Kaaba. Arab elites also sought help from Iranian masters to construct their palaces and buildings. For example, it is stated in *The Book of Songs* that Mu'awiya used a number of Iranian builders and workers to construct his palace (10). An Iranian named Ruzbeh founded Kufa in 638 CE (20), and Ziyad built the Great Mosque of Basra based on the architecture of the palaces of Istakhr, Persepolis, and Iranian temples (25). Although the palaces of the Umayyad caliphs were mostly built in the style of Byzantine and Syrian buildings, some structures, including the palace of Khirbat al-Maffjar, which was built during the Umayyad period, used Iranian decorative forms, designs, and elements (26). This palace was built during the caliphate of Hisham, and its decorations used motifs derived from the ornamentation of the Sasanian palace at Ctesiphon (26).

The Role of the Shu'ubiyyah Movement in Iranian Cultural Transmission to Arabs

The Shu'ubiyyah movement was an Iranian movement against the Arabs that began during the Umayyad period and reached its peak in the ninth century CE. The inappropriate conduct of the Umayyads in creating a significant disparity between Arabs and non-Arab client groups led to the emergence of national, political, and religious uprisings and movements (6). The ideas and views of the Shu'ubiyyah movement consisted of a return to the self, revival of Iranian ancient culture and glories, and criticism and denigration of Arabs (10, 27).

The festive culture of Sasanian Iran, with its court ceremonies, music, poetry, banquets, and official rituals, influenced the Umayyad period, especially from the time of Mu'awiya onward. The court of Damascus moved toward a form of orderly ceremonial practice and the holding of banquets and official rituals. Other elements influenced by the Iranian tradition included the holding of formal ceremonies on festivals and special occasions, the presence of musicians and singers in gatherings, and the organization of reception and banquet protocols at court. These occasions became instruments for displaying the splendor of government and distributing grants and gifts.

Conclusion

The penetration of Iranian customs, culture, and language into Islamic lands and their acceptance by Arabs naturally began with the earliest instances of contact between Arabs and Iranians. Before the rise of Islam, because Arabia was located near the powerful Sasanian Empire, Arabs had more or less extensive commercial, cultural, and political relations with Iranians. The extent of these relations differed across geographical regions. Some areas, because of special conditions such as strategic facilities, favorable climate, or active trade, were more important than other parts of Arabia.

Governmental organizations and bureaus, which were first established among the Arabs during the caliphate of Umar, the second caliph, acquired a more organized form during the Umayyad period. The official language of the bureaus was the Iranian language until, during the caliphate of Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan, the language of the bureaus in different regions was changed from the Iranian language to Arabic. During the Abbasid Caliphate as well, various bureaus with specialized duties continued to function according to the same model of Sasanian administrations and organizations, though in a more organized manner. The spread of Shu'ubiyyah ideas and beliefs was also very extensive in the late Umayyad period and the first phase of the Abbasid Caliphate, to the extent that it influenced some Arab poets and authors. During this period, Iranian poets and authors openly took pride in their noble Iranian ancestry. In this era, many Sasanian court customs and manifestations of Iranian culture penetrated Umayyad society through bureaucrats and other Iranian officials.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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