



In God's Path: The Arab Conquests and the Creation of an Islamic Empire

Robert G. Hoyland

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In just over a hundred years--from the death of Muhammad in 632 to the beginning of the Abbasid Caliphate in 750--the followers of the Prophet swept across the whole of the Middle East, North Africa, and Spain. Their armies threatened states as far flung as the Franks in Western Europe and the Tang Empire in China. The conquered territory was larger than the Roman Empire at its greatest expansion, and it was claimed for the Arabs in roughly half the time. How this collection of Arabian tribes was able to engulf so many empires, states, and armies in such a short period has perplexed historians for centuries. Most accounts of the Arab invasions have been based almost solely on the early Muslim sources, which were composed centuries later to illustrate the divinely chosen status of the Arabs. Robert Hoyland's groundbreaking new history assimilates not only the rich biographical information of the early Muslim sources but also the many non-Arabic sources, contemporaneous or near- contemporaneous with the conquests.

In God's Path begins with a broad picture of the Late Antique world prior to the Prophet's arrival, a world dominated by two superpowers: Byzantium and Sasanian Persia. In between these empires, emerged a distinct Arabian identity, which helped forge the inhabitants of western Arabia into a formidable fighting force. The Arabs are the principal actors in this drama yet, as Hoyland shows, the peoples along the edges of Byzantium and Persia--the Khazars, Bulgars, Avars, and Turks--all played critical roles in the remaking of the old world order. The new faith propagated by Muhammad and his successors made it possible for many of the conquered peoples to join the Arabs in creating the first Islamic Empire. Well-paced, comprehensive, and eminently readable, *In God's Path* presents a sweeping narrative of a transformational period in world history.

In God's Path: The Arab Conquests and the Creation of an Islamic Empire Details

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From Reader Review In God's Path: The Arab Conquests and the Creation of an Islamic Empire for online ebook

Sarah Nichols says

This well-researched history provides a wealth of information about the territorial expansion of the Arab world during the 7th and 8th centuries. As the title implies, it focuses on the military conquests of the Arabs and challenges the commonly held notion of an Arab "Blitzkrieg". While I enjoyed reading the book and certainly gained new insights into this period, I wish that the author had gone into more detail about the political organization of the new empire and the cultural interaction between the conquerors and the native populations. This is not missing from the book, but seems to be relegated to a small section at the end of each chapter.

José Luís Fernandes says

A very interesting and balanced account of the Arab conquests and the formation of the Islamic civilization as well as its early empires (of the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties).

I loved Hoyland's contextualization of the Arab expansion within the developments of Late Antiquity, his reassessment of the importance of the rise of Islam to it and his approach to the formation of several features of Islamic civilization like the "sharia", the evolution of the concept of "jihad", its social structure and the development of Islam as a religion, which are very important both for the historiography of this period and modern debates on Islam (the latter is horribly skewed by far-right propaganda entering into History, especially in America and Europe after 9/11).

There might be a few imperfections (there was no Georgia in the 7th and 8th centuries, for instance, although I suspect the author used that name for familiarity), while the use of "and" gets sometimes annoying for me, but the scholarship in this book is invaluable and very well thought out.

Brett says

A very historically solid book that discusses an important theme in Middle Eastern history. I felt that the book did a good job of discussing the Arab conquests in a modern and insightful way that exposes the common misconceptions regarding them. In particular, the thematic sections at the end of each chapter, the introduction, and the end of the book did a good job of this. The majority of the book's content was a little on the dense side, but very informative and detailed for people who are into the nitty-gritty details of wars and names.

The book only gets three stars from me for three reasons. First, I found that other books, such as Tom Holland's *In the Shadow of the Sword*, explained the book's major themes and arguments in a more cohesive, intelligent, well-written way. Second, this book's use of largely Christian or "Western" sources reminded me slightly of an orientalist approach; Hoyland justifies this in a mostly acceptable way, but I nonetheless thought that at certain moments, Arab accounts of events were "disproven" or painted in a patronizing light. Finally, the book was simply on the dull side at times. I don't blame Hoyland for this, as history books often

can be very dry, but it did contribute to this book's rating of only three stars, rather than four.

Overall, *In God's Path* was a solid, though sometimes boring, exploration of the truly multicultural, patient character of the Arab Conquests.

Christopher says

Short overview of the period of the Arab conquests in the first two centuries after Mohammed's death. The author's main perspective is to use contemporary sources by non-Arabs. The main Arabic sources are later and tend to reinterpret the earlier period from a teleological perspective by which the conquests are a purely Arab enterprise carried out by pious adherents of the one true god with his help. Hoyland emphasizes the local circumstances in the aftermath of the brutal wars between the Persians and the Eastern Roman Empire that resulted in the exhaustion of those two states. Basically, the Arabic tribes of the Arabian peninsula had been a part of the military conflict between those states, and the galvanizing force of the new religion combined with the military exhaustion of the two major powers of the Middle East resulted in the permanent loss of Byzantine territory south of the Tarsus Mts. and the complete collapse of the Persian state, whose populace then largely converted. The author also treats the social circumstances that allowed small Arab/Moslem groups to dominate much larger populations of conquered adherents of other religions, and the policies and circumstances that led to the gradual Arabicization/Moslemification of the area, which resulted in the formation of the modern Arab/Moslem world, which is much broader than the area in the Arabian peninsula that gave rise to it.

The story told makes overall sense. There is a huge amount of historical information and processes to deal with in a rather short compass (less than 250 pp. of real text). The necessarily thin narrative is a little trite at times, but the main point is the overall interpretation of the historical process rather than the details, so I guess the weak narrative is excusable (even if the threadbare narrative is at times a bit unengaging).

Justin Tapp says

In an effort to greater understand the history of Islam and the Middle East, I worked through several books and concluded with some of the most recent books on Islamic reform and the rise of ISIS (many reviews forthcoming). *In God's Path* most closely resembles Tom Holland's *In the Shadow of the Sword* as well as the first half of Tamim Ansary's *Destiny Disrupted*. I've also read Reza Aslan's *The Origins and Future of Islam*, but Aslan crafts his story far too selectively from history in the years this book covers. Other books that assisted my understanding of this book are Albert Rouhani's *History of the Arab Peoples*, the surprisingly helpful *Islam: A Very Short Introduction* by Ruthven, *The Koran: A Very Short Introduction* by Cook, *The Cambridge History of Turkey* Vol. 1, and Justinian's *Flea* for the immediately preceding context up to 565 AD. I also used to live in Azerbaijan which was at an important geographic crossroads of much of the history in this book.

In God's Path is a lightning read, as it is a amazing how quickly nomadic tribes from the Middle East were able to subdue so many lands and peoples in just a couple centuries' time. Hoyland embraces the challenge of examining the scant literary evidence from the time period of 600-800 AD that Islam fanned out across the globe. He gives credence to 7th and 8th century sources as opposed to earlier texts, irregardless of their religious source. Christian texts of the period writing fearfully of Islamic invaders (ie: biased) still have value

in dating events into a timeline. Hoyland does not focus much on religious development, except toward the end when Muslims began to write down and codify Islam. Instead he focuses on the battles and the characteristics of the tribal organizations that allowed for the most rapid expansion of an empire since Alexander the Great.

Beginning in the 630s, Hoyland examines the context in which Muhammed the Prophet arose. The Persian Empire had dreams of success over the collapsing Byzantine empire after the time and treaties of Justinian in the 550s. Plague and division had greatly weakened the Byzantine Empire. From 602-628 the Sassanids had pushed back in the Levant and Anatolia, forcing a siege of Constantinople in 626 before Turks in the area actually helped defend the area from the Persian-Avar attack in 627. A Byzantine resurgence and Sassanid civil strife eventually pushed the Sassanids out of their territories in Persia and Jerusalem. The Sassanids were in a weakened state to face a new threat of united tribes of Arab warriors.

The first period is the time before 600 to 640. The author points out that contrary to stereotype, Arabs are/were not all monolithically nomads, some controlled and inhabited cities alongside other peoples, like Jews. There were already a lot of battles around 610 AD between Arab tribes and Persians, Muhammed's own tribe was only one of many attacking Sassanids in both Persia and the west around 625-630, though the details are "lost to history." Muhammed's rise is dealt with rather quickly. He is opposed at Mecca in 622, the beginning of the Islamic calendar, forms an army in Medina, takes Mecca through both battle and marriage, uniting tribes into an impressive force capable of subduing other tribes of Arabic speakers and leading them to conquest. After Muhammed's death, the conquest of Palestine continued under the Rashidun Caliphate, for which Abu Bakr had laid down rules of war from Muhammed's teaching. Actual historical details of battles are not many, but in the 634 Battle of Ajnadayn, Muslim warriors from many united-but-rivalrous tribes outfought Byzantines. A monk in Jerusalem in 634 is recorded as calling for repentance in his city because the "Saracens," the Greco-Roman term for Arabs, were ravaging the area. In 636, the Rashidun Caliph's army defeated the Sassanids at Basra. There were definitely raids, if not battles, throughout Arabia. In 636, perhaps weakened by plague and doubtless out-generated, the Byzantine force lost the Battle of Yarmouk, and with it Palestine and the Levant, a major blow. Syria, Damascus, and Antioch were written off by the retreating Byzantines. Gaza and Palestine eventually became fully occupied in 637. Historic accounts of the 636-637 siege of Jerusalem by Caliph Umar's forces are "murky." The Byzantines apparently surrendered without a fight. Jews had been both slaughtered and marginalized by the Byzantines, so some welcomed the Arab forces as liberators, as did some Christians-- who increasingly joined the Muslim conquerors for various reasons. Muslims granted freedom to Jews and Christians to practice, although there were varieties to policies in various territories depending on who was in charge of the area. Conversion was often optional, and large populations of ethnic Christians were left alone provided they did not pose a threat. Later 9th century Muslim scholars adopted a view of spreading Islam by uniting all Arabs under Islam, but in the 7th century there was quite a bit of variety and not everyone in the marauding armies was Muslim.

The next major period is 640-652 AD. In 643, the Christian John of Nikiu chronicled conquest of Egypt by Amr ibn al-Aas, which took only two years. John apparently wrote that the Muslims were harsh on the populace, particular with taxation, but left churches and church property untouched. (His is a chronicle I'd like to read. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_of...) Like other Christian writers of the time, John saw the Muslim conquests as God's judgement on apostate Christians (his church itself was considered un-orthodox after the Council of Chalcedon).

Hoyland then quickly moves to the conquest of Libya and then Iran. Iran had claims on the Caucasus lands since 428 AD, but the Arab tribes moved quickly. (Today, the peoples of the North Caucasus are largely Sunni whereas Azerbaijan itself is Shi'a from later Persian occupation of the land south of the mountains.) In 640, the Arabs had invaded Armenia and were able to set up a buffer zone with Byzantium in Anatolia.

History records that the choices facing non-Muslims were not "just submit or be killed in battle" but that a wide range of remedies were applied, the Arab conquerers were often outnumbered by Christians and others, after all. Some were given deals exempting them from taxes upon conversion, which led to quite a few converts-- and quite a few angry converts when those privileges were later taken away once the conquest had roughly ended and the focus switched to governing. Christians still made up the majority in Damascus, its walls were left intact. Many simply thought the Arabic occupation was a thing that would quickly pass at any rate.

While Hoyland does not go into nearly as much detail and speculation as does Holland, he does note that "the Arabic 'Bismillah' is an exact translation of the Greek *en onomati tou theou* ("in the name of God", p. 101). He notes a papyrus written in Greek and Arabic from 643 AD, the first document we have written in Arabic, which adopts many Greek terms and cultural forms of the area (some of which also come from Syriac). This suggests that there was already a similar Arabic "administrative tradition" as was found in Byzantine areas and that there was already a familiarity among both the conquered and the conquerers in culture, administration, and religion, such as that it may not have been a radically big deal for these groups to be under Arab control. Hoyland writes that we should refer to the conquerers as "muhajirun," whose message was "to conquer and settle" which was part of the appealing message for their recruits (p. 102).

Chapter 4 covers 652 to 685, beginning with the movement toward Constantinople. An Arab fleet sent to blockade the Bosphorous was "miraculously" (to the inhabitants) wiped out by a storm in 654. The Arabs were later able to blockade Constantinople from 668-669. Meanwhile, Arab differences resulted in civil war, allowing Christians a chance to regroup; Armenia restored its ties with Byzantium in 656. From 656-661, there was the first "Arab civil war" (chronicled well by Holland) which resulted in the Umayyads supplanting the Rashidun caliphs. There was increasing debate about who had the right of succession. Arab conquests had reached into what is now Afghanistan and Kyrgyzstan. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_F... Hasan ibn Ali submitted to the Umayyads to keep the peace.

Chapter 5, "The Great Leap Forward," covers the Berber-Arab conquest of Spain and an increasing shift toward actual governance circa 685-715. Caliph Abd Al-Malik is credited with the minting the shahada onto coins. Arabs were outnumbered 100 to one in non-Arab territories, so Islam and Arab culture tended to be absorbed over time, with syncretism common in territories like the Caucasus. The line between ethnic and cultural Arabs became quite blurred. Hoyland writes that conversion became more common in Al-Malik's reign, and the Arab practice of enslavement encouraged conversion to gain more favorable treatment and potential freedom. At the frontiers of the Islamic state, deals were increasingly worked out which encouraged syncretism in order to get local subjugation.

In 703, Armenians revolted against the Arabs in what is now Naxchivan, and between 715-730 there was further "retrenchment and revolt." There is very little about Arab battle tactics or technology during this period and in 732 Arabs gained full control over what is now Azerbaijan. Armenia and Georgia were largely left alone and maintained their Christian heritage, whereas (Caucasian) Albania was not and did not. As the Arabs increased codification of Islam, the practice of Islam as the state religion became codified and minority religions were held protected but subservient. Alms-giving became mandatory around 730 AD. Arab Muslims, interestingly, paid lower taxes than non-Arabs but all were taxed. Initially, exemption from poll taxes encouraged local converts, but when fiscal needs led to repeal of this exemption the local populations across the territory would revolt.

We may often forget that there was no organized clergy or system of religion yet in the 8th century, most people who were writing down sayings of Muhammad or chronicling events were amateurs with other jobs. But Arabic becoming the new lingua-franca uniting the region from North Africa to the Central Asian steppe

led to the intellectual boom in the 9th century as trade increased and Greek works were quickly translated into Arabic and disseminated. There were distinct differences between "Gentile Islam" and Arab Islam. While some aspects of codified Islamic law were already present early on, in many cases some local laws were incorporated. Some laws which were rejected were later claimed to have been explicitly rejected by Muhammed. The early civil wars were covered over by later Islamic history, and later scholars overrode the earlier. Only the Caliph ruling from 632-660 had the ability to truly legislate, after that the canon was closed.

The author concludes with thoughts on the success of the spread of the Islam empire, crediting it ultimately with the recruitment of nomads under one central ruler that made it effective. (My own thoughts): In that sense, it is no different than the Mongol invasions from the East-- a centralized command structure over a highly mobile force encountering other tribes and people who were weakened by divisions and plague, and in some cases eager to cast off the yoke of their current rulers. Perhaps unlike the Mongols, Arabs allowed for some tolerance and self-governance, and actually focused on building in place rather than simply extracting resources. It was only later when exclusive and extractive institutions were built, leading to the inevitable decline of the empire. Other books in the list at the top of this post deal more with the decline and psychological effects, Hoylands work deals purely with the rapid expansion. A solid four-star work.

H. P. says

Hoyland (or his publisher) chose a funny name for Hoyland's book on the Arab conquests. So much of Hoyland's thought-provoking and groundbreaking book downplays the role of religion and Islam. Any historian of the birth of Islam and the Arab conquest faces a basic problem—essentially all of the Arabic sources were written two centuries later. Hoyland adopts a sensible response that is otherwise avoided, I assume, due to academic siloing and language barriers. That is, he consults contemporary, non-Arabic sources.

These are frequently Christian sources, but another major theme of Hoyland's work is that religious differences were not as important then as centuries later. Early Muslims tended to divide the world between adherents of Abrahamic religions and pagans. The Middle East of the time was pluralistic. Certain unorthodox Christian sects had been persecuted by the orthodox and welcomed a more forgiving Arab rule. Later Islamic sources see only Muslims and infidels, Persians and Turks; Christian and other contemporary sources show a rich tapestry of religions and ethnic groups. Islam only broke "away from the more narrow Judeo-Christian focus" after "east Iran/Transoxania provided a majority of the troops who would overthrow the Umayyad dynasty in AD 750."

Hoyland pushes back against the idea that the Arab armies sprang forth from a desert nowhere. "Arab tribesmen had been serving in the armies of Byzantium and Persia in large numbers in the fifth and sixth centuries." It is true that nomadic Arabs played an important role in the conquering armies (nomadic people can produce roughly twice the soldiers per capita) but there were a number of Arabs living in cities in the Levant and much of the early Arab armies were drawn from Yemen, which had been civilized for centuries. The Arabs were exposed not only to the Byzantine and Persians but also Ethiopians and Indians.

Hoyland also pushes back against the idea that the Arabs deserve all the credit for toppling the Persian Empire and crippling the Byzantine one. The Byzantine and Persian empires had conspired for their own demise through over a century of costly war. Those empires also suffered heavily from a plague that didn't hit the more dispersed Arabs as hard. The Arabs co-opted a long tradition of cutting agreements with

conquered peoples to respect life, property, and customs in return for submission and tribute.

Hoyland redefines the role of Islam. Islam was not the all-important factor as it is sometimes treated, but it played a key role. It helped the Arabs develop the strong organization necessary to conquer and govern their large empire. Islam's initial tolerance "distinguished it from Christendom" and "enabled Christians and Jews to make a substantial contribution to the intellectual life of the Islamic world." Conversion only took place slowly (in part because more Muslims meant more diluted spoils), and non-Muslims "formed the majority of the population of the Middle East for at least the first three centuries after the death of Muhammad." It goes beyond the scope of the book, but of course it was religion that took Islam past the "natural barriers and well-organised states" that stopped Arab armies. On the opposite side of the coin, the lack of an organized clerical hierarchy robbed the Arab Empire of a potential source of imperial support.

Hoyland also redefines what it meant to be "Arab" at the time. It was already applicable to a number of non-ethnically Arab people in the Levant in Muhammad's time who spoke Arabic, and became in the Arab Empire "a term like 'American,' applied to people with very different roots, but who have shared cultural values and a common language." The Arabicization led to a cultural boom as texts from other nation-states "were translated into Arabic, studied, and made a part of the intellectual worldview of Islamic civilization."

In discussing the decline of the Arab Empire, Hoyland covers geographic scope and exposure to nomads like the Turks and Mongols, but also touches on the vulnerability to climate fluctuations of the marginal, arid lands of much of the empire. That's not a point unknown the literature, I think, but one less prevalent in popular histories.

The bulk of the book, which concerns the conquests themselves, suffers from sparse source material. Without accounts of tactics and weaponry employed, it inevitably turns into a tiresome string of dates and names. The section on the Islamicization and Arabicization of the Middle East doesn't suffer the same weakness and is much stronger. This is a book from an academic publisher, but it doesn't read like it. Hoyland addresses scholarly dispute without robbing the story of its narrative force.

Disclosure: I received a free, advance copy through NetGalley.

Maitrey says

In *God's Path* by Robert Hoyland was an intriguing history of the Arab conquests after the death of Muhammad. Hoyland is currently the Professor of Islamic History at Oxford University. He has previously written on the histories of Islam, the Arabs and the Near East.

Hoyland sets out from the beginning to challenge the narrative that Islam was carried at a breakneck speed across the world on the backs of Arabian horses. This is evidently a one-sided version, and if not wrong, it certainly is heavily biased towards the victors i.e the Muslims. I thought he successfully achieved this by critically re-looking at sources from people living in the 7th Century, both Muslim and non-Muslim, (especially the latter since the bulk of sources from this time are chroniclers from Byzantium). Then he gives precedence to later writers and sources from the 8th-9th centuries onwards, but is still pretty picky about whom to trust and whom not to.

The book's main thrust is that it wasn't inevitable for Islam to be successful, or that it wasn't just zeal and God which propelled the conquerors. Like all good history, it's far more complex than that. Take for instance

that just before the Prophet's birth in the early 7th Century, the then superpowers of Byzantium and Persia were locked in a struggle for the Middle East and were exhausted by the time the first Muslim soldiers tested these empires. There was also a devastating plague which swept across these regions which might have not struck core-Arab areas such as Mecca and Medina too hard.

Also consider that many Arab tribes had learnt quite a bit through association with both empires, whether it was administrative skill, siege technology or simply the power of propaganda and organization.

The book is mainly divided chronologically with periods such as pre-Islam, immediately post-Muhammad, and the wars between the Arabs and Byzantium (in Syria, Egypt and North Africa), and those between the Arabs and the Persians. Throughout, Hoyland stresses on credible sources and what might have actually happened in battles. Since much of our history, both Islamic history from the Middle Ages and modern history has stressed the victors' tale, Hoyland I think doesn't do too much of disservice by stressing on sources who might have been eye-witnesses or writing immediately after these battles. Therefore we get a picture not of one-sided victories but a jumble of victories, defeats and even stalemates between the Arabs and their various opponents. I read for the first time of how the Arabs lost to various hardy tribes such as the Khazars of the Caucasus, or the North African Berbers. Hoyland states repeatedly, that this wasn't just religion-fueled conquering but a complex relationship between conquerors, the conquered, local elites, tax-payers and governors.

Some of the most interesting sections were Arab interaction with the Persians and Central Asia. The Persian Sassanian Empire collapsed totally when fighting the Arabs, and the politics in Central Asia didn't fair much better. The melding here of Islam with the local culture (not to mention of the Arabs and locals), and it's distance from central Arabia played a pivotal part in how the Ummayyad dynasty of caliphs was overthrown by the Abbasids, and how much of Islam came to Persianized.

Hoyland also de-stresses the importance played to so-called pivotal battles like the Battle of Poitiers/Tours (between the Arabs and the Franks) or the Battle of Talas (between Arabs and the Chinese Tang dynasty). These were on-off and really didn't much determine future events. Other factors such as Central Asia, Spain and North Africa becoming more or less independent from centralized Muslim rule were far more pivotal. The last few chapters wonderfully dealt with the Islamic civilization that was created by the melding of various cultures, yet how the Arabs remained important still (consider: Mecca is still the holy site for Muslims, or that Muslim children are still given Arabic names). Insights such as why there might have been a ban of images in Islamic art, or the widespread practice of alms-giving among Muslims were particularly delightful to read about.

Some things I can criticize about the book was that it was too short, and more details wouldn't have hurt at all. A short biography of Muhammad say, or the Arab civil wars that are only mentioned in passing. Hoyland also assumes the reader to be somewhat well versed in Arab history, quite a drawback in a book aimed at an interested yet layman reader. The time periods also jump around quite a bit such as we might move on to the 9th Century in Persia but then return to the 7th in Egypt. Otherwise, the book is written simply and in an engaging manner.

Overall the book is an eye-opening read of how one can approach early Islamic history. It is also a great example in how to evaluate historical sources. Highly recommended.

Full Disclosure: I was given an advanced reading copy of the book in exchange for a review by the publisher.

[illegible][illegible]

I am glad that Oxford University Press published this book since works by Middle East historians on early Islamic conquest (seventh to ninth century AD) are rare as the author stated in the introduction and the end of the book. I thought this is a relevant book in light of the contemporary discussion about Islam, Islamic violence and the Middle East which lead some to ask the question of what the Islamic Arabic world was like shortly after Muhammad died. It is indirectly relevant to those discussions because this book touches on the early Islamic movement and warfare. The author has no intention of writing a book bashing Islam nor is he presenting an apologetics for Muslim. The book's main thesis is to challenge the common assumption made by many people today including historians that the Islamic Arabic empire expanded rapidly at an unprecedented rate and that these military expansion are driven to convert people to Islam. Here the author points out that the Islamic expansion was at the same rate as those of other nomadic people such as the Mongols; the author also noted how few people converted to Islam during the military conquests during the early Caliphs as evidence that in the beginning the expansion was not about bringing about conversion of others to Islam per se. In fact, there were strong incentive in the beginning not to convert people into the Arabic community of faith, as that would mean the distinction between conqueror and conquered would be erased and the profit of invasion for the conqueror would disappear (in later period the issue of conversion was controversial because of what it would mean for the original Arabic party). I think the author's citation of early Muslim political sources are solid in establishing this point. I really enjoyed how the book describe the context of the Arabic/Islamic expansion as during a time in which much of the known world was going through a population decrease due to diseases and also the weakening of empires that allowed the Islamic empires to rise and fill in the vacuum. Specifically those empires were the Byzantine, Persians and the Chinese. What made this book unique to other works on the Islamic military expansion (some of which are mentioned in the bibliography) is that this particular work didn't just study the issue from 9th and 10th Century Arabic Sources (some centuries removed from the actual events) but instead it focused on the earlier sources and it also looked into non-Islamic sources. It is incredible to see the citation and footnotes of a wide array of cosmopolitan sources, from the Byzantines, Armenians, Christian monks, Persians, Chinese,

Buddhist monks and travelers who wrote account, the author's ability to cover such large and diverse sources make this a valuable work for decades to come. The appendix must not be missed in which the author summarizes some of the primary sources he employ, so that readers will get a better understanding of what it was that the author was citing. Excellent work and I recommend it for the history buffs, those interested in understanding the role of warfare and violence in Islam and those interested in the history of the Middle East. NOTE: This book was provided to me free by Oxford University Press and Net Galley without any obligation for a positive review. All opinions offered above are mine unless otherwise stated or implied.

xhxx says

A good short history, full of suggestive thoughts on early Muslim civilization.

Hoyland takes a skeptical approach to the Arab sources on the first four Caliphs (632–61 CE). Prefers contemporaries (Christian) to later (Arab Muslim) sources throughout. As a result, provides an episodic and spotty narrative. Hoyland fills in the gaps in his sources by inference and conjecture. But he's all the more convincing for that.

Some questions asked and answered:

Did the conquerors offer the defeated a choice between conversion and death? No. They offered conquest, and took the spoils. They offered their new subjects peace in exchange for tribute. Were the conquerors all Muslims? (I hadn't even thought to ask this question before reading Hoyland.) No; the first conquerors were Arabs leading Arab armies, but many were not Muslim.

The first conquerors did not think of Islam as a universal religion. It was an Arab religion. Muslims were exempt from all taxes. If the conquered people converted to Islam, there would be nothing left to take. When their new subjects asked to convert, the conquerors stalled them. They asked for an Arab Muslim sponsor. They asked for circumcision too. But the conquered still converted. There was nothing in the Qur'an to forbid it.

Two things accelerated the process: First, the Arabs had non-Muslim wives. Those wives gave them Muslim children. Second, the Arabs had non-Muslim servants in their armies and households. They needed the non-Muslims to fight for them, and to administer their estates. When they had rendered those services, the conquerors offered them manumission, and they accepted their requests to convert.

That meant that Islamic civilization assimilated Roman and Persian influences. Especially Persian influences. (Rome had survived, so honouring Rome was always more politically dubious than honouring Persia.) The great learned Muslims of the first centuries were not ethnic Arabs. They were not born Muslims. They were not the conquerors. They were Persians, Egyptians, and Syrians. They were converts. They were the conquered.

How did the conquerors take so much, so quickly? They were a nomad army on advantageous terrain, facing states weakened by decades of war. And as Roman and Persian allies in the centuries before Mohammed, Arabs in the borderlands had learned from the empires. Did the heterodox Christians of Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and North Africa betray the orthodox empire? We have no contemporary evidence for it. Our sources suggest the opposite: the heterodox were as unhappy as the orthodox about the fall of the Near East to non-

Christians.

The conquerors were not invincible. They took the Near East because it was flat, rich, and right next door. They had a lot of trouble in the highlands. They didn't make much headway in the Anatolian highlands and the Caucasus. They had trouble in the Sind and the Hindu-Kush. They tried and failed to take Afghanistan several times. Their sovereignty in northern Iran and the highlands of North Africa was more nominal than real. And they couldn't take Constantinople, even with Slavic help.

The empires were not defeated in the cities or in the countryside. They were defeated on the battlefield. They were not defeated by a new religion. They were defeated by a nomad army. But the conquerors were just and equitable, offering honourable terms to the defeated. (The Arab conquerors followed Near Eastern best practices in that regard.) The conquered kept their old freedoms. They kept their churches. They just had to pay a few new taxes.

Bfisher says

The author contends that the classic history of the Arab conquests has been an Islamicized story written primarily by 9th century Muslim historians - the victors sometimes get to write the history :) Therefore, the accepted history of the Arab conquests was written two centuries afterwards to fit the Islamic worldview of the time. The author cites a number of contemporaneous non-Arab sources to provide a more nuanced view of the sweep of Arab dominance over the Middle East and North African area in the century after the Hijra.

There is a more nuanced explanation of why the Arab armies were able to partition the Byzantine empire, one of the prior superpowers of the region, and overwhelm the Persian empire, the other superpower, and inaugurate an enduring cultural, if not a lasting political change. This is explained in terms of both military and nonmilitary factors, and the role of Islam itself in the conquered areas.

It is a condensed view of a long running process over a vast sweep of territory. Fortunately, there are maps to connect the place names for the reader.

Mohamad Ballan says

An excellent book that sheds important light on the multiple factors that contributed to the process known to historians as the "Arab Conquests." Hoyland provides readers with crucial insight into the social, political, religious, and economic forces that contributed, in one way or another, to the establishment of Islam as a world civilization between 600 and 800 A.D. The author clearly has a strong grasp of the sources--textual, epigraphic, and numismatic--and his critical approach to the evidence is one of the strong points of the book. Rather than privileging later narrative histories of the conquests and the foundation of the Islamic Empire (many of which can be considered founding myths composed by later generations motivated by their own concerns), Hoyland roots his discussion in the seventh-century source material. This ultimately means that he is able to produce a narrative that is colored as much by the conquered as it is by the conquerors. The inclusion of these non-Muslim voices and narratives does a great service to the modern reader who can appreciate the complexity of the Arab conquests and the various ways in which it was understood by

contemporaries. The excellent research is presented in a highly accessible, jargon-free manner which can allow this important work to be appreciated by students and scholars, specialists and non-specialists.

Highly recommended to all students of medieval history.

Mohummed Al Refai says

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The Great Arab Conquests, How the Spread of Islam Changed the World we Live in

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<http://lostislamichistory.com/books/>

Stephen says

A Roman author referred to the Roman and Persian empires as the two eyes of the world -- but they didn't see the Arabs coming. In the span of a hundred years, a people from the desert wastes between Egypt and Mesopotamia had traveled from Spain to the Indus, bringing together a diversity of nations under one banner and laying waste to empires. History texts usually present a map of expansion as the sudden creation and explosive growth of Islam, but Hoyland argues that's premature. Instead, he examines the Arab conquests as...the Arab conquests, in which Islam is first the means of an alliance between Arab tribes that allows them to sack two ailing realms, and then is the means of forging their own empire that transcended tribal bounds. Instead of merely attributing the Arab spring into empire as one motivated by religious zeal, Hoyland examines the Arabs as actors on the historic stage, and dwells on their political skill.

The result is a history that overturns elementary assumptions. For instance, conquest and conversion were two completely different processes: even a province absolutely integral to the nascent Islamic civilization, Persia, was not majority-Muslim until the 14th century. (Islamic provincial governors were by no means eager to force conversion: non-Muslims were taxed by the government.) By preserving the structure of the societies they were conquering -- relying on Christian and Persian scribes, civil officers, etc to retain their roles -- and offering completely secular benefits for joining the Arabs on their globetrotting campaigns, what began as a local city-state quickened into a global phenomenon. Eventually, the religion of the Arabs, who had become the ruling class, would become the religion of a multitude, evolving along the way. Towards the end Hoyland dips into religious history, reflecting on how the century of war, mixed defeats and triumphs, and the assimilation of various cultures shaped it. For instance, he views the bar against images as a way for the Arabs to distinguish themselves against the decadent empires they had supplanted, but especially against the Romans, whose Constantinople twice defeats sieges here. While there were some brief spots in the strictly historical narrative that rivaled Numbers for being a list of names and places without story to them, Hoyland's insightful commentary more than makes for it, This is a history that illustrates not only the beginning of the Islamic world, but shows some of the shared machinery of empires in general. For a book on conquests, there's comparatively little about the actual execution of battles; for that, a source like Crawford's War of the Three Gods might prove a complement.

Related:

War of the Three Gods: Romans, Persians, and the Rise of Islam, Peter Crawford

Destiny, Disrupted: A History of the World Through Islamic Eyes, Tamim Ansary

Anthony Nelson says

Perhaps I'm in the minority, but this is the type of book I would much rather be twice as long. Lots of good information, but little time to get acquainted with the people portrayed.
