



## The Causes and Contexts of the Emergence of Religious Claimants in Medieval Iranian History (with an Emphasis on the 5th to 9th Centuries AH)

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### Abstract

The history of Iran has consistently been confronted with heterodox religious ideas and, consequently, the emergence of false claimants to prophethood, Imamate, and Messianism—a trend that continues to this day. Notably, the medieval Islamic centuries, particularly the 5th to 9th centuries AH, played a significant role in this phenomenon. These events were shaped by political, religious, and economic factors and profoundly affected the fabric of Iranian society during this period. The influence of religion and religious phenomena on the political, social, and even economic transformations of Iran throughout history, especially during the medieval Islamic period, is undeniable. In this context, the emergence of false religious claimants attests to the significance and status of religion, while also demonstrating its potential for instrumental use in the political arena.

Historical reports indicate that a significant number of false claimants to prophethood (false prophets), Imamate, and Messianism (false Mahdism) appeared during this period, making it essential for specialists to analyze this phenomenon. Historical evidence suggests that the frequency, diversity, intensity, and scale of the emergence of false claimants make this period in Iranian history distinct and worthy of scientific examination compared to other periods. Thus, this research, using a descriptive-analytical method, seeks to answer the fundamental question: What are the causes and contexts of the emergence of religious claimants in Medieval Iranian history, particularly during the 5th to 9th centuries AH? The primary aim of the research is to develop a theory concerning Iranian history. Given that Iran has consistently faced such events throughout its history, even to this day, analyzing and understanding this phenomenon during the medieval period—an exceptional and unique era—will be invaluable for grasping its origins, themes, and roots in subsequent periods.

Regarding the literature or research background, it must be acknowledged that despite the importance of discussing the causes and contexts of the emergence of false claimants, there is a lack of scientific research, particularly concerning the specified period. The few existing studies, such as the book “*False Mahdism*” (Jafarian, 2012),



the article “*Messianism during the Mongol Rule in Iran*” (Izadi, 2013), the article “*Typology of False Claimants of Mahdism*” (Saffari Foroushani and Erfan, 2014), and the article “*An Analysis of the Claim of Mahdism by the Hurufiyya Sect during the Timurid Period*” (Alizadeh Deil and Karimi, 2019), primarily introduce some of the claimants, generally focusing on false claimants of Mahdism within the broader context of Islamic history. The article “*False Claimants and Their Propaganda Tactics in the Medieval History of Iran*” (Shabani and Abbasi Rami, 2022) addresses the propaganda tactics of the claimants, such as magic, claiming connections with the supernatural and religious leaders, possessing spiritual charisma, and fabricating lineage, all within the broad spectrum of the Medieval Islamic period. The research “*Understanding the Nature of False Claimants in the Medieval History of Iran (4th-9th centuries AH)*” (Shabani and Abbasi Rami, 2023) explores whether the primary social origins of religious claimants in the 4th to 9th centuries AH were urban, rural, or tribal.

Thus, an analytical approach, particularly concerning the causes and contexts of the emergence of religious claimants and the development of a comprehensive theory, is notably absent in the work of these researchers, underscoring the innovative and pioneering nature of the present study. This research, derived from a dissertation titled “*Heterodox Religious Ideas and Reactions to Them in the Medieval History of Iran,*” examines false religious claimants during the Medieval Islamic period, with a section devoted to the causes and contexts of their emergence from the 5th to 9th centuries AH, further emphasizing the originality of this work.

An examination of the causes and contexts for the emergence of religious claimants in Medieval Iranian history, particularly from the 5th to 9th centuries AH, reveals the influence of various factors. First, the historical background and the prevailing political mindset concerning the idea of a savior's emergence, especially claimants of prophethood, imamate, and Messianism, must be considered. This phenomenon not only has historical precedence in Iranian and Islamic history but has also been shaped by interactions with various religions and nations throughout history.

Achieving political, economic, and social objectives by leveraging religious motives as powerful drivers was another reason for the emergence of false claimants. Personal and group benefits were fundamental factors, with historical sources documenting the pursuit of power, wealth, and the accumulation of others' property through deceit and trickery, highlighting their instrumental use of society's religious beliefs.

Moreover, exploiting the political and social conditions, along with public discontent arising from the turmoil caused by the invasions and dominance of the Turkic-Mongol nomadic governments, also contributed to the public's acceptance of false claimants. As a result, the motivations for claiming to be a savior, in various forms such as prophethood, Imamate, and Messianism, were established.

It is, therefore, no coincidence that false claimants and their supporters primarily came from the lower social classes, who were oppressed by various forms of injustice and inequality. Additionally, the disintegration of the class system and the decline in the status of the upper classes, particularly the Iranian elite, due to foreign domination, sometimes aligned these elites with the lower social classes around a false claimant,



fueling movements and uprisings. They also exploited the public's lack of religious awareness, particularly regarding the concept of expectation, using propaganda tactics such as dreams, ascetic practices, magic, and self-victimization to attract followers and disciples.

Furthermore, mind control through brainwashing techniques and flattery, along with the creation of false personas for their followers, was part of their strategy.

The lack of, or at least the disruption and damage to, the legitimacy of the predominantly foreign governments during the 5th to 9th centuries AH, and also the social rejection of their authority, provided the necessary background and motivation for the emergence of heterodox religious claims. This, in turn, led to the rise of false claimants and the subsequent transformations resulting from their actions and activities.

**Keywords:** Religious claimants, causes and contexts, history of Iran, Medieval Islamic centuries, 12th to 16th centuries.

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