



## ‘**AYYĀR**

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‘**AYYĀR**, a noun meaning literally “vagabond,” applied to members of medieval *fotowwa* (*fotūwa*) brotherhoods and comparable popular organizations.

*i. General.*

*ii. ‘Ayyār in Persian sources.*

**i. General**

The history of ‘*ayyārs* and ‘*ayyārī* presents a paradox. On the one hand, there can be little doubt as to their pre-Islamic origin, not only because in later times they were said to have certain distinctively Iranian customs, but above all because in the Islamic period up to the Mongol invasion they were only to be found in territories which had once belonged to the Sasanian empire. On the other hand, our scanty documentation on that empire does not appear to contain anything about them. The early Islamic sources present difficulties because they combine different traditions—Arab, Iranian, urban, rural-aristocratic—under the same name.

In the pre-Islamic Arab tradition, the noun *fatā* (plur. *fetyān*), literally “young man,” was applied to any individual claiming the specific qualities of youth (*fotowwa*). The latter noun also acquired the collective meaning of a group of such individuals, though this usage is not attested before the 2nd/8th century.



The qualities were essentially courage, generosity, and chivalry. In the Iranian aristocratic tradition, the noun *javānmard*, also literally “young man,” or its Arabic equivalent *fatā* meant a sort of knight-errant, in whom similar qualities were expected. The urban brotherhoods were evidently influenced by these ideas and words, but to what extent we do not know; in any case they were different in their recruitment, corporate organization, and confinement to towns.

Comprehension of the urban *fotowwa* movement is hampered by the fact that the sources are of two different kinds. As will be seen, the *fotowwa* brotherhoods at a certain stage of their development began to absorb ideas of mystic origin, and this trend found expression in writings which prompted a long-held belief among modern scholars that the movement was essentially ideological. Although F. Taeschner, who collected almost all our documentation, and L. Massignon, who set Islamic socio-religious problems in the context of his personal understanding, did not ignore certain aspects of recruitment conducive to this ideology, neither could really explain the position of the *fotowwa* brotherhoods in the social contexts of their times. Research faces the difficulty that for the early Islamic period we possess no texts emanating from *fotowwa* circles, and that for later times we possess little except ideologically slanted writings. Our only information about social aspects of the *fotowwa* movement in early Islamic times comes in works by authors connected with aristocratic circles, who take no interest in it except in cases of its involvement in disorders, when they describe it as a bandit organization; they never credit it with ideological motives. Nevertheless it seems possible, if clear questions are asked, to extract sufficient evidence from the sources to permit the piecing together of an interesting social record.

The picture is one of groups of young men (*fetyān*) aspiring towards a better life. Although the members were not required to quit after growing older and acquiring wives and children, they were for the most part bachelors, which led their adversaries to accuse them of homosexuality. They lived more or less together, ate together, and held joint entertainments. In short they were “comrades,” bound by a strong sense of group loyalty (*‘aṣabīya*), who saw themselves as “smarter” than other men and apparently had demanding notions of personal and group honor. Although it appears (contrary to some opinions) that they did not admit non-Moslems, who may have had similar groups of their own, religious belief was clearly not the main bond. The evidence shows only that particular groups were associated with different



persuasions. The *fetyān* have often been portrayed as artisans or proletarians, but it should be borne in mind that *fotowwa* groups were not organized on a craft basis before late medieval times, and then only in the Turco-Iranian lands; also that the *fetyān*, while clearly for the most part of humble origin, included and would increasingly include influential notables, who found membership useful in building up clienteles for furtherance of their ambitions.

In historical chronicles and other writings, the *fetyān* generally appear as trouble-makers, ready in times of breakdown of authority to harass rich merchants and other worthies by pillaging or threatening to pillage the shops or premises of any who would not pay them fixed sums of protection-money. Being subject to police surveillance even in undisturbed times, the *fetyān* pressed for appointments of police chiefs sympathetic to them and even applied for enrollment in the police, which would assure them of regular pay as well as impunity. At Baghdad they achieved these goals for a short time in the 5th/11th century, but never did so in the subsequent period of Turkish rule when urban policing was in the hands of the army. In provincial towns where the central government's grip was less tight, the *fetyān* in the early period often made themselves the real masters, no doubt after admitting a "bourgeois" element into their ranks. In the subsequent period when political fragmentation permitted the rise of local lordships, *fetyān* groups were more than once able to bring their own candidate to power.

It is a well-known fact that medieval Moslem cities were often torn by strife between factions whose sectarian labels must have masked social cleavages not easily detectable today. The *fetyān*, with their group loyalties (*ʿaṣabīyāt*), frequently appear as militant wings of broader movements. Like the sans-culottes of the French revolution, they often proudly appropriated insulting or contemptuous names given to them by their adversaries—names which varied from century to century. It would therefore be hazardous to dissociate them from those to whom the texts give names such as *ʿayyār* (vagabond), *šāṭer* (adroit), *rend* (rogue), and in the nineteenth century *lūṭī* (pederast, rowdy).

Sometimes there were separate and rival *fotowwa* groups in a town. On the other hand, groups in different towns maintained a degree of solidarity, notably through hospitality to traveling comrades. The Ismaʿilis may have tried to infiltrate *fotowwa* groups in this way, but (despite certain suppositions) there is no evidence that they had any success.



The *fetyān* or ‘*ayyārān* have often been confused with the *gāzīs*. This is incorrect but explicable. The *gāzīs*, being volunteers for holy war, were only important in frontier regions, at first mainly in Central Asia where they faced the pagan Turks. Although they were recruited from town-dwellers and concentrated in towns, they had no links with the urban social organizations. Conversely the ‘*ayyārān* had nothing to do with holy war. In the frontier regions, however, the two elements were obviously bound to become more or less intermixed, whereas in the towns on the Iranian plateau no such process occurred. Where intermixing did take place, it was fostered by the popular institution of the *zūrkāna* (gymnasium), in which young men practiced archery and other sports.

It has already been mentioned that from the 5th/11th century onward, some of the *fotowwa* groups began to adopt an ideology which brought them into contact with mystic circles then seeking corporate forms, and that this trend gave rise to a considerable literary output. The groups thus acquired an increasing cultural role in contemporary society. As a result they began, during the 6th/12th century, to attract favorable attention from official and clerical quarters hitherto hostile to them. Finally the caliph al-Nāṣer (575/1180-622/1225) decided to support them while planning to use their organizations as instruments for integrating them in a social framework which would transcend sectarian difference and be held together by the aristocracy and the caliphate. Literature written under official auspices to promote this policy is the source of such knowledge as we possess concerning initiation ceremonies and patron saints (‘Alī, Salmān) in the ritual of various groups. It is significant that Šehāb-al-dīn Sohrawardī, one of the chief exponents of *fotowwa* teachings, was also the founder of a mystic order. In later times we find occasional mentions of notables who combined mystic literary activity with leadership of more or less violent protest-groups.

The originality of the caliph al-Nāṣer’s *fotowwa* policy lay in its being on the one hand an effort to promote unity and discipline, and on the other hand an attempt to win over the notables by giving them exclusive control of sports and thereby enabling them to acquire popular clienteles. Al-Nāṣer not only pursued this policy in his own domains but also persuaded most of the leading Moslem princes in the east to adopt it. The fact that the orientalist J. von Hammer-Purgstall happened to find the manuscript of a “Court *fotowwa*” text at a time (in the mid-19th century) when no other *fotowwa* texts were known, gave rise to the long-held notion that the *fotowwa* was initially a sort of order



of chivalry. In Iraq, the city and therewith the *fotowwa* of Baghdad were soon afterward destroyed by the Mongol invasion. Somewhat surprisingly this was just the time when the *fotowwa* achieved a remarkable and long-lasting spread into Asia Minor and Azarbaijan in the new and perhaps original form of the brotherhoods mentioned under the name *akī* (plur. *akīān*). We do not have such clear information about what happened in the rest of Iran and in Central Asia under the various Mongol and Turkish regimes of the next two and a half centuries. The outstanding development in the Turco-Iranian sphere as a whole in this period is the increasingly (though unevenly) close linkage between *fotowwa* groups and guilds. The *fetyān* began to identify and organize themselves on the basis of their craft or trade, and thus to gain control of the respective guilds. This system subsequently spread to the Arab countries as a result of the Ottoman conquest.

In later times the *fotowwa* tended to become semi-official. *Fotowwa* catechisms and guild rule-books had virtually identical titles and contents. Popular dislike of this tendency may perhaps have been an underlying cause of the Sarbadār revolt in Khorasan in the 8th/14th century; in Qajar Iran it was voiced by the *lūṭīs* (rowdies) and by men of the type made known to Europeans and Americans through J. Morier's portrayal of Hajji Baba of Isfahan.

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The largest number of original texts as well as the most important and the greatest number of studies bearing on *'ayyārs* and *fotowwa* were published by Franz Taeschner; nearly all of these are now assembled in a posthumous volume edited by Heinz Halm under the title of *Zünfte und Bruderschaften im Islam*, Artemis Verlag, Zurich and Munich, 1979.

See also "Futuwwa" by Claude Cahen and Franz Taeschner in *EI*<sup>2</sup>. Most of the references to studies on the subject are found in Claude Cahen, "Mouvements populaires et autonomisme urbain dans l'Asie musulmane du Moyen Age," *Arabica*, 1958-59, also printed separately, Leiden, 1960. Despite the Iranian nature of the *fotowwa* and the *'ayyārs* the majority of the relevant works are in



Arabic and concern the Arab world. In addition to major Arabic histories, mention should be made of *Ketāb al-ḏakā’er wa’l-toḥaf* by the Egyptian Rašīd b. Zobayr, ed. Ḥamīdallāh, Kuwait, 1959. (For Persian sources and studies see the of the following article.)

(Cl. Cahen)

ii. ‘Ayyār in Persian Sources

In Persian sources the term ‘*ayyār*’ varies widely in meaning with time and context. It appears in prose texts and poetry of all periods, and is used literally and metaphorically with both positive and negative connotations. No succinct definition can cover all occurrences of the term, but three broad areas of meaning can be distinguished: (1) In a neutral or negative sense, mostly in historical works, ‘*ayyār*’ can mean irregular fighter, rogue, highwayman, robber, troublemaker. (2) In a sense ranging from somewhat negative to somewhat positive, mostly in poetry, it can mean strong, fast, or rough; a night prowler, a deceiver, or a coquette. (3) In a wholly positive sense it can mean a noble-minded highwayman, or a generous, clever, brave, modest, pious, chaste, hospitable, generally upright person. This last image is found mostly in poetry, in *adab* and Sufi texts, and popular romances. The meaning of ‘*ayyār*’ often reflects the social point of view of the author of the text in which it appears, so it can be found with quite different meanings in the same period. Further complicating the problem of definition is the fact that at times ‘*ayyār*’ is synonymous with *javānmard* (q.v.), and the abstract noun ‘*ayyārī*’ is synonymous with *javānmardī* and *fotowwa* (*fotūwa*). Rather than attempt a chronological or generic survey of the term, this article will examine the three large areas of meaning mentioned above, and the sources for each.

1. ‘*Ayyārs*’ portrayed in a neutral or negative sense appear in early historical texts as irregular fighting men. *Tārīk-eSīstān* mentions Ṣāleḥ b. Naṣr, a local ‘*ayyār*’, who rose to power in Bost in 238/852-53 and that “all of his army’s strength came from Ya’qūb b. Layṭ and the ‘*ayyārs*’ of Sīstān” (p. 193; tr., p. 153). *Qābūs-nāma* describes what sort of songs to sing on particular occasions, and says “If you see [in your audience] soldiers and ‘*ayyārs*’, sing quatrains in the Transoxanian style about war and bloodshed, and in praise of ‘*ayyārs*’” (pp. 195-96; tr., p. 189). Qaṭrān of Tabrīz, in a *qaṣīda* praising a ruler’s military prowess, says of an enemy fortress that it was as wide and high as the sky and filled with fighting men, each one chosen for his bloodthirstiness and ‘*ayyārī*’ (*Dīvān*, p. 397). In the story of Ardašīr and Haftvād, Ferdowsī says: “There was



an ambitious man named Šāhōy/who was of bad character and ill-spoken” (*Šāh-nāma* [Moscow] VII, p. 145), and: “There was also Šāhōy, [Haftvād’s] ‘*ayyār*/who was his eldest son and his commander” (loc. cit., p. 153).

‘*Ayyārs* acting in groups appear to have been led by *sarhangs*. Gardīzī, discussing Ya‘qūb b. Layt, says, “After being a coppersmith he turned to ‘*ayyārī*, and from there to stealing and highway robbery. Then he became a *sarhang*, acquired a following, and gradually became a commander (*amīr*). He was the first to be given the leadership (*sarhangī*) of Bost” (*Zayn al-aḵbār*, ed. Ḥabībī, p. 139). *Tārīk-eSīstān* describes how in 248/862-63 Ya‘qūb b. Layt promised rewards to defecting Kharejites: “Ya‘qūb gave their leaders robes of honor and praised them saying that “whoever of you is a *sarhang* I shall make an *amīr*, and whoever is a cavalryman I shall make a *sarhang*, and whoever is a footsoldier I shall make a cavalryman”” (p. 205, tr., pp. 162-63).

Groups of ‘*ayyārs* often acted independently, siding with or against the established authority. When the Saffarid Ṭāher b. Ḳalaf revolted in 393/1002-03 against his father Ḳalaf b. Aḥmad, and Ḳalaf captured Ṭāher after swearing a false oath, “The people of Sīstān (i.e., Zaranj) and Ṭāher’s army and the ‘*ayyārs* closed up the city, turned against Ḳalaf, and proclaimed their allegiance to the Ghaznavid Sultan Maḥmūd” (*Tārīk-eSīstān*, p. 350, tr. p. 285). In contrast, in 635/1237-38 the ruler of Herat with a group of ‘*ayyārs* from the city went five farsangs out of Herat to greet the amir ‘Ezz-al-dīn Moḡaddam and welcomed him warmly (*Asfezārī, Rawzāt al-jannāt* II, p. 110).

In times of weak central authority, groups of ‘*ayyārs* would often harass local populations. After the death of Maḥmūd of Ġazna in 421/1030 “Turmoil appeared on the earth and the world was disturbed . . . . The ‘*ayyārs* took the city and engaged in fighting and factionalism . . . and burned and plundered the houses of Imam Fāḳer b. Ma‘ād and his sons” (*Tārīk-eSīstān*, p. 362, tr. p. 295). In 423/1031-32 affairs were still in turmoil, but “[Bū Sa‘d Jīmartī] had arrived and the uproar of the ‘*ayyārs* had lessened because he had cut in half a number of them, and ‘Azīz [Fūšanjī, who had arrived earlier] had arrested the *sarhangs* and whipped them, and had decapitated and cut in two their leaders” (ibid., p. 363, tr. p. 296). Similarly, in the troubled times following the death of the Saljuq Sultan Malekšāh in 485/1092 the ‘*ayyārs* harassed Bayhaq, and Fakr-al-dīn Abu’l-Qāsem Faryūmadī patrolled the city with cavalry and foot soldiers for five months to protect the families and property there (*Ebn Fondoq, Tārīk-eBayhaq*, pp. 101, 478).



A number of individual 'ayyārs appear in the historical texts as local strongmen and troublemakers. A dark view of 'ayyārs is taken by Ebn Esfandiār: "Much trouble broke out in Khorasan at the hands of *rends* and 'ayyārs . . . . The most prominent of all was Ya'qūb b. al-Layṭ the Copper Smith, who was originally of lowly origin and an 'ayyār" (*Tārīk-eṬabarestān* I, p. 245, tr. pp. 180-81). A particularly troublesome individual was 'Alī Qohandezī who operated in the area of Jūzjānān. Gardizī calls him "an 'ayyār and a malefactor" (*mardī 'ayyār o mofsed*; *Zayn al-aḵbār*, p. 202), and Bayhaqī says that "he had spent some time in that district and had robbed and plundered and made trouble; several clever fellows had allied themselves with him and they used to raid caravans and plunder villages" (2nd ed., pp. 741-43). The reputation of 'ayyārs for this sort of behavior is echoed in a line from Sa'dī where he says "If that city-disturbing 'ayyār should ask about me one day/Say "He can't sleep at night because of [the disturbance caused by] the 'ayyārs"" (*Ġazalhā* II, no. 456, p. 151). Here the 'ayyār is, of course, the beloved, and what is disturbed is peace of mind, patience, sobriety, and sleep. In addition to the above, the sources contain many references to 'ayyārs as deceivers, thieves, or worse. Ebn Fondoq says that Ṭūs was famous for its 'ayyārs (*op. cit.*, p. 46), and Gardizī related that when Alptigin passed through the environs of Ṭūs in 350/961-62 some of his baggage was left behind and the 'ayyārs and sarhangs plundered it and carried it off (*op. cit.*, p. 162). The fourteenth-century historian Karīm Āqsarāī explains the origins of a popular expression with an anecdote about a trusting monk and a thievish 'ayyār (*Mosāmarat al-aḵbār*, p. 69). This view of 'ayyārs is also found in Ḥāfeẓ' line "Depend not on the night-prowling star; for this 'ayyār/Has stolen Kāvūs's crown and Kaykosrow's belt" (*Dīvān*, no. 407, p. 281). Similarly, Mas'ūd-e Sa'd-e Salmān says "My heart-stealer, like an 'ayyār, has stolen my heart/Yes, stealing has always been the business of 'ayyārs" (*Dīvān*, p. 277), and again, "I do not know why I have been imprisoned/I know that I am neither a thief nor an 'ayyār" (*ibid.*, p. 357). Mo'ezzī likewise says "Nowrūz spread a new display in the flower gardens/And stole yesterday's display from the garden like an 'ayyār" (*Dīvān*, p. 674). This attitude is seen at its most extreme in the scandalous tales recounted by Moḥammad Hāšem Āṣaf of court life during the reign of Shah Sultan Ḥosayn (r. 1105-35/1694-1722), emphasizing the decadent morality of the time. He links 'ayyārs with popular champions, wrestlers, night prowlers, imposters, rogues, dare-devils, and swindlers (*Rostam al-tawārīk*, pp. 103, 108-09, 153).

2. 'Ayyārs are not always portrayed as thoroughly bad: Often they are viewed ambivalently. Sometimes they are described as strong, quick, or rough as in a quatrain written by a famous *rend* after witnessing the *samā'* of the Mawlawī



(Turk. Mevlevi) dervishes: “Those who associate with (*barḳordār-and*) that Noble One/Are quick and bold and ‘ayyarish/Beware, do not grapple with them, for/They have defeated and taken as slaves a hundred like you” (Aflākī, *Manāqeb al-ārefīn*, p. 840). In the same vein, Nāṣer(-e) Ḳosrow says “The sober man is helpless in the hands of drunks/Even if he is like an ‘ayyār ” (*Dīvān*, no. 167, p. 352), the image representing the sober but “unawakened” man in the clutches of this world. The ‘ayyār as spy or night prowler is seen in an anecdote in *Manāqeb al-ārefīn* when Jalāl-al-dīn Ḳvārazmšāh says of ‘Alā’-al-dīn Kayqobād that “in ‘ayyārī and night prowling he is a wonder” (pp. 49-50). Nāṣer Ḳosrow says of solitude, his “companion” in Yomgān “You will never see him nor hear what he says/Nobody has ever seen such an ‘ayyār ” (*Dīvān*, no. 127, p. 272); and Ḥāfeẓ, about his beloved: “What hard-hearted one taught her these ‘ayyarish ways/For from the first when she came out she has robbed the night-people (*šab zendadārān*: *Dīvān*, no. 153, p. 104). The ‘ayyār as coquette or deceiver is seen in Ṣā’eb’s verse: “Although that eye appears to be ill/Do not be deceived by its tricks: It might be an ‘ayyār ” (*Kollīyat*, no. 879, p. 322), and in this verse from Solṭān Ebrāhīm Mīrzā: “Don’t think that her eye knows not the ways of ‘ayyārī/It just presents itself so that you would think not” (*Maktab-e woqū’*, p. 5).

3. ‘Ayyārs are presented in a strongly positive sense in many sources. *Qābūs-nāma* has a story about an ‘ayyār from Khorasan who is described as “very respectable, of good character, and well known” (p. 145, tr., p. 133). *Sīar al-molūk* has Ya’qūb b. Layṭ describe his rise to power and fortune as due to bravery and ‘ayyārī, not to inheritance (p. 24, tr., p. 18). In *Čahār maqāla* the Amir Abu’l-Moẓaffar Čaġānī says to the poet Farroḳī (regarding a herd of horses), “You are a Sīstānī and an ‘ayyār</em>; you can have as many as you can catch” (p. 64). ‘Ayyārī means skill in Ḥāfeẓ’s lines “It is natural that I be oppressed by that curly lock/But what fear of her bonds and chains is there for one with the ways of an ‘ayyār ?” (*Dīvān*, no. 191, p. 129), and “Thinking of your locks is not for the inexperienced/For escaping from chains is the way of ‘ayyārī” (*ibid.*, no. 66, p. 46).

From the time of the earliest appearances of ‘ayyārī in Persian texts, the word has also been linked with *javānmardī*. Early definitions of *javānmardī* often involve ‘ayyārī. Abu’l-Ḥasan ‘Alī Hojvīrī relates an anecdote about the Sufi Ḥamdūn-e Qaṣṣār who met in Nišāpūr an ‘ayyār named Nūḥ and asked him the definition of *javānmardī*. Nūḥ defined it in mystical terms (*Kašf al-maḥjūb*, p. 228; ‘Aṭṭār repeats this story in his *Tadkerat al-awlīā’*, pp. 401-02). *Qābūs-*



*nāma* discusses 'ayyārs and puts forth a theory of *javānmardī*, which it divides into three levels. The first level is the *javānmardī-e'ayyārī*, possessed by 'ayyārs, soldiers, and merchants (p. 243ff., tr., p. 239ff.). In the chapter "On Being a Merchant" in the same work, the author advises his son to associate with three types of persons while traveling: 'Ayyārs and persons who practice *javānmardī*; wealthy and generous persons; and those who know the roads and the local area (p.170, tr., p. 161). The importance of the ethical code of *javānmardī* is stressed in an anecdote related by Hojvīrī about Fozayl b. 'Eyāz, a noble-minded 'ayyār who guarded faithfully money entrusted to him by a merchant from the very caravan that he was robbing (op. cit., p. 120; also in 'Aṭṭār, op. cit., pp. 89-90, tr., pp. 53-54). A story making the same point is found in *Qābūs-nāma*, pp. 108-09, tr., pp. 96-97).

The richest and most extensive representation of 'ayyārs in the positive sense is in the pre-Safavid storytellers' romances, where the 'ayyārs are popular heroes, deeply motivated by the ideals of *javānmardī*. One of the functions of these romances must have been to portray and transmit the ideals of 'ayyārī and *javānmardī* to an illiterate population. In doing so, they present a view of 'ayyārs quite at odds with that found in the works of court historians. The earliest of these romances, and the one in which the ethical code, and the rituals of the 'ayyārs are most clearly set out, is *Samak-e 'ayyār*. Explicit descriptions can be found in vol. I/1, pp. 44-45, 48-49, and 65. From these, and from descriptions of the garb and equipment of 'ayyārs (e.g., *ibid.*, I/1, pp. 44, 104; *Dārāb-nāma* I, p. 685) and references to initiations (*ibid.*, II, p. 310), it is clear that in addition to engaging in the traditional activities of 'ayyārs, these 'ayyārs are being shown as members of a corporate, initiatory organization apparently similar to organizations of craftsmen, and Sufi orders in the Iranian world.

In the storytellers' romances of the Safavid period, the 'ayyārs become almost fantastic figures. The most famous of these, Mehtar Nesīm in *Eskandar-nāma* and 'Amr-e Omayya in *Romūz-e Ḥamza*, no longer represent the ethical ideals of *javānmardī*, but become essentially comic figures and vehicles for the creative imagination of the oral narrators who told these tales. They still embody a non- or even anti-courtly view of society, however, and are a balance to the early court historians who looked on 'ayyārs as threats to public order and established power. By the Qajar period, 'ayyārs are no longer mentioned in popular romances.



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See also E. Narāqī, *Āyīn-e javānmardī*, Tehran, 1363 Š./1984, basically a Persian translation of H. Corbin’s introduction of M. Šarrāf’s *Rasā’el-e javānmardī*, but with the addition of 19 articles on ‘ayyārs and *fotowwa* by mostly Persian scholars.