Encyclopædia Iranica

BANŪ SĀSĀN
Article by **Clifford Edmund Bosworth**

Published: December 15, 1988
Last Updated: October 28, 2016

BANŪ SĀSĀN

BANŪ SĀSĀN, a name frequently applied in medieval Islam to beggars, rogues, charlatans, and tricksters of all kinds, allegedly so called because they stemmed from a legendary Shaikh Sāsān. A story frequently found in the sources, from Ebn al-Moqaffaʿ onward, states that Sāsān was the son of the ancient Persian ruler Bahman b. Esfandīār, but, being displaced from the succession, took to a wandering life and gathered round him other vagabonds, thus forming the "sons of Sāsān." Another explanation says that the Persian nation as a whole took to begging and vagabondage after the Arab conquest of the 1st/7th century and excited pity by claiming to be descendants of the dispossessed Sasanian house, and the process whereby the name of a fallen dynasty is satirically or ironically applied to a subsequent group seems psychologically possible. Further etymologies have been sought in Sanskrit and in Persian itself (see Bosworth, I, pp. 22-24).

The Banū Sāsān, as depicted for us in such works of Arab *adab* literature as those of Jāḥeẓ, Ebrāhīm b. Moḥammad Bayhaqī, Abū Dolaf, and the *maqāmāt* of Badīʿ-al-Zamān Hamaḏānī and Ḥarīrī, must have ranged—whether in groups or as individuals—all over the Islamic lands and as far as the borders of India. Specifically in regard to the Iranian lands, the beggar leader Ḵāled b. Yazīd in Jāḥeẓ's *Ketāb al-boḵalāʾ* boasts that he has in the course of his life headed bands of robbers and desperadoes from the outlaws and bandits of Jebāl, of the Baṭṭ river region in Ḵūzestān, of the Kūfečīs (q.v.) of Kermān and Baluchistan, and the pirates of Qīqān of the Makrān coast. In almost all the literature relevant to the Banū Sāsān, the Kurds are singled out as the nation

of predators and brigands par excellence, and Ḵāled b. Yazīd in his enumeration of the beggar leaders mentions Jaʿfar Kordī among various others with Persian names, such as Banjawayh, Ḥammawayh, Sahrām, Saʿdawayh, Mardawayh, etc. From Abū Dolaf's poem (see below), it emerges that the Kābolis (or perhaps in this context, the Indians in general) were especially famed as jugglers and conjurors (see Jāḥeẓ, *Boḵalāʾ*, ed. Ṭaha Ḥājerī, Cairo, 1958, pp. 46, 50, tr. Ch. Pellat, *Le livre des avares*, Paris, 1951, pp. 66, 71; Bosworth, I, pp. 34ff., 93-94, 171).

Regarding the ethnic composition of these beggars and rogues, doubtless representatives of all the Middle Eastern peoples were to be found within their ranks, while from the social aspect we can only surmise, in the absence of firm documentation, that the greater part of them may have been misfits in society or déracinés and were probably from the lowest strata of the population. It is clear that they should be differentiated from such groups in medieval Iranian society as the *ʿayyār*s, who seem to have been primarily urban and rural vigilantes, at times paramilitary groups, and the *šoṭṭār* or urban mobsters and rowdies, and from such bodies in more recent Iranian society as the urban *lūṭī*s.

The medieval Arabic literature, as well as giving us the names of beggar chiefs and their groups, also provides us with the texts of two lengthy poems written in the jargon or argot of the Bānū Sāsān, i.e., the *qaṣīdasāsānīya*s of the traveler and litterateur Abū Dolaf Ḵazrajī (q.v.) (4th/10th century) and of the Iraqi poet Ṣafī-al-Dīn Ḥellī (8th/14th century). The first of these poems was actually written for the great vizier of the Buyids, the Ṣāḥeb Esmāʿīl b. ʿAbbād (q.v.) (Ṯaʿālebī, *Yatīmat al-dahr*, ed. Moḥammad Moḥyi'l-Dīn ʿAbd-al-Ḥamīd, Cairo, 1375-77/1956-58, III, pp. 356-57, cf. Bosworth, I, pp. 76ff.). In this jargon, the so-called *monākāt* or *monāḡāt Banī Sāsān*, while the general basis is clearly Arabic, many loan words appear, including some from Persian. Thus in Abū Dolaf's *qaṣīda*, we have *boštadārīyūn* "porters," from Persian *pošt-dārī* "one who carries something on his back" (v. 90; Bosworth, II, p. 259); *ḵᵛoš-būyī* "drugged stew," from Persian *ḵᵛoš-būy* "fragrant, having a savory smell" (v. 116; Bosworth, II, pp. 268-69); and *kors* "fasting, hunger," from Persian *gors*, *gorosnagī* "hunger" (vv. 79, 116; Bosworth, II, p. 253). In that of Ṣafī-al-Dīn—which was written for one of the Turkmen Artoqid rulers of Dīārbakr, at whose court Persian cultural influence was strong—we find rather more Persian elements, such as *boštadārī*, here "slave boy," also in *boštakānī ḵorda* "peddler of trashy, insignificant goods," with the second element also Persian

(vv. 7, 46; Bosworth, II, pp. 305, 332); *hankām* “assembly, circle” and verb *hankama* “to gather round,” from Persian *hangām(a)* “assembly, crowd of traders, players, etc.,” > “noise, commotion”; *jarraḵa* “to dance,” perhaps from Persian *čarḵ* “wheel” > “a turning circle of dancers” (v. 54; Bosworth, II, p. 336); and *ḵandaja* “to laugh,” from Persian *ḵandagī* “laughter” (v. 55; Bosworth, II, p. 337).

One should finally note traces of the persistence of the Bānū Sāsān and their jargon on the far eastern fringes of the Iranian world as attested in an anonymous *Ketāb-e sāsīān-e bā-kamāl* (Book of the most consummate beggars), possibly dating from the 8th/14th century and preserved at Tashkent, which contains a jargon vocabulary with Persian equivalents (the form *sāsī* for *sāsānī* is not infrequent in Persian contexts; cf. Dehḵodā, s.v.). This has been thoroughly investigated by A. L. Troitskaya in her “Abdoltili. Argo tsekha artistov i muzykantov Sredneĭ Azii,” *Sovetskoe vostokovedenie* 5, 1948, pp. 251-74, where she notes the persistence of several of these jargon terms (some in turn traceable back to Abū Dolaf’s time) up to the 14th/20th century among the guilds (*mehterlik*) of artists and musicians in what is now Soviet Uzbekistan (cf. Bosworth, I, pp. 171-76).

See also begging i.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

See in general C. E. Bosworth, *The Mediaeval Islamic Underworld. The Banū Sāsān in Arabic Society and Literature*, 2 vols., Leiden, 1976, to be supplemented by idem, “Jewish Elements in the Banū Sāsān,” *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 33/5-6, September-November, 1976, pp. 289-94.

Search terms:

بنو ساسان banou sasan bano sasan banou saasaan