



## BARĪD

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**BARĪD**, the official postal and intelligence service of the early Islamic caliphate and its successor states. The service operated by means of couriers mounted on mules or horses or camels or traveling on foot. In this way, official letters and dispatches were delivered to the central *dīvān* in Damascus or Baghdad or such provincial capitals as Shiraz, Bukhara, and Ġazna; and, since this was an official institution, with its personnel drawing their salaries from the central or provincial exchequers, it was only exceptionally that private correspondence was carried. The use of such a communications network dates back in the Iranian world to the Achaemenids, with their relay service along the “Royal Roads” such as the one from Sardis to Susa (cf. Herodotus, 5.52-3; *Camb. Hist. Iran* II/I, pp. 276-77), and was perpetuated by the Sasanians. Hence K̄vāja Neẓām-al-Molk was correct (*Sīar al-molūk* [*Sīāsāt-nāma*], chap. 10, ed. Darke<sup>1</sup>, Tehran, 2535 = 1353 Š./1974, p. 79, tr. Darke, *The Book of Government*, London, 1960, p. 66) in tracing the institution back beyond Islamic times and in stressing the vital necessity of it for enabling the ruler to acquire information about happenings in remote provinces of the empire and, especially, to control governors and officials who might be tempted, because of their distance from the capital, into rebellion.

Popular etymology derived the term *barīd* from *borīda-donb* “having docked tails,” but it derives in reality from late Latin *veredus* “post-horse,” showing Byzantine influences in the evolution of the Islamic *barīd* system. However, the technical terminology of the system does contain some Persian elements, e.g., *forāneq* “man who carries the dispatch bags” (from Pers. *parvāna*, see,



further, the section on the technical terms of the postal service in K̄vārazmī's *Mafātīḥ al-'olūm*, ed. G. van Vloten, Leiden, 1895, pp. 63-64, Germ. tr. E. Wiedemann, in *Sb. der Phys.-Med. Soz. in Erlangen* 42, 1910, pp. 308-10 = *Aufsätze zur arabischen Wissenschaftsgeschichte*, Hildesheim, 1970, I, pp. 674--76, Eng. tr. with comm. C. E. Bosworth, in "Abū 'Abdallāh al-Khwārazmī on the Technical Terms of the Secretary's Art," *JESHO* 12, 1969, pp. 141-43 = *Medieval Arabic Culture and Administration*, London, 1982, XV).

In early Islamic Iran, the stages (*sekka*, *rebāt*) of the *barīd* service were two *farsak*s (5 miles) apart, a comparatively short interval, since runners were employed as well as mounted couriers. The routes followed by these messengers are known to us from the itineraries and listings of staging posts, which form a considerable part of the classical Arabic geographical works, starting with that of Ebn K̄ordābeh (mid-3rd/8th century), who at one stage of his official career was *ṣāḥeb al-barīd* in Jebāl. The provincial postal-service directors (*aṣḥāb al-barīd*) were directly responsible to the caliph, as being the chief sources of intelligence, and, if a provincial governor or ruler raised a rebellion in his region, one of his first acts would be to endeavor to arrest the *ṣāḥeb al-barīd* and prevent his sending news back to the capital. Thus in 207/813, when the governor of Khorasan Ṭāher Ḍu'l-Yamīnayn (q.v.) omitted the caliph al-Ma'mūn's name from the *koṭba* or Friday sermon, this being tantamount to an act of defiance, the caliph's *ṣāḥeb al-barīd*, Kolṭūm b. Ṭābet, felt certain that he would be killed when it became known to Ṭāher that he had written to Baghdad with the news (Ṭabarī, III, p. 1064).

The provincial dynasties which arose in the Iranian lands with the decline of the 'Abbasids imitated the central government in their use of postal and intelligence services. The Samanids had *dīvāns* for the *ṣāḥeb al-barīd* and for the *mošref* ("overseer," i.e., intelligence gatherer) in their capital, Bukhara, from the time of Amir Naṣr II b. Aḥmad (301-31/914-43) onward (Naršaḳī, p. 36, reading here *dīvān-e ešrāf* for *dīvān-e šaraf*, tr. Frye, p. 26; Barthold, *Turkestan*<sup>2</sup>, pp. 229-31), while the Ghaznavid *barīd* and *ešrāf* systems were held to be of paramount importance in what was, at its zenith in the early 5th/11th century, a far-flung empire; not infrequently, the office of *ṣāḥeb al-barīd* was a stepping-stone to that of vizier (see M. Nazim, *The Life and Times of Sulṭān Maḥmūd of Ghazna*, Cambridge, 1933, pp. 144-46; Spuler, *Iran*, pp. 333-34; Bosworth, *The Ghaznavids*, pp. 93-97). Under the earlier Saljuqs, with their looser, more decentralized system of government, the *barīd* system was apparently no longer maintained at its earlier level of efficiency or was even



allowed to lapse altogether. Neẓām-al-Molk mourned this fact, regarding such a system as vital for his ideal, authoritarian monarch (*Sīar al-molūk*, chaps. 10, 13, 14, ed. Darke<sup>1</sup>, pp. 79-89, 94-110, tr. Darke, pp. 66-74, 78-91; cf. *Camb. Hist. Iran V*, pp. 76, 267). It by no means disappeared, however, from Iran, for the Mongols, as a highly mobile aristocracy of cavalrymen, with an empire enormous in extent, were aware of the utility of a relay and courier system. Jengiz Khan ordered the establishment of post stations (Tk. *yam*, Rubruck's *iam*, and Marco Polo's *yanb*), and the subject populations were heavily afflicted by the duty of providing horses (Tk. *olaḡ*) for the messengers (Tk. *eḷčī*; see P. Pelliot, "Sur *yam* ou *jam*, "relai postal"," *T'oung-pao* 27, 1930, pp. 192-95; Spuler, *Mongolen*<sup>1</sup>, pp. 422-26; *Camb. Hist. Iran V*, p. 536; and see *olaḡ*). The system continued, but apparently with declining efficiency, under the Ilkhanids, although with the looser forms of political organization under the ensuing Turkmen dynasties in Iran, the *olaḡ* system gradually fell into disuse.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Given in the text. See also R. Levy, *The Social Structure of Islam*, Cambridge, 1957, pp. 299-302.

D. Sourdel, "Barīd," in *ET*<sup>2</sup>, pp. 1045-46.

*Search terms:*

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