



BARMAKIDS

BARMAKIDS or Barāmeke, a well-known family of secretaries and viziers during the time of the early ‘Abbasids, stemming from the region of Balḵ where Barmak, the ancestor of the family, according to early Muslim authors was the high priest of the Zoroastrian fire temple of Nowbahār (Yāqūt, IV, p. 819; Ebn Ḳallekān, Cairo, III, p. 198; Beirut, IV, p. 29); however, the name Nowbahār is likely to be from Buddhist Sanskrit *nava-vihāra* “new monastery,” and the eponym of the family, Barmak, may ultimately derive from Sanskrit *pramukha* “chief” (H. W. Bailey, *BSOAS* 11, 1943, p. 3). Muslim relations with the Balḵ region go back to the early phase of Islamic conquests during the time of Mo‘āwīa, but no tie between a member of the Barmakids and a Muslim caliph can be established before the reign of Hešām b. ‘Abd al-Malek (105-25/723-42). Attempts to date this tie back to the time of the third caliph, ‘Oṭmān (r. 23-35/644-56), seem unconvincing.

In his *Aḵbār al-Barāmeke*, ‘Omar b. al-Azraq, the early historian of that family, relates that Barmak was received with great respect by Hešām when he came to his court with 500 followers. Barmak was converted to Islam. He must have stayed many years at Rošāfa, the residence of Hešām, where his son Ḳāled grew up with the caliph’s son Maslama. Barmak appears to have been a physician, for, when Maslama married, Barmak advised him to take a certain medicine that would enable him to beget a child. Barmak was also endowed with the gift of prophecy; when he saw Moḥammad b. ‘Alī b. ‘Abd-Allāh b. ‘Abbās passing, he told his son Ḳāled that the caliphate would be transferred to the ‘Abbasids, and advised him to promote their cause in the future if he could



(Ebn al-‘Adīm, *Boğyat al-ṭalab*, III, p. 22; V, pp. 337ff.). Barmak afterward left Syria for Gorgān where he met Yazīd b. Barā’ and arranged a marriage between Yazīd’s daughter and his son Kāled.

It was Kāled’s fortune to participate in the ‘Abbasid mission (*da’wa*) and to become one of the twenty members who were selected after the twelve syndics (*naqībs*) to propagate the cause of the Hashemites. His activities covered Gorgān, Ṭabarestān, and Ray, where he would go around posing as a merchant of cattle and slaves (*Boğya*, loc.cit.). When the armies of Abū Moslem left Khorasan for the west, Kāled was, with Qaḥṭaba, entrusted with the distribution of plunder. After being wounded, he was well received by Saffāḥ, who at first thought, because of his eloquence, that he was an Arab. The caliph appointed him the manager of both the *dīvān* of the army (*jond*) and the *dīvān* of the land tax (*karāj*). The registers used in the first *dīvān* were in the form of scrolls, and Kāled was the first one to replace the scrolls with ledgers (*dafāter*). Soon Kāled won the confidence of the caliph and became his principal adviser. His wife suckled Saffāḥ’s daughter Rayṭa, and the caliph’s wife suckled Kāled’s daughter Omm Yaḥyā.

In the time of al-Manṣūr (r. 136-58/754-75), the rivalry between the vizier Abū Ayyūb and Kāled drove the latter away from the capital to Fārs where he served as governor. Kāled managed to drive rebellious Kurds from Fārs and proved to be a wise and generous governor, eulogized by poets. His generosity evidently exposed him once again to the intrigues of the vizier, for he instigated the caliph to recall Kāled and to take three million dirhams from him as restitution. The matter was soon settled, and Kāled remained for some time with al-Manṣūr, to whom he gave advice about the plan of the future capital and whom he dissuaded from ruining the *Ayvān-e Kesrā*. Around 150/767 Kāled was appointed governor of Ṭabarestān, where he stayed for seven years. In 158/774, when a revolt broke out in Mosul, Kāled was commissioned to put it down and to become the city’s governor; he stayed there until the death of al-Manṣūr, which occurred a few months later.

During the time of al-Mahdī, Kāled was given Šammāsīya as a fief (*eqṭā*), in a part of which, later called Sowayqat Kāled, he chose to build his residential quarters. Nearby his son Yaḥyā and Yaḥyā’s two sons, Faḏl and Ja’far, built their palaces.

Kāled’s son Yaḥyā gained prominence first as an assistant to his father in governing Ray, then as a tutor of the prince Hārūn, then as the secretary and



treasurer to Hārūn during the latter's campaign against Byzantium. In 163/779, as deputy governor of Fārs, he managed to abolish taxes paid on trees. Kāled died in 165/781-82, shortly after Hārūn returned from his campaign.

In the short reign of al-Hādī (r. 169-70/785-86) Yaḥyā was thrown into prison because he stood firmly against al-Hādī's attempts to remove Hārūn from succession to the caliphate. After al-Hādī's sudden death Yaḥyā was released from prison and in 170/786 became Hārūn al-Rašīd's vizier; the following year he received control of the caliphal seal. The height of Barmakid power was reached under al-Rašīd; in fact, there was no essential activity in the caliphate in which the "triumvirate" of Yaḥyā, Faḏl, and Ja'far did not involve themselves. They received help from other Barmakids whenever necessary. Moḥammad b. Kāled was the caliph's chamberlain until he was dismissed from office in 179/795. Mūsā b. Yaḥyā was the leader of an army which put down a rebellion in Syria in 176/792. The main roles, however, were played by the three leaders, who, in spite of their power, did not act against the wishes of the caliph.

Yaḥyā remained in power for seventeen years. In 178/794 he was entrusted with all the administrative matters in the state. His son Faḏl, the "foster" brother of Hārūn, was appointed governor of the East and Ja'far governor of the West in 176/792. Faḏl also put down the revolt of Yaḥyā b. 'Abd-Allāh and was appointed governor of Khorasan where he proved to be an able and beloved administrator, he left Khorasan a year later after having had many mosques built. He remained in the caliph's favor until 183/799 when he was dismissed from all his offices. The dismissal of Faḏl did not, however, presage the tragic end of the whole family; Ja'far remained unrivaled in his great position. In 180/796, he suppressed a revolt in Syria, gave the seal to his father, and was appointed head of the caliphal bodyguard and manager of the postal service, the mints, and the textile factory (*dīvān al-ṭerāz*). It is not clear what exactly took place between 183/799 and the pilgrimage of the caliph in 186/802 to turn him against his "viziers," but he did order that Ja'far be killed in 187/803. Faḏl and his brothers were arrested, Yaḥyā put under surveillance, and the property of all the Barmakids (except Moḥammad b. Kāled) confiscated.

The end of the Barmakids has eluded satisfactory explanation. It is not enough to say, as the historians imply, that Hārūn grew exceedingly covetous in his later years; that raising his many children was very costly, that the luxury of



the Barmakids and their favorites and clients provoked his envy; and that the intrigues of Faʿl b. al-Rabīʿ, who succeeded Moḥammad b. Kāled as chamberlain, and others turned the caliph against them. These and other reasons are suggestive but not convincing; there has thus been a popular tendency to seek other explanations. The stories of Jaʿfar’s supposed marriage to ʿAbbāsa (much embroidered in the sources) and of the censers used in the Kaʿba (mentioned in the sources en passant, possibly because the heathen object would recall the Buddhist background of the family) have been circulated as the events which led to the final disaster. Popular imagination has produced many other stories about the tragic end of the Barmakids, such as the dialogue between the mother of Jaʿfar and Hārūn (*al-ʿEqd* V, pp.62-65) and the story of the man who used to frequent the ruined halls of the Barmakids and lament their fate (*al-Faraj baʿd al-šedda* III, pp. 166-72).

The generosity of the Barmakids also became proverbial; to this day, an unstinting host of banquets and festivals is called “Barmakī.” The eloquence (*balāḡa*) of Yaḥyā and his son Jaʿfar won the admiration of their contemporaries. They were also genuine patrons of poets and writers; under their auspices a special office was established for the support of poets. Jaʿfar’s palace became the residence of caliphs. On the whole they set a tradition in different aspects of cultural as well as political life. The *nesba* Barmakī was applied to their descendants, such as the poet Jaḥza, and to people who lived in a quarter of Baghdad called al-Barmakīya. Today Barmakī designates a certain gypsy-like group which roams in Egypt and Syria (cf. *E²* I, p. 1036).

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*EI*¹ s.vv. “Dja‘far,” “al-Faḍl,” and “Yaḥyā b. Khālid.”