



DABĪR II. IN THE ISLAMIC PERIOD

ii. In the Islamic Period

Dabīrs, the bureaucratic personnel comprised in the third estate of Sasanian society, survived as a group after the Arab conquest of Persia. They constituted the core of the civilian administration (*dīvān*) throughout the Islamic period and played a significant role in the transmission of bureaucratic skills and the Persian cultural heritage in general under the Arab caliphs and later under the Turkish dynasties.

After the conquest Persians, of whatever class, were lower in the social hierarchy of the Muslim empire. Whereas previously members of the bureaucratic class, which comprised, beside the *dabīrs*, viziers, accountants and tax collectors (*mostawfī*, record keepers, and scribes (*dabīr*, *kāteb*, *monšī*), had been exempt from taxes, they, like all the conquered peoples had to choose between conversion to Islam and the status of clients (*mawālī*) of the new Arab rulers or payment of the poll tax (*jezya*) levied on nonbelievers. The Muslim rulers soon found that they needed the administrative skills of the *dabīrs* in order to govern their empire. Conversely, *dabīrs* sought the support of the ruling elite in order to maintain their privileged position in their communities (see class system iv; Cahen, *Camb. Hist. Iran*, pp. 305-28; Jahšīārī, pp. 16-17; Moroney, pp. 199-211, 300-05). The title *dabīr* was presumably in use in the early Omayyad period before Arabic replaced Persian as the language of



administration; in Islamic Persia it remained a synonym for Arabo-Persian *kāteb* “scribe, clerk,” the more common designation for an official in the secretariat (*dīvān*; Sellheim and Sourdel; Fragner, EI²). When Persian was revived as the language of administration in much of the eastern Islamic world, *dabīr* once more became an administrative title.

The survival of the bureaucratic estate that included the *dabīrs* was furthered by the legacy of the four-part Sasanian social stratification, which had been made familiar to the Islamic world by Persian historians and by authors of mirrors for princes and books of ethics, who were members of the same social class. Some authors viewed this estate as a distinct stratum comparable to the those of the military, clerics, and men of affairs (i.e., merchants, artisans, peasants, and herdsmen; see Ṭabarī, I, p. 180; Ṭa‘ālebī, *Ġorar*, p. 12; *Šāh-nāma*, ed. Kāleqī, I, pp. 42-43; *Nāma-ye Tansar*, p. 57; Ebn al-Balkī, pp. 30-31; Gardīzī, ed. Ḥabībī, p. 2). Other writers considered *dabīrs* and religious leaders the two pillars of the class of “men of the pen.” For example, Naṣīr-al-Dīn Ṭūsī (d. 672/1274) divided society into four classes (men of the pen, men of the sword, men of affairs, and peasants), which were to be maintained in their proper places by the ruler; men of the pen included “learned men,” jurists (*foqahā*), judges (*qoṣāt*), scribes (*kottāb*), mathematicians, geometers, astronomers, physicians, and poets (for similar views, see Davānī, pp. 138-39; tr., pp. 388-90; Wā‘eẓ Kāsefī, p. 48). The functioning of the Persian bureaucratic estate after the conquest thus contributed both to the continuity of Persian administrative traditions and to the building of the Islamic state.

Given the important position and role of *dabīrs* in public administration, certain qualities were considered indispensable to them. Moḥammad Ġazālī devoted the third chapter of his *Naṣīḥat al-molūk* (p. 189) to *dabīrs* and their art; he noted that, “beside the art of literary composition, *dabīrs* should know many things to qualify to serve rulers,” among which qualities he included expert knowledge of astronomy, mathematics, agriculture, irrigation, medicine, and poetry. The *dabīr* was also supposed to be cheerful and good-looking. Neẓāmī ‘Arūzī described the qualified *dabīr* as a man of noble birth with a good reputation, sound judgment, capacity for profound thought, prudence, knowledge of *adab*, a refined manner in correspondence, and sincere devotion to the service of his master. He defined *dabīrī* as “an art, comprising eloquent rhetorical syllogisms, useful in communication among people in the form of dialogue, consultation, and controversy” (*Čahār maqāla*, ed. Qazvīnī, text, pp. 19-22; cf. Naḵjavānī, I, pp. 98-101; ‘Onṣor-al-Ma‘ālī, chap.



39). The *dabīrs* thus preserved and passed on, often within families, bureaucratic techniques, including styles of handwriting, principles of composition, and knowledge of forms of address and titles of nobles and notables; such aspects of the bureaucratic life-style as etiquette, manners, appearance, and dress; and support for the institution of the vizierate (see Mottahedeh, 1980, pp. 25-36; Klausner, pp. 37-81). In classical Persian literature there are many references to the literary virtuosity of *dabīrs*. The term eventually became almost synonymous with “man of letters.”

The relative position of the bureaucratic estate in the Islamic world varied. In the late 8th and 9th centuries the power of the vizier rose in relation to that the Arab tribal military aristocracy, as the ‘Abbasids sought to consolidate their central authority (Mez, pp. 89-106). As a result, those who assisted and supported the viziers, including the *dabīrs*, also enjoyed high status. Like other members of the dominant classes *dabīrs* were exempt from taxation and controlled agricultural land as intermediaries between the state and the cultivators. Nonhereditary grants of land (*eqṭāʾ*, in the medieval period, later *toyūl*) were basically ways of remunerating military, administrative, and religious personnel, who would then be responsible for extracting taxes from them (Lambton, *Continuity*, 1987, chap. X; Fragner, *Camb. Hist. Iran*, pp. 499-524; Cahen, *ET*²).

Military power began to become more important in the 10th century, when Turkish slave soldiers and Daylamites seized control of the ‘Abbasid state. In Persia the supremacy of the military persisted under Turkish, Mongol, and Turkman rule until the 19th century (see, e.g., Ashtor, pp. 168-248). In that long period princes and men of the sword were primarily of Turkish stock, whereas viziers and men of the pen in general were of Persian (in the sources sometimes called Tajik) stock. Under the Ghaznavids (366-582/977-1186) and Saljuqs (429-590/1038-1194) both the titles *dabīr* and *kāteb* were in use. Offices known from that period include the *dabīr-e sarāy* (the palace secretary), *dabīr-e nawbatī* (the secretary on duty), *dabīr-e kezāna* (the secretary of the treasury), and *dabīr-e kāṣṣ* (the private secretary of the ruler; Anwarī, p. 189). Under the Saljuqs the *dabīr-e jāmagīyāt* (secretary of the wardrobe) and *dabīr-e rūz-nāma* (secretary of the daily register) were subordinate to the *mostawfī* (accountant; Abū Rajāʾ, pp. x-xiv). In the Safavid period *dabīr* was replaced as an official title by *monšī*, but it was in use again under the Qajars.

The functional significance of the men of the pen and the men of the sword in the Persian social hierarchy was a source of conflict and rivalry throughout



the long period following the Saljuq invasion. Many writers claimed either the superiority of the pen over the sword (e.g., Māwardī, p. 10) or the equal importance of the two for the survival and functioning of the state apparatus (e.g., Ya'qūbī, pp. 27-54). Despite sporadic manifestations of solidarity and group identity within each of these groups, the clerks, like the soldiers, were often divided by factionalism incited by the rulers. In this respect both clerks and soldiers differed from members of other professions, which often exhibited strong group loyalty and functioned en bloc in intergroup conflict (Mottahedeh, 1980, pp. 108-10, 116-17).

A strong hereditary tendency among prominent bureaucratic families continued until quite late. In the 14th-century Qazvīn, for example, there were fourteen families of city officials, tax collectors, and bureaucrats (of thirty-three families of notables) who had dominated the region for generations; many had accumulated wealth and land property. The clan of Ḥamd-Allāh Mostawfī, attested among notables in the city for more than five centuries, is a prime example (*Tārīk-egozīda*, ed. Browne, pp. 798-814).

In modern Persia *dabīr* is the title of a secondary-school (*dabīrestān*) teacher and a component in the titles of a newspaper or journal editor (*sar-dabīr*) and the secretary or secretary-general (*dabīr-e koll*) of an association or political party.

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