



EBN ESFANDĪĀR, BAHĀ'-AL-DĪN MOḤAMMAD

EBN ESFANDĪĀR, BAHĀ'-AL-DĪN MOḤAMMAD b. Ḥasan, historian, probably from Āmol, who flourished around the turn of the 7th/13th century. He is the author of the earliest surviving history of Ṭabarestān, on which he was engaged around 603/1206 (400 years after the martyrdom of Imam 'Alī al-Rezā; Ebn Esfandiār, I, p. 203) and which he was still writing ten years later (I, p. 82). According to his own account, Ebn Esfandiār was in the service of the Bavandid (see [ĀL-E BĀVAND](#)) ruler Ḥosām-al-Dawla Ardašīr (d. 602/1206), who had questioned him about the king of Ṭabarestān called Gāvbāra. Sometime before 606/1209, Ebn Esfandiār went to Baghdad, which he left that year, and following news of the murder of Ardašīr's son, Našīr-al-Dawla Rostam, he proceeded to Ray. During a stay of two months, Ebn Esfandiār came across various passages about Gāvbāra in books belonging to Rostam b. 'Alī b. Šahrīār's library. Among these was a work by Abu'l-Ḥasan b. Moḥammad Yazdādī, called *'Oqad-al seḥr wa qalā'ed-al dorr*, which he translated from Arabic and was determined to use as the basis for a history of Ḥosām-al-Dawla, his ancestors, and descendants. Before finishing this with the help of the 'olamā' of Ray, he returned briefly to Ṭabarestān at his father's request. Ebn Esfandiār then traveled to K̄vārazm, whose rulers had extended their control over the former Bavandid territories. After five years in K̄vārazm, he found a collection of *resālas*, including an Arabic translation of an Indian work, dating from 197/813—the significance of which for his History of Ṭabarestān is unclear—and [Ebn al-Moqaffa](#)'s Arabic translation of the *Letter*



of *Tansar* (or *Tosar*), written by the chief Herbad of [Ardašīr Bābakān](#) to Josnasp (Gošnasp), ruler of Ṭabarestān. Ebn Esfandīār incorporated a Persian translation of this important Pahlavī text into his own history. It is not known whether Ebn Esfandīār returned to Ṭabarestān and died there, or whether he perished in the Mongol assault on K̄vārazm in 617/1220 (Şafā, *Adabīyāt* I, pp. 1017-19; Āl-e Dāwūd).

The *Tārīk-e Ṭabarestān*, though rightly regarded and used as an important local history, has not been the subject of a critical study in its own right. The surviving manuscripts are late (Storey, I/1, p. 360; Storey-Bregel, II, pp. 1070-72) and imperfect, incorporating interpolations by later author(s) and a continuation down to 750/1349, largely on the basis of the *Tārīk-e Rūyān* by [Awlīā'-Allāh Āmolī](#). A summary English translation of the aggregate work was published by E. G. Browne in 1905. 'Abbās Eqbāl's 1941 edition was based on two privately owned manuscripts, earlier than those available to Browne, dated 978/1570 and 1003/1595, respectively. Eqbāl follows the first of these in ending the narrative shortly before NasĀir-al-Dawla's murder on 4 Šawwāl 606/1 April 1210 (II, p. 174; cf. I, pp. 1-2). By contrast, the *Nāma-ye Tansar* has attracted considerable scholarly attention (see LETTER OF TANSAR).

Tārīk-e Ṭabarestān. In common with other local histories, the *Tārīk-e Ṭabarestān* is concerned with the characteristics that distinguish the region from other parts of Persia and of the Islamic world and that establish its claim to fame. Because of the terrain of the Caspian provinces, their protracted resistance to Islam and to the various rulers of the Iranian plateau, the early success of Shi'ism in the region, and the appearance of dynasties such as the Buyids and Ziyarids, which more or less explicitly championed aspects of Persia's cultural heritage, one might expect the particularism reflected in the *Tārīk-e Ṭabarestān* to be stronger than that of other Persian local histories, and the sense of continuity with the pre-Islamic past more pronounced. There are certainly strong echoes of this, not least in the words and poems in Ṭabarī dialect that the work contains (Kīā) and in the *Nāma-ye Tansar*, with which it opens; the first section of the book includes much material linking Ṭabarestān to the ancient history and legendary rulers of Iran (see below). Other such indications of continuity are the occasional use of the Persian calendar (I, pp. 178, 245, 262, 265, II, p. 105) and the survival of the coronation customs of the Persian kings (II, p. 171), quite apart from the names of the local rulers, which recall the pre-Islamic past. The epithets attached to the murdered Rostam b. Ardašīr at the outset (I, p. 1) are redolent of the world of the *Šāh-nāma*, and



official *Šāh-nāma* readers are present at the court of Ḥosām-al-Dawla (II, p. 121; cf. Melikian-Chirvani, pp. 33-34, who misattributes the authorship of this passage).

Nevertheless, the *Tārīk-e Ṭabarestān* is the work of a thoroughly Muslim (Shi'ite) author, whose accounts of the struggles of the local rulers against the Muslim Arabs and later the Turks serve to reveal the obstacles faced by outsiders in controlling the region, with its complex mosaic of fiercely independent principalities and its difficult terrain, rather than to suggest any coherent and deliberate promotion of Persian national sentiments. The revival of such sentiments in the author's own day might, on the other hand, have colored his account of certain early episodes, such as the revolt of Māzīār, and unduly encouraged modern nationalistic theories (see the comments in Rekaya, 1973, pp. 144-45). Ebn Esfandiār's moral outlook is pragmatic rather than religious or ideological, and he is evenhanded in praising justice and condemning tyranny, whether from rulers or rebels. Thus even Māzīār is accused of an oppression such as had not been seen before or since (I, p. 211), and the tyranny and contemptuous airs of the Espahbad Ḳoršīd prompted the people of Āmol to embrace Islam (I, pp. 173, 176); on the other hand, Esmā'īl b. Aḥmad the Samanid is said to have administered justice such as the people of Ṭabarestān had never experienced before, and to have restored property seized by the sayyids and others over the previous fifty years to its rightful owners (I, p. 259).

Such a concern with justice and the ethics of government, though not a major theme of the book, helps to define the intellectual background and outlook of the author, a minor government official (*kāteb*), and is particularly apparent in the way the *Nāma-ye Tansar* is used to introduce the whole work. This text is followed by several anecdotes about kings and the behavior of rulers, illustrating the justice of Ḳosrow I Anōšīrvān as well as more specifically Islamic virtues (I, pp. 41-54). The main work then follows, along a pattern familiar from other Persian local histories. According to the author's preface (I, p. 8), the *Tārīk-e Ṭabarestān* was divided into four sections (*qesm*): (1) on the foundation of the kingdom of Ṭabarestān; (2) on the rise and rule of the dynasties of Vošmgīr and Būya in Ṭabarestān; (3) on the transfer of power from the family of Vošmgīr to the Ghaznavids and Saljuqs; and (4) on the second phase of Bavandid rule, to their final demise. However, this preface is missing from the earliest manuscripts and, with the exception of the first *qesm*, these headings bear little relation to the actual contents. As noted above,



the fourth *qesm* is demonstrably a later continuation and is excluded from Eqbāl's edition, and the second is not the work of Ebn Esfandiār, but fills a gap in his text, using material taken from various sources (see II, p. 1, editor's note). Thus only sections one and three are of any historical value and contain the work of Ebn Esfandiār himself.

Section one proposes some popular etymologies of the names Ṭabarestān and Māzandarān and the first references to the province in ancient myth, from the time of Jamšēd. There follow stories of the founding of Sārī (by Ṭūs son of Nowḍar) and the building of its mosque; the early history of the district of Rūyān, from the time of Farēdūn, including the story of the bowshot of Āraš, which here is said to have landed in Marv (p. 61); and the foundation of Āmol and its mosque, and of other towns. These accounts emphasize the continuity of settlement from pre-Islamic to Islamic periods, as well as the wealth of the province (the *karāj*, or tax revenue, being given as 6,130,000 dirhams in the time of the Taherids; I, pp. 74-75). The rich revenues paid to the Sasanians (300,000 dirhams) are also alluded to later (I, p. 175), in the context of explaining the caliph al-Manšūr's desire to seize the province (but cf. Ṭabarī, II, p. 1321, and Bal'amī, ed. Rowšan, II, p. 891, for the probable origin of this story). The virtues and peculiarities of Ṭabarestān are described, including its fertility and its quality as a place of refuge and security. Various anecdotes from the pre-Islamic period (pp. 81-82), as well as the evidence of the book as a whole, attest the historical truth of this; the desirability of the province is also alluded to elsewhere (e.g., I, pp. 162, 209).

Biographies of the famous sons of Ṭabarestān follow, containing brief lives of the rulers, including Māziār (pp. 90-91) and the Sayyed and Bavandid families; 'olamā' such as Ṭabarī (pp. 90-91, 122-23); and saints, ascetics, and philosophers. Ebn Esfandiār claims that [Bozorgmehr](#) fled to Ṭabarestān after the collapse of the Sasanian dynasty (sic), and quotes a number of his philosophical remarks (in Arabic; pp. 135-36); the other philosopher mentioned is Marzbān b. Rostam b. Šarvīn, author of the *Marzbān-nāma*, which Ebn Esfandiār considers superior to the comparable fables of Bīdpāy, of Indian origin (p. 137). A brief list of some famous doctors, astronomers, and poets concludes the chapter.

The remainder of the first section of the book in Eqbāl's edition is taken up with a history of the rulers of Ṭabarestān. After outlining the origins of the Bāvand and Qāranvand families, the author covers the rule of the descendants of Gīlānšāh, which continued till the time of the caliph al-Manšūr (ca. 140/757);



they were followed by a succession of 'Abbasid governors until the Qāranvands rebelled under Vandād, who enjoyed a checkered career of resistance to the 'Abbasids until the caliphate of Hārūn al-Rašīd (170-93/786-809). Ebn Esfandiār narrates two versions of the fall of the **Barmakids**, whose relatives he describes as oppressive governors of Ṭabarestān (I, pp. 190ff.), and various stories connected with al-Ma'mūn's treatment of the Imam 'Alī al-Rezā (I, pp. 201-03). Following the revolt of Vandād's more celebrated grandson, Māziār (I, pp. 208-21), the Taherids governed the province for several years. The Zaydī imamate followed. Ebn Esfandiār gives a detailed (and original) account of the history of the period, including the struggles involving the Saffarids and later the Samanids for influence in Ṭabarestān. The section concludes with an account of the rivalries between the Buyids and the Ziyarids, whose history seems to have been the intended subject of the second *qesm*.

The third (and final) *qesm*, the beginning of which is missing from all the manuscripts, provides a detailed history of the Bavandid rulers from the time of Ḥosām-al-Dawla Šahrīār b. Qāran (ca. 500/1107) onward. Despite its local perspective on Bavandid relations with the Saljuqs, Isma'īlis, K̄vārazmšāhs, and (briefly) the Ghurids, the *Tārīk-e Ṭabarestān* is valuable not only for the Caspian provinces, but also for Saljuq rule in Persia generally, particularly in view of the dearth of Persian historiography for the period (see Bosworth; Morton). The narrative becomes particularly full with the reign of the author's patron, Ḥosām-al-Dawla Ardašīr (I, pp. 114-21; II, pp. 118-71), from about 569/1173 (though dates are conspicuously scarce in this section), who is given a long eulogy and a genealogy that linked him back to Ardašīr Bābakān the Sasanian and beyond him to Noah and Adam (II, pp. 126-27). Browne's abridged translation of this section has been rendered wholly inadequate by the superior and fuller text provided by Eqbāl; the same is much less true of volume one.

Ebn Esfandiār mentions several authorities in the course of the *Tārīk-e Ṭabarestān*, including Helāl Šābe's history of the Buyids, Ṭa'ālebī's *Yatīmat al-dahr*, a history of Barmakids, and the works of 'Otbī and Neẓām-al-Molk, as well as various literary sources such as the *Ketāb al-bayān* of Jāhez and the *Šāh-nāma* of Ferdowsī (cf. index to vol. I, pp. 330-31). He mentions Ṭabarī's *History* (I, pp. 122-23), but does not cite it, although he reproduces a letter from the Byzantine emperor Theophilus to al-Ma'mūn (I, p. 199), given in Ṭabarī (III, pp. 1109-10), and must in practice have made extensive, if sometimes garbled,



use of his work. A critical comparison between Ebn Esfandīār and other available accounts of the earliest periods of the history of Ṭabarestān remains to be undertaken, though for the pre-Islamic and early Islamic eras much of his information is not to be found elsewhere (see the study of this period by Rekaya, 1974, and idem, “Ḳārinids,” *EI* ², pp. 644-47). Unfortunately, Yazdādī’s apparently fundamental work is lost, though Ebn Esfandīār himself states that its chief purpose was literary, and he is often critical of its contents (I, pp. 5, 85). The *Tārīḳ-e Ṭabarestān* in turn was used extensively by later local historians, such as Awliā’-Allāh Āmolī and Ḳahīr-al-Dīn Mar’ašī, who is, nevertheless, still often cited in preference to Ebn Esfandīār.

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