



ESFARĀYEN

ESFARĀYEN, ESFARĀ'ĪN (*Ḥodūd al-ālam*, tr. Minorsky, pp. 64, 102, has “*Siparāyin” [Sabarāyen], possibly influenced by a popular etymology given, e.g. by Yāqūt, *Boldān* (Beirut), I, p. 177 “shield bearers”), a district, and in pre-modern Islamic times, a town, of northwestern Khorasan. It lay on the northern edge of the long plain stretching from Gorgān and modern Šāhrūd in the west almost to Nīšāpūr in the east, through which runs the river now known as the Rūd-e Esfarāyen; the whole valley was an important corridor for communications between the Caspian lands and northern Persia and Khorasan.

Its foundation was attributed to the legendary hero Esfandīār, and an earlier name for it was allegedly Mehrjān (a name which survived into later times for one of the villages in the *rostāq*, or rural district, of Esfarāyen; Yāqūt, *Boldān* [Beirut], p. 177), but little is known of its pre-Islamic history except that a local *dehqān* is mentioned by Ṭa'ālebī (*Ġorar*, p. 591), and it does not figure in the accounts of the early Arab conquest of Khorasan nor of the subsequent Omayyad and Abbasid governorships of that province. The geographers of the 4th/10th century describe it as one of the rural districts of Nīšāpūr, with markets and a strong citadel, set amidst a fertile agricultural region which grew cereals and rice and which comprised numerous villages (cf. Moqaddasī, p. 318). The inhabitants were of the Shafi'ite law school (*aṣḥāb al-ḥadīth*), and Sam'ānī and Yāqūt enumerate a large number of theological and legal scholars from there, including the Ash'arite theologian and Shafi'ite jurist Abū Eshāq Ebrāhīm b. Moḥammad Esfarāyenī (d. 418/1027) and 'Emād al-Dīn Abu'l-



Moẓaffar Ṭāher b. Moḥammad Esfarāyenī (d. 471/1078-79), a protégé of the great Saljuq vizier Neẓām al-Molk (q.v.) and author of one of the earliest extant Qurʾān commentaries in Persian, the *Tāj al-tarājem fī tafsīr al-Qorʾān leʾl-Aʾājem* (see Storey, I, pp. 3, 1190; Lazard, pp. 94-96, Halm, pp. 81-82). Notorious for his exactions in Khorasan, until his fall and death in 404/1013, was Maḥmūd of Ghazna's vizier Abu'l-Abbās Faẓl b. Aḥmad Esfarāyenī (see ABU'L-ḤASAN 'ALĪ. . . ESFARĀ'ĪNĪ, where the name should be corrected as in "Addenda and Corrigenda," *Elr* VI).

Esfarāyen was savagely sacked by Čengīz Khan's commander Sübetey in 617/1220, and then in 630/1223 it was entrusted to a local *malek* called Bahā'al-Dīn, responsible to the Mongol governor of Khorasan, Čin-Temür (Jovaynī, tr. Boyle, I, p. 146, II, p. 487). It nevertheless apparently revived in the next century, for Ḥamd-Allāh Mostawfī (*Nozhat al-qolūb*, ed. Le Strange, p. 149, tr. *idem*, p. 148) records it as a town with a flourishing agricultural hinterland; it derived its water supply from a river which flowed by the foot of a stronghold called Šo'lūk, to the north of the town, and from subterranean channels (*qanāts*). The town was now significant enough for the Il-khanids (and, later, the Safavids) to mint coins there (see Zambaur, p. 46). It was sacked again, however, by Tīmūr in 783/1381, and under the Safavids, it lay near the frontier with the Shahs' great enemies, the Shibanids of Transoxania, and suffered much from Uzbek raids. Then, during the 18th century came another devastation by the invading Afghans (1143/1731), which Esfarāyen did not survive; today the site is marked by the ruins known as Šahr-e Belqīs or Šahr-e Sabā (described by Yate, *Khurasan and Sistan*, pp. 378-79).

Today, the district is peaceful and agriculturally prosperous; it forms a separate *šahrastān* within the province of Khorasan, with its center at the town of Mīānābād.

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