



HELMAND RIVER III. IN THE MEDIÉVAL PERIOD

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The early Islamic geographers refer variously to the Helmand River as Hendmand (Eṣṭakri, pp. 242-45; Yā-qut, *Boldān* [Beirut] V, p. 418); Hilmand (Ebn Ḥawqal, p. 417); Hirmid (Moqaddasi, pp. 304, 329); Hidmand (*Ḥodud al-ālam*, tr. Minorsky, pp. 73, 110); Hermand or Hirmand, the usual name in Persian down to the present time (Ḥamdallāh Mostawfi, *Nozhat al-qolub*, ed. Le Strange, pp. 142, 178); and Nahr Bost, the river of Bost (Mas'udi, *Moruj* II, p. 80; *Moruj*, ed. Pellat, I, p. 246, sec. 510, as another name for Hermand). They describe it as rising in the mountains on the far side of Ġur and then flowing by the fringes of Roḳḳaj (Arachosia, q.v.) and the land of Dāvar (i.e., Zamindāvar, q.v.) to Bost (q.v.), where it receives on its left bank its greatest tributary, the Arḡandāb (q.v.); Yāqut (loc. cit.), says that the river has a thousand tributaries. Below Bost, the geographers describe its united course as flowing through desert regions to Sistan, with the Dašt-e Margo or “Desert of Death” to its north and the Rigestān to its south, but with rich cultivation, orchards, and date-palm groves along the river shores (thus in the year 332/943, according to Mas'udi, loc. cit.). At one stage above the capital Zarang, the river was dammed at several points and diverted for irrigation purposes into various channels, such as the Nahr al-Ṭa'ām, the Nahr Bešt Ruḍ, and the



Sanārud.

The geographers also noted that its flow was perennial and that it never dried up, but other evidence shows that this is not in fact true. In the lower stretches, much water could be lost by evaporation through dry winds from the surrounding deserts and the heat of the deserts themselves. The *Tāriḳ-e Sistān* (p. 186; tr. Gold, pp. 147-48) records that in the summer of 220/835 the lower reaches of the Helmand dried up (and possibly those further up, around Bost), causing famine and distress in the region. Members of the Seistan Boundary Commission recorded that in 1902 the lower course of the river had been dry for two months (Tate, 1910-12, II, pp. 117 ff.). Conversely, there was at times an excess of water from the melting snows of the mountains of central Afghanistan. In spring 641/1244 there was so much water that the whole Sistan basin was flooded for three or four months, with heavy losses of beasts and crops (*Tāriḳ-e Sistān*, pp. 397-98; tr. Gold, p. 324). The upper course of the river was too turbulent and rapid for navigation, but river traffic on the middle and lower stretches, from Gerešk, just above Bost, southwards, was possible; and, depending on the level of the river, boats could travel almost to Zarang in medieval times (Ebn Ḥawqal, p. 418). Sultan Mas'ud of Ghazna went pleasure-sailing on the Helmand near Bost in 428/1036 and was almost drowned in an accident (Bayhaqi, ed. Fayyāz, pp. 663-64; Russian tr. A. K. Arends, Moscow, 1969, pp. 620-21). In more recent times, in 1885, members of the Seistan Boundary Commission sailed down the river from Khvāja 'Ali some 200 miles to the Hāmūn basin, noting along its banks the many traces of former habitations and of former agricultural prosperity, by that time long disappeared (Tate, 1909, pp. 108 ff., 237 ff.). The river has not, however, regularly been used for navigation in recent times.

Until the last two centuries, political control of the Helmand basin has only sporadically been in the hands of a single power. The Arabs extended eastwards from Sistan to Bost soon after their first appearance at Zarang in 31/651-52. For some two centuries, the way farther up the river's course was blocked for the Muslims by the local rulers of Zamindāvar and Zābolestān, the Zonbils; and Islam was only implanted there towards the end of the 3rd/9th century after Saffarid probes towards Kabul (Bosworth, 1968, pp. 33 ff.; idem, 1994, pp. 83 ff.). The Turkish slave commander Sebūktigin, founder of the Ghaznavid line, extended down the river from Ghazna to Bost and Sistan during his reign (366-87/977-97). It is at this time that the geographers mention settlements, at best small towns, such as Doḡoš, Tell, Baḡni, and Bešlang, in



the upper Helmand valley (see *Ḥodud al-‘ālam*, tr. Minorsky, pp. 73, 111). It seems to have been the first Ghaznavids who laid out a complex of military encampments and palaces along the left bank of the Helmand at Laškari Bāzār (see BOST i.) just north of Bost. After the Ghurid sack of Ghazna in 544/1149 and then that of Bost, the upper reaches of the river passed under Ghurid control. Over subsequent centuries, various outside powers, from the K̄vārazm-shahs to Nāder Shah Afšār, controlled the region until the consolidation of power there by the indigenous Pashtun line of the Sadōzays in the mid-eighteenth century, and the Helmand basin was thenceforth substantially controlled by members of the Dorrāni family ruling from Kabul and/or Qandahār (see [AFGHANISTAN X. POLITICAL HISTORY](#)).

The French officer and traveler Jean-Paul Ferrier traveled in the region of the lower Helmand valley in the 1840s and describes the banks of the river below Gerešk as very fertile, but with wretched agriculture there because of the prevalent lawlessness and violence; although navigation on it was perfectly possible, and there were few fords, the only craft which he saw were a few rafts buoyed up by inflated skins (Ferrier, pp. 404-14, 428-29).

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