



IRAN II. IRANIAN HISTORY (2)

ISLAMIC PERIOD (PAGE 2)

IRAN ii(2), continued

FORMATION OF LOCAL DYNASTIES

The Taherids (821-73). The first of these dynasties came into being when Ṭāher b. Ḥosayn, nicknamed Ḍu'l-Yaminayn (the Ambidextrous), who had successfully led Ma'mun's army against his brother Amin (810), was appointed the governor of Khorasan with full power. The governorship remained in his house (821-73) until Ya'qub the Saffarid put an end to its rule and captured Nišāpur, their capital. (A number of the Taherids were also governors of Baghdad.) The Taherids were thoroughly Arabicized and remained loyal to the caliphate, but the fact that they were of Persian extraction and were ruling in Persian territory made a start for dynasties in Persia enjoying local autonomy.

The Saffarids (861-1003). The Saffarids were centered in Sistān, and it seems that they had a Kharejite background. Their first ruler, Ya'qub (861-79), rose from a plebian stock (his father was a coppersmith or *ṣaffār*). He took Kabul and later wrested Khorasan from the Taherids, while adding Kermān and Fārs to his expanding realm. As the Abbasid caliph refused to recognize his rule over Fārs province, he boldly attacked the caliph's army without any compunction about the sanctity of caliphal authority, but he was defeated on the shores of Tigris. He was preparing a second attack when death took him.



Ya'qub had no taste for the Arabic language. According to the anonymous author of the *Tāriḳ-e Sistān* (first part of the 11th cent., pp. 209-12), when a poet wrote and recited an Arabic *qasida* in his praise, he protested against hearing a poem in a language that he could not understand. So Moḥammad b. Waṣif, his secretary, composed for the first time a *qasida* in Persian, which set the trend for writing Persian poems in prosodic form adopted from Arabic.

Ya'qub's brother, 'Amr, was defeated in a decisive battle by Esmā'il the Samanid, and the Saffarid authority was henceforth confined to Sistān. The rise of the dynasty was important in initiating a practically independent power by the Persians after their devastating defeat by the Arabs in the 7th century.

The Samanids (819-1005). The Samanids hailed from Transoxiana. Their eponymous ancestor was Sāmān, a landowner or *dehqān* who resided in Balk. He embraced Islam, and his four grandsons served the caliph Ma'mun and received the governorship of four different districts in Transoxiana. His great-grandson Naṣr b. Aḥmad was eventually made the governor of the entire region, ruling from Samarqand. He was succeeded by his brother Esmā'il (q.v.; 892-907), who had been a governor of Bukhara. Esmā'il was a capable military leader, who expanded the Samanid domain in Central Asia and took Khorasan from the Saffarids, thus making the Samanids the prominent power in the eastern lands of Islam. The greatest expansion of Samanid power took place under Naṣr b. Aḥmad (914-43), when it stretched north as far as Chorasmia and the upper Oxus valleys, while Samanid arms controlled also Khorasan, Gorgān, and for a while the western provinces of Persia almost as far as the present-day border with Iraq. The Samanids developed a reputation for justice and decency and were served by a number of able viziers such as Abu'l-Faḏl Bal'ami (q.v.) and Abu 'Abd-Allāh and Abu-'Ali Jayhāni. They were able to keep the trade routes of Central Asia open, a fact that contributed to their own economic prosperity. Their capital, Bukhara, grew into a center of Arabic and Persian culture, and other cities in their domain were able to attract scholars, poets, and other cultural exponents. For instance, Avicenna (q.v.; ca. 980-1037) and Biruni (q.v.; 973-1050) were originally attached to the court of the Samanid Maṣūr II b. Nūḥ (997-99), and Farroḳi (11th century), the celebrated poet of the Ghaznavid court, served first the Amir of Čaġāniān (see [ĀL-E MOḤTĀJ](#)), a vassal of the Samanids.

During their advances in Central Asia to expand their borders and to spread Islam, the Samanids took a large number of Turkish captives, whom they



assigned assoldiers to their army and also as pages and servants in their palaces. Both these practices had significant consequences. Some of the more talented Turkish slaves rose through the ranks to become army commanders and generals. When the Samanid state began to weaken, some of these military leaders entertained the idea of independence and rebelled against their sovereign. Sebüktegin, whose son Maḥmud founded the Ghaznavid dynasty, was one of them. The slaves who served in the household of the princes and dignitaries and also served wine at their banquets became in Persian poetry the symbol of unmatched beauty and the subject of love songs and lyrics (see [BELOVED](#) and [HOMOSEXUALITY iii](#)).

The particular significance of the Samanids for the history of Persian culture is that it was at their court and by their encouragement that a revival of Persian language as a vehicle for poetry, scholarship, and historical chronicles took place. Rudaki (d. 941), Šahid of Balk (d. 936), and many others wrote their panegyrics for their Samanid patrons and the dignitaries of their courts. It was under the Samanids that Daqīqī (q.v.) began his unfinished *Šāh-nāma*; and, much more significantly, it was under the Samanids that the greatest monument of Persian language and literature, Ferdowsi's *Šāh-nāma*, was conceived and in part composed. The work was based on a Persian prose rendering of Ebn al-Moqaffa's (q.v.) Arabic translation of the late Sasanian *Kwadāy-nāmag*, prepared by the order of Moḥammad b. 'Abd al-Razzāq, a Samanid governor of Ṭus. It was also through the encouragement of the Samanid Maṣṣūr b. Nuḥ (961-76) that his vizier Abu 'Ali Bal'ami prepared a Persian rendition of Ṭabari's universal history *Ta'riḥ al-rosol wa'l-moluk*. It was also under the Samanids that Ṭabari's other major work, his great commentary on the Qur'ān, was also rendered into Persian, both works being adaptations rather than literal translations. Avicenna, who was also educated in the Samanid realm, wrote a treatise on philosophy (*Dāneš-nāma-ye 'Alā'i*, q.v.), and Biruni wrote *al-Tafhim* on astronomy, albeit under non-Samanid patronage. The debt of Persian culture to the enlightened Samanid kings, viziers, and *dabirs* (scribes) is thus enormous.

Persia divided: the rise of local dynasties and warlords. By the end of the 9th century the centralizing power of the caliphate had begun to wane, and ambitious adventurers, warlords, and military leaders were rising everywhere and vying with one another. Persia had lost the political unity that it had enjoyed under the Sasanids. It had turned into a kaleidoscopic collection of shifting kingdoms and had become an arena for changing fortunes, torn and



ravaged by the unbounded ambitions of rival claimants. No peace could last. Many urban centers like Nišāpur, Marv, Bukhara, Ray, Hamadan, Qazvin, and Isfahan were repeatedly attacked and destroyed, their inhabitants suffering sieges, starvation, destruction of property, and slaughter. Among the modern studies no work shows better than Bertold Spüler's *Iran in früh-islamischer Zeit* (1952, pp. 69-129) the continual wars among rival adventurers and military leaders and the savage attacks by them on Persian cities and countryside, resulting in unimaginable destruction. This also explains the ruin and disappearance of Persian architectural monuments, libraries, and artifacts prior to the Mongol and Timurid invasions. During the 9th through 12th centuries all the territories that together had made up Sasanian Iran were parceled out among a fairly large number of contending houses; active on the scene were the Saffarids, the Samanids, the Ziyarids, the Buyids, the Kakuyids, the Ghaznavids, the Ghurids, the Zaidis, the Šarvān Shahs, the Hashemids of Darband, the Jostanids of Rudbār, the Sajids of northwestern Persia, the Kōrramdinis in Azarbaijan and western Persia, the Salarids in Azarbaijan and the Caucasus, the Ravvadids in Azarbaijan, the Shaddadids in Arrān and eastern Armenia, Dolafids in western Persia, and finally the Saljuqs and their various branches followed by the Atābaks who achieved independence. The major dynasties are reviewed below.

The Ghaznavids (977-1186). Maḥmud, originally a young Samanid general, took advantage of the confusion in the Samanid state and the dissensions within it under its last amirs, and defeated the army of Esmā'il II, the last of the Samanids, in 1005, and became the master of Khorasan, while his allies, the Turkic Qaraḳanids, occupied the northern domains of the Samanids.

Maḥmud was an able soldier and a zealous Sunnite, who soon brought other areas under his control; pushing westward, his army encroached on Jebāl, that is, the western mountainous region of Persia. Prior to the final disappearance of the Samanids he had already overcome Kālaf b. Aḥmad, the Saffarid ruler of Sistan, in 1002; later, in the course of two military encounters with the Qaraḳanid Arslān Khan and another Turkic invader, Qadar Khan, from eastern Turkestan, he expanded his northern territory. Having secured his northern borders, he could concentrate on his raids on the Indian plains of Punjab and Sind to enforce Islam and at the same time enrich his own court with considerable booty and numerous Indian slaves. He penetrated the Ganges-Jumna Doāb, and advanced as far as Gwalior in central India. As the crowning of his conquest in the subcontinent, he despoiled the famous shrine of



Somnath in Kathiawar of its riches (1021-26). His campaigns in India were highly praised by the poets of his court as a great triumph against the infidels. His reputation as a soldier of Islam spread, and the Abbasid caliph honored him with a number of honorific titles, such as Helper of the Faith and Right Hand of the State (Nāṣer-al-Din and Yamin-al-Dawla, respectively). Some modern critics have accused him of latent greed and thirst for plunder as the real motives of his invasion of India, where he left mostly local princes in charge as tributaries; but the Muslims of the subcontinent generally express a high opinion of him as a fighter for Islam. Later in his reign he annexed also Chorasmia (q.v.) to his possessions and extended his attacks to Buyid territories and captured Ray on the pretext of fighting the heretical Rāfezis (a pejorative term for the Shi'ites), a meritorious act in the eyes of the Abbasids in view of the threat of the Ismā'ili Fatimid caliphs of Egypt (909-1171). Maḥmud and many of his courtiers were enthusiastic supporters of Persian letters. The poets of Maḥ-mud's court, with such luminaries as Farroḳi, Manuĉehri, and 'Onṣori, present one of the most brilliant periods of Persian poetry.

Maḥmud was succeeded first by his son Moḥammad, his designated heir, who was, however, overcome by his more martial brother Mas'ud. About the latter's rule we know a good deal from what remains of Abu'l-Faḏl Bayhaqi's famous history, the *Tāriḳ-e Mas'udi*. Mas'ud had the misfortune of having to face the penetration into his domain of the Turkic Ġozz (q.v.) tribes under the leadership of the Saljuq clan. They first asked permission to settle in Khorasan, but later attacked the Ghaznavid army. Mas'ud was decisively defeated in 1040 and had to withdraw to his capital Ġaznin. As the Saljuqs extended their power, the Ghaznavid territory shrank and finally was confined to their Indian territory, supporting still Persian court poets such as Mas'ud-e Sa'd, 'Oṭmān Moḳtāri, and Abu'l-Faraj Runi, until the Turkic Ghurids of Afghanistan put an end to the dynasty in 1186.

Although the Ghaznavids were of Turkic origin and their military leaders were generally of the same stock, as a result of the original involvement of Sebüktegin and Mahmud in Samanid affairs and in the Samanid cultural environment, the dynasty became thoroughly Persianized (see Omidsalar, 1999), so that in practice one cannot consider their rule one of foreign domination. In terms of cultural championship and the support of Persian poets, they were far more Persian than the ethnically Iranian Buyids, whose support of Arabic letters in preference to Persian is well known.



The Deylamite Ziyarids (927-1090) and the Buyids (932-1062). The Deylamites were a people who originally came from the mountainous regions in the southwestern corner of the Caspian Sea. The region had for a long time resisted conversion to Islam, but by the 9th century they had accepted the new faith, at least formally. However, under the influence of the Zaidi rulers of Ṭabarestān who descended from the ‘Alids and possibly also as a reaction to Umayyad policies, they developed sympathy for Shi‘ism. They made their appearance on the military scene of the eastern lands of Islam first as mercenaries in the army of caliphs and warlords of the late 9th and early 10th centuries. They acquired a reputation as hardy and brave fighters.

A Deylamite leader, Mardāvij b. Ziār, established his rule in most of northern Persia; making Ray his capital and advancing westward, he captured Hamadān and reached Ḥolwān near the present-day Iranian border with Iraq. The caliph had to confirm his conquests. In 935, however, he was assassinated by the Turkish troops serving him, and his empire fell apart, even though his dynasty continued to rule, on and off, in Ṭabarestān and Gorgān until 1090, mostly as vassals of the Ghaznavids.

With the disappearance of Mardāvij, the fortunes of the three Deylamite sons of Buya, ‘Ali, Ḥasan, and Aḥmad, who were serving in Mardāvij’s army, began to rise. Later events showed that they were capable and energetic leaders. ‘Ali, who was holding Isfahan, marched south and seized Fārs, while Ḥasan came into possession of Jebāl and Aḥmad secured Kermān and Khuzestan. Moving westward, Ḥasan entered Baghdad in 945. A year later he deposed the caliph al-Mostakfi and replaced him by al-Moṭī‘. Thus began a period of 110 years of domination of the Buyids over the caliphate, a domination that took only 12 years for the Buyids to establish. They assumed the title of *Amir-al-omarā*, formally bestowed on the Buyid rulers of Baghdad.

The three brothers as well as their ruling descendants all received honorific titles from the caliph. Aḥmad’s son, ‘Azod-al-Dawla (949-83, q.v.), the most powerful of the Buyid princes, brought all the Buyid domains under his control and could boast one of the most prosperous courts of the Islamic lands. After him, the Buyid empire was divided among his successors; internal struggles among the Buyid princes, which had subsided with the rise of ‘Azod-al-Dawla, and the conflict with the Samanids continued.

The Buyids, even though Shi‘ites, stopped short of attempting to establish a Shi‘ite caliph, and their mild Shi‘ism allowed the Sunnite establishment to



continue. Indeed, despite having embraced Twelver Shi'ism, they were hostile to the Abbasids' archrivals, the Ismā'īli caliphs of Egypt. However, it was in the Buyid period that Twelver Shi'ism, originally dominated by the Ḡolāt's (q.v.) emotional extremism, began to be moderated and systematized; taking a leaf out of the book of the Mo'tazelites, who believed in divine justice (*'adl*) as a pillar of the faith, the Shi'ites adopted much of the logic of the Mo'tazelite theological arguments and provided an intellectual framework for their doctrines.

Nonetheless, some concessions to their Iranian origin and their nationalism could be discerned. For instance, they revived some of the old Iranian festivals, and 'Azod-al-Dawla pointedly adopted the Sasanian title of *Šāhanšāh* (according to some, initiated by his uncle 'Ali) and encouraged the tracing of his descent to the Sasanians. Furthermore, some of the Buyids, unlike most other rulers of the time, carried Iranian names, such as Fanā Kōsrow ('Azod-al-Dawla), Piruzšāh (Ziā'-al-Dawla), Širdel (Šaraf-al-Dawla), Rostam (Majd-al-Dawla), Pulād-Sotun (Abu Maṣṣur). Whether such manifestations of Iranianism were the continuation of a tradition among them or symbolized a conscious revival of old traditions is difficult to say. Their encouragement of Persian language and letters could not come close to that of their rivals, the Samanids. In fact, 'Azod-al-Dawla, with the vizierate of SÂāḥeb b. 'Abbād, a great patron of Arabic letters, and the patronage extended to the outstanding Arab poet al-Motanabbi, distinguished himself in the promotion of Arabic letters.

The Buyid rule is marked by never-ending conflicts among the descendents of the three founding brothers and their wars with their rivals: the Samanids, the Ghaznavids, the later Saffarids as well as other local warlords and the enemies of the caliphate such as the Hamdanids of Syria in northern Iraq. Such conflicts eventually weakened them, so that the Sunnite Saljuqs had little difficulty in defeating and putting an end to their rule in Baghdad when they entered it in 1055. The Buyids survived for a few more years in Kermān, until they succumbed to the Kurdish Šabānkāra'i amirs, who soon lost Kermān to the Saljuqs.

[Continue](#)