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NEẒĀM-AL-MOLK

NEẒĀM-AL-MOLK, Abu ʿAli Ḥasan b. ʿAli b. Esḥāq Ṭusi (1018-92) celebrated vizier of two Saljuq sultans, Ālp Arslān (r. 1063-73) and his son Malekšāh (r. 1073-92). He held the honorifics Neẓām-al-Molk (“order of state”), Ḡiāṯ-al-Dawla (“pillar of government”), Qawām-al-Din (“mainstay of religion”), and Rażi Amir-al-Moʾmenin (“favored one of the Commander of the Faithful”), bestowed by the Abbasid caliph himself (Ḵᵛāndamir, p. 158). The latter two are inscribed on the outer wall of the Neẓāmiya *madrasa* in Ḵargerd (Godard, 1965, pp. 287, 292; Figure 1) and are mentioned in most poems addressed to the great vizier by Moʿezzi Nišāburi (d. between 1125 and 1127), poet laureate at Malekšāh’s court (Tetley, p. 111). In his 74 years, Neẓām-al-Molk rose from a relatively lowly position in the bureaucracy of the provincial governor of Balḵ (Balkh) to become the de facto ruler over a vast empire, with a final apotheosis as the archetypal good vizier in the world of Islam (Hendušāh, p. 266). He was so highly revered that the Emām-al-Ḥaramayn Jovayni (d. 1085), one of the most celebrated Sunni jurists of the 11th century, declared that Neẓām-al-Molk should replace the incompetent and unlettered Abbasid caliph and rule over the Islamic polity (Jovayni, pp. 243, 263; Hallaq, pp. 26-41).

Neẓām-al-Molk was born in Nawqān (Nawḡān), a village near Ṭus in Khorasan, and was assassinated in a hamlet outside Isfahan. Given the dearth of personal information, as well as the opaqueness of medieval biographies in general, only a skeletal sketch of his early life can be traced (Yavari, 2008, pp. 351-59). His many biographies in the medieval chronicles and biographical dictionaries (*ṭabaqāt*), several of which are discussed below, conform in structure and

content to well-established templates of exemplarity and exhibit little interest in the individual behind the public façade. His legacy as a vizier, as well as his policies and ideological proclivities, are presented in the mold of stock stories rather than probed into and expounded through a cohesive linear narrative.

Ḥasan was born into a family of dehqāns, members of the landed aristocracy (Ebn Fondoq, pp. 73-83). By the 11th century, the dehqāns had lost any local autonomy that they might have enjoyed in the past, and functioned mainly as civil servants in the official bureaucracy for their sustenance and survival. The future vizier first gained employment in government service of the Ghaznavids in Khorasan. Later he left their service and was employed by Abu'l-ʿAli b. Šāḏān, who was the governor (*ʿamid*) of Balḵ on behalf of the Saljuq Miḵāʾil, the father of Čaḡri Beg (r. 1040-60 in Khorasan). According to Sobki (d. 1369), Ebn Šāḏān was among the *ḥadith* teachers of Shaykh Abu'l-Ḥasan ʿAli b. Yusof (d. 1071), the uncle of the Emām-al-Ḥaramayn Jovayni (Sobki, V, p. 299). Ebn Šāḏān developed a great liking for Ḥasan, who proved an able and trustworthy employee. On his deathbed, Ebn Šāḏān recommended him to Ālp Arslān.

Ebn al-Aṯir's version is slightly different. Ḥasan is found working for Amir Tājer, a Ghaznavid official in Balḵ. Every year, Amir Tājer found an excuse to confiscate Ḥasan's property. After several rounds of confiscation, Ḥasan was left with nothing but a mule. Driven by desperation, he collected his two sons, Moʾayyed-al-Molk (d. 1099) and Faḵr-al-Molk (d. 1106), and left Balḵ to seek refuge with Čaḡri's son and the designated crown prince, Ālp Arslān, then the young governor of Khorasan. The mule proved troublesome on the way, and Ḥasan lifted his head to the sky and pleaded with God. Soon thereafter, he encountered a young Torkman astride a stallion, who offered him his horse in exchange for the mule. This he took as a favorable omen that his fortune had turned. In Marv he entered the service of Čaḡri, who introduced him to his son. When Amir Tājer found out that the Saljuqs had taken Ḥasan into their service, he wrote to Čaḡri asking for the return of his former secretary, whom he accused of embezzlement. Čaḡri wrote back that Ḥasan was now employed by Moḥammad (referring to another of Ālp Arslān's given names) and that Amir Tājer should approach Ḥasan's new patron directly. Amir Tājer did not, however, dare relate the matter to the Prophet's namesake and ceased to harass Ḥasan. When Ālp Arslān ascended the throne after the death of his uncle, Ṭoḡrel, he appointed him as his vizier. Neẓām-al-Molk stayed with Ālp Arslān throughout his reign and retained his office after

the crown prince Malekšāh succeeded his father (Ebn al-Aṯir, X, pp. 31-34, 207-8).

These anecdotal accounts of his early career vary from source to source. Hendušah's account (pp. 266-67) conflates Ebn al-Aṯir with Ebn al-Fondoq; it is Čaḡri Beg who recommends Ḥasan to Ālp Arslān, and Ebn Šāḏān is depicted as a miserly patron: "Every now and then Ebn Šāḏān would tell the Master (i.e., Neẓām-al-Molk) that he had become far too well-heeled and affluent and that he would reclaim all that Ḥasan possessed and would say, 'You are a mere clerk, a pen is all you need.'" As the governor's miserly gestures became more frequent and irksome, Ḥasan despaired of his service and left for Marv and entered the service of Čaḡri Beg. Although these conflicting versions (Qāżi Ṭabāṭabāʾi, p. 248) suggest that details of his personal life and the minutiae of his administrative decisions cannot be reconstructed with any degree of certainty, the overall legacy of Neẓām-al-Molk and his pivotal position in the Saljuq ruling edifice cannot be denied.

An important part of this enduring legacy is a manual of advice on governance addressed to the Saljuq rulers entitled *Siar al-moluk* (The ways of kings). The book has an intriguing history of its own. Supposedly penned by the vizier himself while in office, it was completed only after his forced removal from his position in 1091. This may explain the at times bitter criticism of the Saljuq sultan, Malekšāh, and the acerbic comments on the role of women in politics (Neẓām-al-Molk, 1978, pp. 70-71, 179-87; conventionally understood as an allusion to the sultan's wife, Torkān Ḵātun (Terken Ḵātun; d. 1094), depicted as the arch instigator of Neẓām-al-Molk's fall from favor, acting in collusion with Ismaʿili sympathizers at the Saljuq court (Rāvandi, p. 136; Bondāri, p. 65; cf. Bosworth, 2005, pp. 306-7).

Siar al-moluk maintains that good advice is the linchpin of successful kingship, and that the sultan cannot govern without a trusted councilor. These prescriptive sentiments are accompanied by a pessimistic prognostication: the demise of the counselor is deemed as inevitable, for the king would ultimately submit to his engrained frailties and repeat the errors of his forefathers. The popular medieval topos of the failure of the king to rein in his impulsive urges and rise above shortsighted goals, opening doors to tyranny and unjust rule, culminating in the inevitable murder of his councilor by the king's own henchmen, forms the subject of several historical anecdotes throughout *Siar al-moluk.*

A notable example of the fall of the famous in the book is its account of Jaʿfar Barmaki (d. 803; see BARMAKIDS), vizier to Hārun-al-Rašid (r. 786-809), the Abbasid caliph. In *Siar al-moluk*, Jaʿfar is first sought out and invited to the court by the Omayyad caliph Solaymān b. ʿAbd-al-Malek (r. 715-17)—a deliberate transposition that points to the ideological freight of the text (Yavari, 2004, pp. 331-40; 2014, pp. 61-80). In their very first encounter, Solaymān discovers that Jaʿfar has poison hidden in the cavity of his signet ring. Alarmed by this, he inquires further. Jaʿfar responds that the poison was intended for his own use, should the caliph's demands ever exceed his abilities to meet them. The poignancy of this in the light of the later grim fate of the Barmakids and other anecdotes on the subject of troubled relations between viziers and rulers in *Siar al-moluk* is accentuated by the fact that Neẓām-al-Molk was himself a vizier, and that his demise was brought about with the tacit agreement of the sultan (Neẓām-al-Molk, 1978, pp. 173-78).

Medieval historians offer different versions for Neẓām-al-Molk's final demise and Malekšāh's motives for collaborating with the plot against his vizier. Sobki (V, p. 322) suggested that the monarch was determined to put an end to the Abbasid rule by transferring the caliphate to his own progeny through his grandson Jaʿfar, and that the only obstacle happened to be the person of Neẓām-al-Molk. The Abbasid vizier Anuširvān b. Ḵāled (d. between 1137 and 1139) believed that Malekšāh had become weary of Neẓām-al-Molk's long tenure as vizier and wished to get rid of him. The secret plot to assassinate the vizier was revealed to the sultan at the outset. According to Bondāri (d. after 1241), the Ismaʿilis had infiltrated Malekšāh's court and had planned the murder of the vizier, aided and abetted by the sultan's wife and a tacit nod of approval from the sultan himself (Bondāri, p. 65; see Figure 2; cf. Bosworth, 2005, pp. 306-7).

Neẓām-al-Molk's removal from office and subsequent assassination are mentioned in most historical sources. The sultan, fearful of his vizier's reach and influence, sent a message to the vizier, asking if he considered himself a subordinate or an equal to the king (Ebn al-Aṯir, X, p. 205; tr., p. 254). Neẓām-al-Molk's famous retort that the crown would go once the inkstand is removed (*har gāh in dawāt bardāri, ān tāj bardārand*) became proverbial (Hendušāh, p. 280). Malekšāh himself died shortly afterwards, leading in turn to the creation of varied exempla, as a vindication of the laurelled vizier's prophecy or, as couched in the poet laureate Moʿezzi's homiletic verses, side-stepping any hints of a conflict between the sultan and his vizier—an affirmation of divine

power and the corresponding impotence of temporal rule (Dawlatšāh, p. 60; for a translation, see Browne, II, p. 190).

There is yet another biographical detail that foreshadows the ultimate downfall of the vizier and is in itself emblematic of the logic of causality as depicted in medieval biographies. It concerns Neẓām-al-Molk's early career and complicity in the murder of Abu Naṣr Kondori (d. 1064), who was vizier to Ṭoḡrel and to Ālp Arslān, Malekšāh's father. Neẓām-al-Molk ascended to the vizierate only after securing the elimination of Kondori. Disapproval of Neẓām-al-Molk's role in the murder of his predecessor is widespread and unequivocal in medieval sources, although the allegations seem to have left unscathed the otherwise laudatory appraisal of his life. The sources are also adamant on Ālp Arslān's foreknowledge and acquiescence to the murder. In his history of the Saljuq dynasty, Ẓahir-al-Din Nišāpuri (p. 21) postulates Neẓām-al-Molk's complicity in the murder of Kondori on the grounds that he felt habitually fearful and perennially threatened by him.

Kondori's dying words, echoing those of the defiant mother of another executed vizier, Haṣanak, in an earlier narrative (Bayhaqi, p. 236; tr. I, p. 282, III, p. 134), have been enshrined in history. He sent a message to Ālp Arslān and his vizier:

> Your uncle Toḡrel Beg gave me this world so that I could rule over it, and you have granted me [salvation in] the next world, by making a martyr of me this day. So thanks to being engaged at your service I have secured for myself this world and the one hereafter. Tell Neẓām-al-Molk that you have induced into the world a most unseemly innovation and evil custom: that of murdering viziers. I fear that you will see this custom rebound on your own person and that of your progeny.
> (Nišāpuri, p. 22)

Other sources add a grim addendum to Kondori's oracular last words, "For you have taught the Turks the custom of killing their viziers" (Ebn al-Aṯir, X, pp. 31-44; tr., pp. 146-49; cf. Browne, II, p. 174).

One of Neẓām-al-Molk's first diplomatic measures as vizier was to restore ties with the Abbasid caliphate. This was apparently intended not so much to foster better relationships between the sultan and the caliph, but rather to secure their support for his own position against internal opposition at the Saljuq court (Makdisi, 1975, pp. 228-36). His own writings, as well as other

historical accounts, demonstrate his pro-caliphate stance (Neẓām al-Molk, 1961, p. 255; 1978, p. 188). Again, rather than direct references, his sympathies are reflected in anecdotes in *Siar al-moluk,* as, for example, in the story of the muezzin and how he aroused the caliph to act upon his duty and protect Muslim honor against a drunken Turkish soldier (Neẓām-al-Molk, 1961, pp. 66-78; 1978, pp. 50-59).

Marriage ties are another indication. There is the celebrated event of the Abbasid caliph Qāʾem (r. 1031-75) marrying Arslān Ḵātun, Ṭoḡrel's niece, in the 1050s (Ebn al-Aṯir, X, p. 27; cf. Makdisi, 1970, pp. 259-75). In his last years, Ṭoḡrel had coerced the caliph into returning the favor by giving him his daughter in marriage. Ṭoḡrel had subsequently decided to take her away from Baghdad but had met with Qāʾem's resistance. His insolence and audacity marred relations with the Abbasids. Neẓām-al-Molk tried to make amends, and in 1071 he arranged the marriage of Qāʾem's son and heir, who ruled later as Moqtadi (r. 1075-94), to Ālp Arslān's daughter (Ebn al-Aṯir, X, p. 71; tr., pp. 174-75). Shortly before that, in 1070, to put an end to the machinations of the Ebn Jahir family—Qāʾem's viziers—he had arranged the marriage of ʿAmid-al-Dawla b. Faḵr-al-Dawla b. Jahir (d. 1100) to his own daughter (Bondāri, pp. 55-6; Ebn al-Aṯir, X, pp. 14-15, p. 61, tr., p. 167).

Neẓām-al-Molk was Šāfeʿi in matters of jurisprudence and Ašʿari (Ashʿari) as regards to theology. He is cast as a stalwart of bureaucratic reform, institutionalization, administrative efficiency, and visionary rule. In his obituary of Malekšāh, the Hanbali historian Ebn al-Jawzi (d. 1201) commented that the sultan spent his days hunting and drinking, while the affairs of the state were delegated to Neẓām-al-Molk (Ebn al-Jawzi, VIII, p. 65). The vizier's founding of *madrasas* has earned him the admiration of modern scholars. Known as Neẓāmiyas, the madrasas were established throughout the empire, the most famous one in Baghdad in 1066. Less information is extant on Neẓāmiyas founded in Nishapur, Mosul, Herat, Balḵ, Basra, Marv, Isfahan, and elsewhere (for Ḵargerd, see also "Madrasa al-Nizamiyya").

Some sources and modern studies have erroneously credited the vizier as the progenitor of *madrasas.* Sobki (V, p. 314) is among the first to have drawn attention to the error by listing some that predate the vizier. Not much is known about the fate of Neẓāmiyas after the passing of Neẓām-al-Molk and the Mongol invasions of the mid-13th century (Ephrat, pp. 21-32, where she also provides a succinct summary of the debate on the primacy of *madrasas* as institutions of learning or as specimen of architectural splendor; also valuable

is Hendušāh, pp. 270-71, and on the squabble between sects for the *madrasas,* see p. 278). This stems from the immense historiographical emphasis on Neẓām-al-Molk's exemplarity rather than on the net results of his actual administrative policies. Medieval sources announce the establishment of the *madrasas* with great fanfare but say little about their subsequent fate. Some in fact bemoan the destitution that befell the *madrasas* shortly after the vizier's demise (K̲vāndamir, pp. 162-63). In tangible terms, the Neẓāmiyas were the least consequential instrument of Neẓām-al-Molk's policies, though clearly the most visible embodiment of his greatness. Financed by private endowment, they could only function and flourish in times of peace and political stability—scarce commodities in the 12th and 13th centuries. In every way that mattered, the fate of the Neẓāmiyas was sealed with the death of their benefactor. According to Ebn al-Fowaṭi (d. 1323), ʿAlaʾ-al-Din ʿAṭāʾ-Malek Jovayni (d. 1283), the Persian historian made governor of Baghdad by the Mongols, lamented their dire conditions and embarked on reconstructing them (Ebn al-Fowaṭi, pp. 371-74; cf. Talas, p. 32).

While Neẓām-al-Molk built his *madrasas* to propagate Šāfeʿi teachings exclusively, he allowed others to finance mosques and *madrasas* devoted to other schools (Qazvini Rāzi, pp. 34-36). Under his guidance, Saljuq policy veered away from doctrinal disputes and ideological rivalries. Rather than fostering a monolithic and rigid animosity as displayed by Sunni stalwarts against Shiʿis, the primary sources reveal a complex and malleable Saljuq policy, at times complacent, at times belligerent, sometimes propagandizing, but always ultimately compromising (Glassen, pp. 63-84, 121-30). Neẓām-al-Molk's policies were perceived, nearly a century after his death in 1092, as characterized by expediency (Qazvini Rāzi, inter alia, pp. 31-3, 261-2, 111-13), that is, political astuteness bereft of stultifying ideology. This is not to deny that Neẓām-al-Molk was primarily a patron of the Aśʿari/Šāfeʿi faction but to point out that his attitude to the factions exhibited a willingness to compromise when confronted by sectarian strife that might harm his overall policy in the vast empire, in Nishapur, Baghdad, Herat, and elsewhere. Richard Bulliet has suggested that Neẓām-al-Molk's overarching ambition was to secure an independent power base that would make it possible for him to be the virtual ruler during the reign of Malekšāh, and the heart of that policy was winning the allegiance of the religious classes of the empire (Bulliet, 1972, pp. 72-5; 1973, p. 88), to which end he built the *madrasas.*

His predilection for political concord as opposed to adopting a partisan stance

was documented in a letter he sent in 1077 to Abu Esḥāq al-Širāzi (d. 1083), the Šāfeʿi teacher he had appointed to the Neẓāmiya in Baghdad. Importantly, the letter is preserved, not in a Šāfeʿi source, but in the universal history of Ebn al-Jawzi (d. 1200), an ardent Hanbali from Baghdad. News had reached the great vizier that the strong Hanbali community in Baghdad had taken offense at the teachings of Širāzi and riots had ensued. Neẓām-al-Molk decried the favoring of one school over another as unjust and contrary to the Saljuq ethos. His own preference, he declared, was for the preservation of learning and the traditions of the Prophet rather than for instigating riots. He advised Abu Esḥāq to adopt a more cautious tone in his teaching in Baghdad. The schools were founded to propagate learning and to protect the learned, Neẓām-al-Molk wrote, and should they fall short of this objective, he would have no alternative but to close them down (Ebn al-Jawzi, VIII, p. 312). There are occasions wherein Neẓām-al-Molk is recorded to have thrown his weight fully behind the Ašʿari cause, however, for instance, allowing Qošayri (d. 1072) to deliver sermons in the Neẓāmiya in Baghdad, accusing the Ḥanbalis of anthropomorphism, with riots ensuing (Madelung, pp. 280-82).

Another implicit indication of Neẓām-al-Molk's non-partisan policies can be seen in the itinerary of his travels with Malekšāh in 1086, following the conquest of Syria and Iraq. Neẓām-al-Molk and the sultan visited the shrines of Musā b. Jaʿfar al-Kāẓem (d. 799), the seventh Shiʿi Imam, that of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 855), that of Abu Ḥanifa (d. 767), and those of ʿAli b. Abi Ṭāleb (d. 661), and Shiʿi dignitaries including Ḥosayn (d. 680), ʿAli's son and third Shiʿi imam (Ebn al-Aṯir, X, p. 156; tr., p. 228).

The vizier's commitment to non-partisan policies echoed the Sufi espousal of non-denominational religiosity, and it is in this light that his pro-Sufi proclivities should be understood. Biographical accounts, regardless of their ideological underpinning or ethnic affiliation, remark on his seeking the company of Sufis and promoting their cause. Their insistence, at least in the eleventh century, on non-sectarian politics and their aspirations for tolerating plurality in the community resonated with Neẓām-al-Molk's own desire to quell internecine warfare and preserve social stability. Furthermore, Neẓām-al-Molk saw in Sufi piety a particularly effective buffer against the widespread and increasing popular support for Ismaʿili proselytizing, centered at the time around charismatic leadership and a more spiritualist, experiential, and allegorical interpretation of religion. Of the Sufi leaders of the 11th century, Neẓām-al-Molk's close associate Qošayri lamented in his *Šekāyāt ahl al-sunna*

be mā nālahom men al-meḥna (Complaints of the Sunnis on the tribulations afflicting them) the prevalence of sectarian proclivities among the Sunnis, a malaise which he thought contributed to the increasing popularity of non-Sunni interpretations of Islam (Qošayri, pp. 1-38; cf. Cooperson, pp. 33-40). It begins with a denunciation of the persecution of Aš'aris that was launched in Nishapur in 1053, ordered by Kondori and Ṭoḡrel. Qošayri compared the persecution with the *meḥna* (inquisition) sponsored by the Abbasid caliph Maʾmun (r. 813-33) and leading Hanafi and Muʿtazili theologians. By drawing an analogy between the *meḥna* of Maʾmun and the persecution of Ashʿaris in Nishapur during Ṭoḡrel's reign, Qošayri denounced the bigotry and sectarianism that fuel such endeavors.

Another illustration of Neẓām-al-Molk's distaste for sectarianism is to be found in his treatment of ʿAbd-Allāh Anṣāri (d. 1089), the Ḥanbali Sufi from Herat. Denounced by both Ḥanafi/Moʿtazilis and Šāfeʿi/Aš'aris under the Ghaznavids, he was later sent into exile by Kondori. Unlike Qošayri and Jovayni, who were active in political affairs and associated with caliphs and viziers, Anṣāri, a devout pietist, shunned political office and the company of politicians. Neẓām-al-Molk was the only high official whom he held in some respect, in spite of the fact that Neẓām-al-Molk too had fallen for the instigations of Anṣāri's enemies at the start of his vizierate and had exiled the Sufi shaykh for a brief period in 1066. In an effort to win the sympathy of the Hanbalis, however, Neẓām-al-Molk went so far as to persuade the caliph Qāʾem to bestow a robe of honor (*ḵelʿat*) on Anṣāri (Ebn Rajab, I, p. 73). Neẓām-al-Molk also intervened several times on his behalf when in Balḵ, as a Ḥanbali, he fell victim to charges of anthropomorphism and had to be rescued from hostile Hanafis and Shafiʿis. Anṣāri was grateful and praised the vizier as the avenger of the oppressed and the restorer of justice (Ebn Rajab, I, p. 82). An undated and anonymous compilation of Persian aphorisms, extant in manuscript (Ethé 1907), has recorded Anṣāri's advice to Neẓām-al-Molk, affirming their shared viewpoints. The Sufi shaykh encouraged the vizier to befriend the truth, act justly with people, restrain his carnal desires, treat the Sufis with kindness, serve dignitaries, be kind to the young, advise friends, treat enemies with mercy, remain silent in the company of the ignorant, and show humility in the presence of the learned (*Varia*, fol. 150b).

Neẓām-al-Molk came to define, posthumously, the paradigm of the just, effective ruler. In Ḵᵛāndamir's particularly laudatory vita of the great vizier (pp. 165-66), his progeny is likened to the twelve imams of the Shiʿis. That he

was incorporated in the historical vision of future generations as an exemplar, an authoritative template of good governance and godliness, attests to the success of his policies and to the durability of his vision.

Of all the stories told about Neẓām-al-Molk, the most popular one repeated in medieval and modern histories, points, not just to the vast expanse of his dominion, but also to its moral temper. When the armies of Malekšāh passed the Āmu Daryā, Neẓām-al-Molk paid the sailors with draft notes drawn on the treasury in Antioch (Antakya). While the sultan was presiding at a public audience to redress grievances, the sailors complained that they were poor people who made their living from the river. They could not afford to travel all the way to Antioch to collect their pay, as that would take a lifetime. Malekšāh turned to Neẓām-al-Molk for an explanation. The vizier responded that there was no need for the sailors to embark on such a long journey, for they could exchange the draft notes drawn on the royal treasury for gold anywhere in the empire. He had paid them in this manner to demonstrate the extent of the empire and its stability to the world at large and have it noted down in chronicles (Rāvandi, pp. 128-29).

In this anecdote and many more, the vizier is not just impeccable in virtue but also habitually one step ahead of his peers and his monarch. The sources are replete with instances in which the vizier's prudence and wisdom are questioned by the sultan, to reveal that in fact Malekšāh lacked the insight to comprehend the true significance of Neẓām-al-Molk's policies. The incomprehension finally proved fatal for he was shortsighted enough to instigate the demise of a seasoned vizier whom, as in the above quoted passage, he had at times addressed as "father."

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