



SANJAR, AḤMAD B. MALEKŠĀH

SANJAR, Aḥmad b. Malekšāh, Abu'l-Ḥāreth, Mo'ezz-al-donyā-wa'l-din, Amir-al-mo'menin, Burhān (b. Rajab 477/Nov. 1084 or Rajab 479/Oct. 1086; d. 552/1157-8), first subordinate sultan of Khorasan (r. 490-511/1097-1118) and then Great Sultan of the Great Saljuq empire (r. 511-52/1118-57).

Sanjar was born, probably in 479/1086, in Sinjār, a town located in the borderland between Syria and the Jazira. Although the primary sources state that he was named after his birthplace (Rāvandī, p. 185; Ebn al-Jawzi, XVIII, p. 161), Bosworth notes Sanjar is a Turkish name, denoting “he who pierces, thrusts” (Bosworth, 1997, p. 15). Sanjar’s mother, a concubine of Sultan Malekšāh (r. 465-85/1073-1092), had apparently accompanied the sultan on his westward military campaign of that year.

Early Career. In accordance with the Turkish practice of assigning the provinces of the empire as appanages to various family members under the supreme rule of one Great Sultan, Sanjar was in 490/1097 appointed subordinate sultan of Khorasan by his half-brother **Barkiāroq** (r. 487-98/1094-1105) under the tutelage of an **atābak** (Ḥosayni, p. 86; Bondāri, p. 255). Despite his youth, Sanjar played an active military role from the beginning of his governorship, at least as a figurehead: He is portrayed as having participated in military campaigns already in 490/1097 and 491/1098.



About 491/1098 Sanjar's uterine brother Moḥammad Tapar (r. 498-511/1105-1118) began a contest for the great sultanate with Barkiāroq, a struggle that was to last until Barkiāroq's death in 498/1105. Sanjar promptly defected from Barkiāroq's service to Moḥammad Tapar's to play a key role throughout this struggle. His most critical contribution occurred in 494/1101, when Sanjar rescued Moḥammad Tapar's bid after his catastrophic military defeat at Barkiāroq's hands. By this time, at the latest, Sanjar is already portrayed as having taken full command of his armies, and his long career of military successes began.

Sanjar's military campaigns also led to the imposition of Saljuq control over important neighboring territories. In 495/1101-2 Khorasan was invaded by the Qarakhanid ruler of [Bukhara](#), Qāder Khān Jebril b. 'Omar (r. 492-95/1099-1102), with the connivance of one of Sanjar's commanders (sing. *amir*). Qāder Khan was taken prisoner and executed and, in a policy that was to be repeated in other conquered provinces, Sanjar appointed as his successor a prince of the defeated dynasty who was also a Saljuq scion. Sanjar continued to play an active military and political role in Transoxiana throughout the remainder of his viceroyship and his sultanate as well. Sanjar's second major territorial gain during his rule of Khorasan was the defeat of the [Ghaznavids](#) in 510/1117, an achievement that had even eluded Malekšāh (Nišāpuri, p. 54).

First as subordinate sultan, and later as Great Sultan, Sanjar also duly, if sporadically, campaigned against the Isma'ilis (see [Isma'ilism](#)). In 497/1104 Sanjar sent one of his most trusted amirs, Bozḡuš to fight them in the area of Tabas. Buzḡoḡ reduced them considerably, but in the end he negotiated an agreement rather than killing all, a move that was said to have been extremely unpopular (Ebn al-Aṭir, X, p. 378-9). Sanjar also dealt with an Isma'ili counter-offensive the following year, during the course of which the Isma'ilis slaughtered pilgrims who had gathered from all the eastern lands for the Hajj. As Great Sultan Sanjar ordered massacres of Isma'ilis in Khorasan in 520/1126, as well as in the following year when he led a campaign against [Alamut](#). He sent one of his leading amirs in 528/1134 to besiege the Isma'ili stronghold of [Gerdkuh](#) in Khorasan. This amir was apparently heavily bribed by the Isma'ilis to lift his siege when the Sunni forces were on the verge of victory. In 546/1151 Sanjar sent for the last time one of his commanders with a military force against the Isma'ilis, though this army was said to have wreaked destruction upon them.



The Great Sultan. The Saljuq sultanate had been greatly weakened by the succession struggles of 485-498/1092-1105 which the Saljuq magnates had encouraged and fomented. The relative weakness of the Great Sultan continued to some degree throughout the rule of Moḥammad Tapar who struggled to rein in the centrifugal forces of diverse amirs while rebuilding the power of the great sultan (Sanaullah, pp. 114-32). This was fully accomplished, however, only under Sanjar, who is regarded by the sources as having not only successfully reconstituted, but also expanded the empire of his father, Malekšāh (Šabānkāra-i, II, p. 109; Rašid-al-Din, II, pp. 325-6).

Sanjar's successful bid for the position of the Great Sultan was an anomalous triumph of the Turkish succession principle that headship of the dynasty or principality belonged to the oldest surviving male, rather than passing from father to son in a line of direct descent (Bosworth, pp. 119-20). Throughout the Saljuq domains upon, upon the death of any sultan, this Turkish succession principle was routinely challenged by the Saljuq magnates. After the death of Moḥammad Tapar, his son Maḥmud b. Moḥammad, who was married to a daughter of Sanjar, was declared Great Sultan by his amirs in Baghdad and confirmed by the 'Abbasid caliph al-Mostaršed be'llāh (r. 512-39/1118-35), yet at least two of Maḥmud's brothers, Mas'ud and Toḡrel, contested his claim. Almost immediately Sanjar prepared to challenge his nephew Maḥmud by adopting the honorific Mo'ezz-al-donyā wa'l-din, that had belonged to Malekšāh and which Maḥmud also had adopted. Their armies clashed in the summer of 513/1119 and, after a fierce battle, Sanjar emerged as the undisputed Great Sultan of the Saljuq empire. Pursuant to this victory, Sanjar appointed Maḥmud as his subordinate sultan in the west, but retained direct control of Ray in order to ensure his nephew's continued obedience.

Throughout his reign Sanjar's supremacy was challenged upon the death of each subordinate sultan in the west. When Maḥmud died in 525/1131, his brothers Mas'ud and Saljuqšāh rebelled, but were defeated by Sanjar in battle the following year. Sanjar subsequently appointed other sons of Muḥammad as sultans of Iraq, and all of the Saljuq sultans in the west, frequently with the encouragement of the caliph Mostaršed, kept up their armed rivalry with one another throughout the early 1130s.

Indeed, one of the threats to Saljuq rule, which first arose during Sanjar's long reign, was the – ultimately successful – attempt of the caliphs in Baghdad to resurrect the political power of the 'Abbasid caliphate through weakening their Saljuq opponents. Mostaršed rebuilt the walls of Baghdad and was the



first caliph in centuries to personally lead armies in battle. The tension between the Saljuqs and the 'Abbasid caliph became a crisis in 529/1135, when Mostaršed challenged Sanjar's nephew Mas'ud, who at the time was the subordinate sultan of Iraq, in battle. The caliph was taken prisoner and died in captivity in Šawwāl 529/August 1135. Many of the literary sources directly accuse the Saljuqs of having commissioned the caliph's murder (Tor). The sources report that Mas'ud kept Mostaršed under armed guard while moving him around with his camp. But when an embassy from Sanjar reached Mas'ud, the caliph's tent was isolated and most of his guard had been removed. A group of 24 assassins, supposed Isma'ilis, entered the tent to murder Mostaršed.

Strife between the Saljuqs and the Abbasid caliphs continued under Mostaršed's son and successor, al-Rāšed be'llāh (r. 529-30/1135-6). He held the Saljuqs directly responsible for the murder of his father, and began gathering his forces. But in 530/1136 Mas'ud invaded Baghdad, and Rāšed was put to flight. Mas'ud thereupon forced the 'olamā' to depose Rāšed and to appoint the more pliant al-Moqtafi be'llāh (r. 530-55/1136-60) to the caliphate. Rāšed was murdered in 532/1138 by a band of Khorasanis who were in his service. Again, many of the medieval sources articulate the suspicion that these assassins, too, were the emissaries of the Great Sultan Sanjar.

During Sanjar's reign also witnessed the steady rise in importance of the province of Khwarazm (see [CHORASMIA ii. In Islamic Times](#)). After the conquest of 432/1041 the Saljuqs installed a vassal dynasty who were given the ancient title of khwarazmshah (Paul). The [Khwarazmshahs](#) were directly appointed by the Great Saljuq sultan, and ruled the province as Saljuq governors. During the reign of Malekšāh his Turkish slave [Anuštigin](#) received the nominal title of khwarazmshah, although he seems never to have governed there (Bosworth, 1968, p. 52). When Anuštigin's son Moḥammad (r. 490-521/1097-1127) was appointed khwarazmshah, he ruled the province as a loyal Saljuq governor (Juzjāni, I, p. 299). In 521/1127 Moḥammad was succeeded by his son [Atsız](#). For the first ten years of his reign, Atsız was to all appearances a dutiful vassal of Sanjar who accompanied his liege lord on campaigns to [Samarqand](#), western Iran, and [Gazni](#). By 532/1138, however, the khwarazmshah was showing signs of wavering loyalty. As urged by his officials and amirs. Sanjar lead a campaign against Atsız and appointed a new governor. Yet as soon as Sanjar's army had left Khwarazm, Atsız deposed the new governor and resumed his control of the province (Ebn al-Aṭir, XI, p. 67).



After Sanjar's military defeat in 536/1141 at the hands of the Qara Khitay, Atsız invaded Khorasan, but his rebellion was once again quelled, and Atsız and Sanjar were eventually reconciled.

Downfall. The later years of Sanjar's rule were marked by nomadic pressures, coming from around the northern and eastern edges of the empire and from within the empire itself, particularly the provinces of Khwarazm and Transoxiana. The fractiousness of Sanjar's Turkmen allies and ostensible subjects was responsible for two defeats, the only military defeats that Sanjar ever suffered, and the second defeat brought about his spectacular downfall.

The nomadic pressures first came to a head in Transoxiana in 536/1141 at the Battle of Qaṭvān, fought between Sanjar and the Qara Khitay, an offshoot of the Khitan rulers of northern China, Manchuria and Mongolia. In the early 5th/12th century, when the Khitan rulers were defeated in their homeland, a Khitan prince of a collateral branch of the family led a Turco-Mongol military conglomeration westwards in search of a new patrimony. The Qara Khitay do not appear to have been a particularly formidable military force, as the Qarakhanids roundly defeated them around 524/1130 and their first territorial acquisition within the Muslim world, in Turkestan, was a result of political manoeuvring (Sinor, pp. 234-38; Biran, pp. 19-37).

When the Qara Khitay prevailed in the Battle of Qaṭvān, the Saljuq sultan suffered the first military defeat of his long career. This outcome, however, appears to have been rather the result of discord among Sanjar's commanders and of the defection of a large number of Qarluq Turkmen from Sanjar's allied forces to the enemy, than a demonstration of the Qara-Khitay's military prowess (Mostawfi, p. 449, Bondāri, pp. 276-77, Nišāpuri, pp. 57-58). It is revealing that after their victory the Qara Khitay did not attempt to pursue any further campaigns against Sanjar. As a result of this battle, Transoxiana was lost to the Muslim ecumene, Sanjar's prestige suffered, and Saljuq resources were drained, as Sanjar is said to have spent over 4,000,000 *dinars* altogether in ransom payments and the costs of the war (Ḥosayni, pp. 94, 95).

Recently scholars such as Peter Golden (p. 368) and Svat Soucek (pp. 99-100) regarded the Battle of Qaṭvān as a turning point which shattered Sanjar's power. However, this theory is belied both by direct statements in the sources (e.g., Rašid-al-Din, II, p. 337) and, more importantly, by the events that occurred in the 12 years between the Battle of Qaṭvān and the downfall of the Saljuq state. Immediately after Sanjar's defeat, the Khwarazmshah Atsız



attacked Khorasan, but fled at the rumour of Sanjar's approach. Sanjar in turn mounted a successful expedition into Khwarazm, and Atsız renewed his allegiance to the Saljuq sultan (Ebn al-Atir, XI, pp. 95-96). More significant were the revolts against Sanjar by other political players of the eastern Islamic world. The most serious challenge was posed by the rising power of the [Ghurids](#) in 547/1152 (Nezāmi, pp. 104, 132-3), whose revolt had been joined by 'Ali Čatri, the sultan's *ḥājeb* and the fief-holder of [Herat](#) (Rāvandi, p. 176; Mostawfi, p. 450). Yet all of these military revolts were handily defeated.

In the end, the collapse of Sanjar's rule was caused by the Saljuqs' own tribe, when the sultan suffered a startling defeat at the hands of a [Ġozz](#) rabble in 548/1153. No one, least of all the Ġozz themselves, had expected Sanjar to lose this battle, and it was the treachery and fractiousness of his own military commanders that led to the sultan's downfall (Ḥosayni, p. 123, Bayzawi, pp. 78-79, Nišāpuri, pp. 62-63; Mostawfi Qazvini, pp. 450-451). Sanjar and his queen remained in captivity for three and a half years, humiliated to the point where Sanjar became a byword throughout the empire for wretchedness (Sebt b. al-Jawzi, p. 227).

As a result of this anomalous political situation, hordes of unopposed Turkmen overrun Khorasan which in every respect was the most prosperous and the most flourishing of all the eastern Islamic lands. The Turkmen wreaked unprecedented damage upon Khorasan's infrastructure and resources (Nišāpuri, pp. 63-67), and the province fell into eclipse. Sanjar finally escaped from Ġozz captivity in the autumn of 551/1156, and half a year later, in the spring of 552/1157, he died in Marv. After his death, Turkish amirs, Ġozz tribal forces, and regional powers were competing for the control of Khorasan, and after a long period of political fragmentation, the province was eventually absorbed into the Khwarazmian empire in the early 13th century (Bosworth, pp. 185-94).

Sanjar's death marked the true end of the Saljuq empire, since Saljuq rule continued in Iraq and [Azarbaijan](#), as the Muslim sources note, in name only. The weak epigones in the western Islamic land were the creatures of their atābaks and amirs (Ḥosayni, p. 195) until their dynasties were extinguished in 590/1194. Though most 20th century historians do not have a particularly high opinion of Sanjar, his sultanate is viewed in the Muslim sources as a Golden Age. Not only was he the longest-reigning Muslim ruler of the pre-Mongol period (Ebn al-Jawzi, XVIII, p. 121), but he is also universally considered the greatest of the Saljuq sultans (*Moǰmal*, p. 317; Ḥosayni, p. 90). He possessed



“the majesty of the ̤osrows and the glory of the Kayanids” (Rāvandi, p. 168; for glory, see *farr(ah)*). His reign was notable for security and prosperity, as the sultan encouraged patronage of the ‘*olamā*’ and forged close connections between the religious classes and the government (Lambton, pp. 377, 386-87). Some of the greatest luminaries of Persian literature, among them *Mo‘ezzi* (b. ca. 439/1048; d. after 518/1125), *Nezāmi ‘Aruzi Samarqandi* (d. after 547/1152; see *Ĉahār maqāla*), and *Anwari* (d. after 556/1160) graced his court, witnesses to the cultural efflorescence of Sanjar’s reign (Nišāpuri, p. 56).

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