



The Early Islamic Period of Iranian History: An Overview

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Abstract

Unlike other nations of the pre-Islamic Middle East and North Africa the national culture of Iran was not completely overlaid by the political and military victory of the Arabs in the 1st / 7th century. Over the ensuing centuries of Islam, the Arabic language naturally retained great prestige in Iran as the language for scholarly writing in theology, law, philosophy, science, etc. but the new Persian language re-appeared as a literary medium and so the vernacular speech in Iran. Similarly, Iranians, whilst adopting Islamic religion, remained very conscious of their glorious pre-Islamic heritage of the ancient Persian empires, whose surviving mounments could still be seen through-out Iran. As a result of all this, Islam in Iran has always had a special character of its own, seen for example in a special interest in Sufi mysticism.

The sources for the history and culture of early Islamic Iran tend to reflect the fact that Arabic only slowly yielded an equal place to New Persian language as a medium for literary expression and scholarship hence these sources are mainly in Arabic, with Persian only becoming of significance from the 5th / 11th century onwards. They comprise general histories and chronicles, almost entirely in Arabic; local and regional histories, an especially flourishing genre of writing in the Iranian world, in both Arabic and Persian; geographical works and travellers accounts, largely in Arabic but with some significant works in Persian; and **adab** works, written wholly in Arabic till the 5th / 11th century but there after including also important works in Persian.

Iran was a land of ancient culture, with a culture comparable to those of Egypt, Mesopotamia and South Arabia, long before the appearance of Islam; indeed, it is not much more than two decades since the late Shah of Iran celebrated the 2,500th anniversary of the monarchy in Iran--a date somewhat arbitrarily chosen, but one which certainly demonstrated the ancientness of civilization there. It has also been a civilization blessed with a greater heritage of continuity, one which has been felt in Iran more clearly than in any other Middle Eastern country. Whilst in the earlier part of the present century certain elements in Egypt tried to demonstrate a continuity of Egyptian life and culture with the age of the pharaohs, and some groups in Lebanon have recalled the phoenician past of the Levant coastlands, these attempts to look back have seemed rather forced and artificial, as if modern Iraq were to seek to establish a continuity with ancient Babylon and Assyria or the modern North and South Yemens with the ancient Minaean and Sabaeen and Himyaritic civilizations there.

Iranians, on the other hand, are very conscious of a past which stretches far back beyond the advent of Islam. There have been left standing splendid monuments to the glory of ancient Iran, visible for all: the remains of Cyrus the Great's capital at Pasargadae, the immense palace complex of Darius and Xerxes at Persepolis or Takht-i Jamshid, the many Sasanid rock reliefs at various places in the Zagros Mountains, the palace of the Sasanids of Tāq-i Kisrā at Ctesiphon near Baghdad, etc. Some early Islamic rulers showed an interest in these antiquities; the great Buyid' amir 'Aḍud al-Dawla Fanā-Khusraw (338-72/949-83) visited the Achaemenid capital Persepolis near Shiraz, got a local Zoroastrian priest or **mōbadh** to interpret for him the Pahlavi inscriptions there, and had an Arabic inscription of his own carved there to commemorate his presence.¹ New Persian legend and epic describes in great detail the early stages of Iranian national history, with the rulers of Iran traced back to the first man Kayūmarth as the equivalent of Adam in the Judaic-Christian-Islamic tradition². Hence the national epic set down by the Khurasanian Firdawsī, the **Shāh-nāma** or «Book of Kings», glorifies the ancient, pre-Islamic past of the Iranians, and the names of the heroes found in it--Rustam, Isfandiyār, Kay Kāwūs, Bahman, etc.--have been popular till today in Iran as personal names side-by-side with purely Islamic ones. Firdawsī, although a Muslim, felt the threat to the heritage of Iran from the new faith of Islam, from the abandonment of the old religion of Zoroaster and the ancient heroic traditions, and from the replacement of Persian language by Arabic as the favoured medium for **adab**, polite literature, law, theology and science; but he need not have worried, for the resilience of Iranian national culture was such that it was able to adapt itself to the new faith and law of the Islam and still survive. Indeed, it was able to influence and modify the course of Islamic religion and culture in the eastern Islamic world very appreciably, although the integration of Iran's peculiar national genius and distinct identity with the much newer religion brought by Muḥammad was never entirely complete.³

The result has been that Iranian Islam has always had a special nature of its own. Firstly, there were over the first four centuries of the Islamic history of Iran numerous heretical and dissident movements which reflected at times both an anti-Islamic religious sentiment, with relics of earlier beliefs like Zoroastrianism, Mazdakism and Manichaeism combining with Islamic heterodoxy such as Khārijism and extremist Shi'ism, and also a national discontent and resentment at the political and social domination of the Arabs;

these currents of protest had a literary aspect in the Shu'ūbiyya controversies of the 3rd/9th century, when the partisans of the Iranians, the 'Ajam, were ranged against those of the Arabs- a movement which though basically Islamic in its belief, nevertheless, harked back to the glories of an older Iran, which were compared by the Shu'ūbis with the miserableness of the Arab Bedouins' desert existence.⁴ Several of these heterodox religious movements were located in the east, Khurasan, Sistan and Transoxania, ancient meeting-places of cultural and religious cross-currents; they included the movements of Bihāfarīd; of Sunbādh al-Majūsī, the pretended avenger of Abū Muslim al-Khurasānī; of the neo-Mazdakite al-Muqanna⁶ «the veiled prophet of Khurasan» and his followers, the «wearers of white garments», **mubayyiḍa**, **ispīdh-jāmagān**; of Ustādhīs; and of Ḥamza b. Ādharak and his neo-Kharijite movement. But there occurred in western Iran, in Jibal and Azerbaijan, in the first half of the 3rd/9th century, the most prolonged and dangerous rebellions of them all, the strongly anti-Islamic movements of the Khurramiyya or Khurramdīnān, latterly led by Bābak from his citadel at Badhdh in the Karaja-Dagh area of northern Azerbaijan which took the generals of al-Ma'mūn and al-Mu'taṣim twenty years to suppress.⁵

Secondly, all through the Islamic period the Iranian mind seems to have displayed a particular penchant for the mystical side of religion, seen in the strength of Sufism there. On one hand, Iran was a stronghold of the adherents of the Sunna and of the **muḥaddithūn**, the homeland of the compilers of **sunan** al-Bukhārī, Muslim b. Ḥajjāj, al-Nasā'ī, Ibn Māja al-Qazwīnī, al-Tirmidhī, Abu Dāwūd al-Sijistānī, and of many other luminaries in **fiqh** and **kalām** ; whilst on the other hand, it gave birth to the peculiarly Khurasanian mystical school of extravagant, miracle-mongering and antinomian Sufism associated with such figures as Abū Yazīd al-Biṣṭāmī and Abū Sa'īd al-Mayhanī, conceivably influenced, it has been suggested, by the Buddhism which lingered along the eastern fringes of the Iranian world in Central Asia and Afghanistan and by contacts with Hinduism and its Vedānta salvation-philosophy.⁶ A particularly glorious manifestation of Iranian Sufism has been its literary expressions, above all in poetry, seen for instance in the verses of Sanā'ī, Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār, Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, Ḥāfiẓ, Jāmī, etc. Even after the triumph of Shī'ism under the Ṣafawids (who had actually begun at Ardabīl in the 8th/14th century as a basically Sunnī dervish order, the Ṣafawiyya), when obedience to an authoritarian Imām replaced the wide-ranging intellectual freedom enjoyed by the individual Sufi adept in his path along the mystical stages towards God, certain Sufi orders like the Ni'matullāhīs managed to adapt themselves in Iran to Imāmī Shī'ism in its philosophical and theosophical aspects and have survived to this day.⁷

Thirdly, there is a social and ethnic aspect to Iranian Islam. The land and the people have during the fourteen centuries of Islam shown a remarkable power of absorbing into themselves extraneous, non-Iranian elements, those brought in by successive waves of invaders, usually in the shape of nomads from the steppes of Inner Asia, who have all through history been attracted by the richer and more advanced societies of eastern, southern and southwestern Asia, i.e. the Chinese, Indian and Middle Eastern worlds. Turks began appearing in Iran from the early 5th/11th century onwards as part of a sustained movement which was to last for several centuries and which was to change almost completely the ethnic complexion of Anatolia (formerly Greek and Armenian) into Turkish, but which only affected the Iranian world in Central Asia (where Iranians have receded until there is now a small pocket of them beyond the Oxus in what is now the Tadjikistan S.S.R.) and in certain parts of Iran proper, i.e. the highland regions of Azer-

baijan and some areas of Jibāl and Fars which were particularly suitable for a pastoral mode of life. Here Turkish ethnicity, including Turkish language, has prevailed, but from the cultural and religious point of view, these originally Turkmen peoples have become Shi'ite Iranians like the rest. The Mongols who came in the 7th/13th century were, of course, too few numerically to affect the ethnic composition of Iran or of any other Middle Eastern country; only in a territorially very limited and inaccessible region of central Afghanistan, the Ghōrāt, have vestigial Mongol groups, identifiable as such by their speech, survived.⁸ but the advent of the Mongols was significant in the social and economic spheres, in that the grazing of their flocks of sheep and goats and their horses accelerated the process of the pastoralisation of much of Iran, particularly of its northern parts. This process continued together with the spread of an institution significant for the system of land tenure prevalent over large parts of Iran by Ṣafawid times, that of the assignment of land or *iqṭā'*, (from Mongol times, increasingly known also as the *tīmār* or *soyurghāl*, the assignment by the central government of a landed estate, plus the rights to collect taxation to exercise justice there to the exclusion of central government officials. These grants and their immunities might be given to military commanders or to civilian officials. The result was in any case the same: a weak ruler could easily lose most of his control over the land, although stronger rulers were usually able to recover and resume these *iqṭā's* and to redistribute them according to the requirements of the situation. But the spread of the system, within the western and central parts of Iran at least, did mean that the masses of population, the *ra'iyya*, were now at a greater distance than ever from the ruler as a potential protector from injustice and arbitrary exactions.⁹

Fourthly, there is the survival of Iranian national feeling and self-identity within the Islamic religious framework. Of all the peoples incorporated within the Arab empire as a result of the great conquests of the 1st century after the *hijra*, the Iranians possessed the most distinct national identity, going back, as has been mentioned above, far into the pre-Islamic and pre-Christian times. The Iranians as a nation gradually rallied to the Islamic faith, though not without there erupting at times the movements of social protest and religious nostalgia also mentioned above, and the Iranian nobility and landed classes, the so-called *dihqāns*, became pillars of the Sunni religious establishment there; only a tiny minority of Iranians have clung, up to the present day, to the old religion of Zoroaster. Yet this eventual rallying to orthodox Islam, whether in its Sunni or, later, its Shi'ite form, did not mean that the Iranians gave up their national, cultural identity; the strong, secular tradition of national life was deep-rooted enough to survive the change of religion. In this respect, the Iranians differed from other peoples who embraced Islam. The senses of identity of the Copts in Egypt and the Aramaic peoples of Syria and Iraq (called by Arab authors *al-Nabat*) were based on their enthusiastic adherence to particular churches within Eastern Christianity, the Coptic, Jacobite, Melkite, Nestorian, etc. ones. When considerable proportions of these people gradually became Muslim, they merged with the rest of the Muslims in general, above all with the ethnically and linguistically similar Arabs, keeping little of their former traditions and losing in the process their indigenous Coptic and Syriac languages. In the Maghrib also, even though the newly-converted Berbers in large measure retained their Berber language, they had no enduring secular culture of any significance which could provide the basis for a Berber national revival, such as occurred in Iran some two or three centuries after the Arab invasions.¹⁰

In Iran, it is true, the Iranians adopted the Arabic language, with all its prestige as the sacred language of the Qur'an and the new faith, as the medium for religious, literary and cultural expression during the period before the Iranian revival, and for long after it; until the early 4th/10th century, virtually all literature produced by the Iranian Muslims, or at least, almost the literature that has survived, was written in Arabic¹¹. One thinks accordingly of such names in Arabic literature as Ibn al-muqaffa', Bashshār Ibn. Burd, Ibn Qutayba, Ḥamza al-Isfahānī and a host of others. Many notable statesmen and writers of indisputable Iranian origin endeavoured to give themselves, abandoning their original status as **mawālī** or clients of Arab tribes -- ostensibly genuinely Arab genealogies, as did, for instance, the Ṭāhirid line of governors in Khurasan and Iraq for the Abasid caliphs, claiming descent from the Hijazi tribes of Khuza'a and Quraysh, pretensions which are emphasised by some of the poets who eulogised them.¹² But all this did not mean that the Iranians stopped speaking Persian, for Persian, in the form known as New Persian (modern **Fārsī**), as opposed to the Middle Persian or Pahlavi spoken and written in the preceding Sasanid period, remained the vernacular language of Iran. Towards the end of the 3rd/9th century, New Persian begins to emerge as a literary language. It was first used by the surviving Zoroastrian communities for recording their ancient religious and legal texts into New Persian, the earlier written versions of these having been largely lost in the upheavals of the Arab conquests, involving the destruction of many of the Zoroastrian fire temples, etc. Moreover, under the patronage of strongly Iranian local dynasties which grew up in eastern and northern Iran after the decline and shrinkage of caliphal authority there—the Ṣaffārids of Sistan; the powerful Sāmānid amirate in Transoxania and Khurasan, within whose borders the first poetical versions in New Persian of the Iranian national epic, the **Book of kings**, were put together, subsequently culminating in the authoritative version of Firdawsī; and various petty dynasties of the imperfectly-Islamised Caspian coastlands and interior mountains -- there arose a flourishing literature in New Persian during the 4th/10th and 5th/11th centuries. It comprised fine epic and lyric poetry; prose translations of important Arabic books like al-Ṭabarī's **Ta'riḫ** and **Tafsīr**; scientific works on e.g. geography (the **Hudūd al-'alam** by an anonymous author from northern Afghanistan, see below), pharmacology (the **kitāb al-Anbiya 'an ḥa-qā'iq al-adwiya** by Abū Maṣṣūr Muwaffaq) and astronomy and (the **kitāb al-Taḥmīl li-awā'il ṣina'at al-tanjīm** by al-Bīrūnī); historical texts like the journal of the Ghaznavid-chancery official Abū 'l-Faḍl Bayḥaqī, the **Ta'riḫ-i Mas'udī** and the chronicle of the Ghaznavid historian Gardīzī the **Kitāb Zayn al-akhbār** (see on this, below) and several **adab** works, including treatises in the «Mirrors for Princes» genre (see below). Iranian literature was thus at this time well- launched on its course to become one of the great Islamic literatures, second only, indeed, to the Arabic one.¹³

II

The sources for the history of Islamic Iran during its first four or so centuries reflect the fact that Arabic was the unchallenged language of scholarship and science for at least the first three of these centuries, only yielding place slowly to New Persian; as late as the Timurid period, i.e. the 9th/15th century, we find major works of history still being composed in the florid Arabic chancery style characteristic of that age, e.g. the history of Timūr and his conquests, the **'Ajā'ib al-maḥdūr fī nawā'ib Timūr**, by Ibn 'Arabshāh (d. 854/1450).

We may deal with these literary sources for the history of early Islamic Iran under four headings:

- (1) General histories and chronicles.
- (2) Regional and local histories.
- (3) Geographical works and travellers' accounts.
- (4) **adab** works and collections, works on literary biography, etc.

(1) General histories and chronicles

The earliest, authoritative surviving account of the Arab conquest of Iran is that of Ibn A'tham al-kūfī in his **kitāb al-Futūḥ** (composed in 204 /819), who combined early sources like the Iraqi historians al-Madā'inī, al -Wāqidī , Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī , Abū Mikha-naf and Hishām b. Muḥammad al-Kalbī to provide a connected historical narrative, with a wide perspective of the Arab's settlement in Iran. The other great history of the conquests, the most detailed and authoritative of them all , is of course that contained in al-Balādhurī's **Futūḥ al-buldān**. The author(d. 279/892) dealt first with the overrunning of Iraq, and then went on to cover the Arab invasions of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Jibal, Fars, Kirman, Khurasan and Central Asia in a methodical fashion, with many items of information about the subsequent history of the Arab colonies in those lands up to the early Abbasid period. One of his main sources must have been the historian and philologist Abū 'Ubayda Ma'mar b. Muthannā (d. 209/824–5), famed for his part in the shu'ubiyya controversies and his publicising of the shameful aspects (**mathālib**) of the Arabs.

From this same period stems the universal history of the Shi'ite- inclined author Ibn Wāḍiḥ al-Ya'qūbī (d. 284/897), a history which he brought down to his own lifetime, in the year 258/872. Ya'qūbī was in his earlier years in the service of the Ṭāhirid governors of Khurasan, hence knowledgeable about Persian affairs, and like Ibn A'tham and al-Ṭabarī a little later, used al-Madā'inī/(d. 215/830 or 225/840) extensively as an authority for the history of Khurasan, supplying some details from him not found in al-Ṭabarī. A contemporary, the Persian author Abū Ḥanīfa al-Dīnawarī (d. ca. 282/894-5), wrote a history, the **Kitāb al-Akhbār al-ṭīwal** «Book of the long historical narratives», which went up to the end of the Ḥalīf al Mu'taṣim's reign (227/842). It is not in annalistic form but in that of a continuous historical narrative, unbroken by **isnāds**, thereby giving the history a distinctly literary flavour. It begins as a general history, but then starts to take on the aspect of history written from a specifically Iranian standpoint. The epic Iranian heroes and rulers and the Sasanid emperors, religious leaders like Zoroaster and Mazdak, are all treated, and the history of the Islamic period concentrates quite noticeably on events involving or concerning Iran, e.g. the beginnings of the Abbasid **da'wa** and the career of Abū Muslim, the civil warfare between al-Amīn and al-Ma'mūn, the rising of Bābak and the fall of the Afshīn Ḥaydar. Al-Dīnawarī's approach to history was, for his day, quite an original one: he was concerned with putting forward the Iranian viewpoint and he was apparently able to use Iranian sources, including pre-Islamic epic romances, as well as the standard Arabic authorities.

For sheer amount of detail and for the number of parallel versions of events which he gives, the universal history of Abū Ja'far al- Ṭabarī (d. 311/932), the **Ta'rīkh al-Rusul wa 'l-mulūk**, is supremely valuable for the periods of the Arab conquests, the Um'ayyad caliphate and the early Abbasids in Iran. The author was, as his **nisba** implies, of Iranian stock, from Ṭabaristān in the Caspian region, and for the history of Iran he relied exten-

sively on the otherwise lost historical works of al-Madā'inī, which were especially concerned with the history of Khurasan, Fars and Sind. We know from the titles cited in the **Fihrist** of al-Nadīm that al-Madā'inī wrote a special book on the conquest of Khurasan and other monographs on the governorships there of important Arab leaders like Qutayba b. Muslim, Asad b. 'Abd Allāh al-Qasrī and Naṣr b. Sayyār. Al-Ṭabarī also uses the equally lost work of Abū Mikhnaf (d.157/773), who was an expert on the history of Iraq, presenting in particular the tribal tradition of Azd, but since the governorship of Iraq included at this time responsibility for Iran and the East in general, he was valuable to al-Ṭabarī for events there also.¹⁴

The historians mentioned above are most useful for the period up to the mid-3rd/ 9th century. For the succeeding one, we have the general historian, geographer and traveller Abu 'L-Ḥassan al-Mas'udi (d. 345/956), who included in his **Murūj al-dhahab** material from his much larger, now lost, historical work the **Akhbar al-zamān**, said to have amounted to thirty volumes. He carried his narrative into the early years of the 4th/ 10th century, so that he deals with the expansion of the Daylamīs in northern Iran, that movement of hitherto submerged mountain peoples of the Elburz Mountains region who broke out at this time in a wave of military expansionism, and in the shape of dynasties like the Būyids, Ziyārīds, Musāfirīds, etc. took over most of western and northern Iran, which now passed for ever out of the direct control of the caliph in Baghdad. Also, as an extensive traveller who journeyed to India, Ceylon, the East African coastlands, etc. al-Mas'ūdī knew the terrain of Iran personally.¹⁵

The successor dynasties of the Abbasids in Iran now begin to have their own historians, whose writings were often of a high calibre. This is certainly the case with Abū 'Alī Miskawayh (d. 421/1030), philosopher and scientist, who served the Būyid amirs of Iraq and western Iran as a high financial official. In form a general history, although for the earlier centuries entirely derivative, his chronicle the **Tajārib al-umam** becomes a first-hand source of outstanding value when he comes to deal with events in Iran and Iraq in the 4th/10th century; being at the centre of events in the ruler's **dīwān**, he often gives diplomatic and chancery documents in full, and he has many personal comments and verdicts on the motives and characters of contemporary rulers and statesmen, for the whole aim of his work, displayed in its complete title «The experiences of the nations and the consequences of human aspirations», was to provide moral examples for succeeding generations and to demonstrate the value of history as a guide to behaviour.¹⁶ Since the Būyids were often at war with eastern Iranian powers like the Ziyārīds and Sāmānīds and then with the Turkish Ghaznavīds, Miskawayh and his fellow-historian of the Būyids Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm al-Ṣābi' (Only part of whose dynastic history of the Būyids, the **Kitāb al-Tāj fī ta'rīkh dawlat al-Daylam**, has unfortunately survived), together with other members of the Ṣābi' family who continued their work chronologically, often included material relevant for the history of eastern Iran and Central Asia.¹⁷ But there was some historical writing in the East, although the tradition there, at least until the Ghaznavid period, was less developed than under the Būyids in western Iran. The Sāmānid vizier Abu 'Alī Bal'amī (d. 363/974) translated al-Ṭabarī's history into Persian in a shortened version, but did not continue it till his own time. It seems that there was, however, a history of the governors of Khurasan by the Sāmānid period author Abū 'Alī Ḥusayn al-Salāmī, who actually served the Muḥtājīd family of the upper Oxus principality of Chaghāniyān and apparently took his **Ta'rīkh Wulāt Khurāsān**, now lost, up to 334/955; it was a prime source for the 7th/13th century annalist 'Izz al-Dīn Ibn al-Athīr and for the 5th/11th

century Ghaznavid author 'Abd al-Ḥayy Gardīzī, who in his Persian general history the **Zayn al-akhbār** dealt with the pre-Islamic history of the Iranians and Turks and then becomes a valuable source for eastern Iranian and Central Asian events in the 3rd/9th and 4th./10th centuries and up to ca. 1050.¹⁸

(2) Regional and local histories

In mediaeval times, Iran was fortunate to possess a flourishing genre of local historical writing. It may be that this was a reflection of the particular vitality and independence of urban life there, for these local and regional histories comprise both histories of provinces and regions, such as the various works concerned with Khurasan, and also histories of individual towns. In certain cases, such as that of Nishapur in Khurasan, we know of histories of the town by as many as three or four different writers.¹⁹ These local histories often concentrated on the merits, excellences and specialities (**manāqib, faḍā'il, khaṣā'is**) of the place in question, dealing amongst other things with its products, crops, fruits, manufactures, etc, and on the notable scholars, ulema and literary men which it had produced. Nevertheless, there is often also a considerable amount of information about the historical events affecting the place -- which notable figures stayed or passed through there, the appearance or ravages of armies, natural disasters such as earthquakes, plagues, famine, etc. Thus the regional history in Persian of Sistān, substantially by an unknown author who wrote in the second half of the 5th/11th century, is both a local history of the province, going back to its role in legendary Iranian history, and at the same time a special history of the Ṣaffārids, who were a dynasty of local origin; and the whole book expresses the view of a local patriot who regarded the Ṣaffārids as defenders of the province's interests against exploitative outsiders, by them the Abbasid caliphs, the Sāmānids or the Ghaznavids, whereas the general Sunni orthodox sources for Iranian history regard the Ṣaffārids with disapproval as base-born adventurers who showed no respect for the caliphs or for more aristocratic neighbouring dynasties.²⁰ The history of Fars by Ibn al-Balkhī (early 6th/12th century) likewise expresses local attitudes in its detailed survey of the history and topography of the province, whilst the **Ta'rīkh-i Saljūqiyān-i Kirmān** of Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm (wrote in the early 11th/17th century) is a special history of the branch of Saljuq amirs who ruled in Kirman for over a century during the 5th/11th and 6th/12th centuries. There are several regional histories of the geographically and politically very fragmented Caspian region of Iran, both of the coastal plains and the interior mountains, and historiographical tradition continues up to the 11th/17th century in the historians of Ṭabaristān/Māzandarān, Gurgān and Daylam, exemplified for the earlier period in the **Ta'rīkh-i Ṭabaristān** of Ibn Isfandiyyār (wrote in the early 7th/13th century) and the **Ta'rīkh-i Ṭabaristān u Rūyān u Māzandarān** and **Ta'rīkh-i Gilān u Daylamistān** of Ṣāḥir al-Dīn Mar'ashī (wrote towards the end of the 9th/15th century); this very rich material was extensively exploited for several articles and monographs on the dynastic history of the region by H.L. Rabino di Borgomale, formerly H.B.M. Consul at Rasht on the Caspian coast.

Of the town histories, we have at least three extant for Nishapur, concentrating on the ulema and traditionists of this noted centre for scholarship, and an especially significant one for the nearby town of Bayhaq (modern Sabzavār) by Ṣāḥir al-Dīn Ibn Funduq Bayhaqī (d. 565/1170), who continued in Arabic the Arabic chronicle by al-'Utbi of the Ghaznavid dynasty, **al-Ta'rīkh al-Yamīnī** (regrettably no longer extant) and who wrote in Persian a history of his native town which is extremely valuable for its information on

the settlement at Bayhaq of leading Arab families, including several families of **sayyids**, and then for Bayhaq's role in the general history of Khurasan during the Sāmānid, ghaznavid and Saljuq periods. Further histories exist for Qum, by Ḥasan b. Muḥammad Qummi (wrote in the second half of the 4th/10th century), of which only a later Persian translation of the Arabic original survives; one on the **maḥāsīn** or beauties of Isfahan by al-Mufaḍḍal b. Sa'd al-Māfarrukhi (wrote in 421/1030; one on Shiraz by Ibn Zarkūb Shirāzī (d. 789/1387); one on Herat, the **Rawḍat al-jannāt fī awṣāf madīnat Harāt**, by Mu'īn al-Dīn Isfizārī (d. 903/1497-8); and one on Bukhara in Transoxiana by Abū Bakr Muḥammad Narshakhī (wrote in 332/942-3 for the Sāmānid amir), continued by later hands. It is noteworthy that many of these histories were originally written in Arabic but then had Persian translations or epitomes made from them, often with continuations up to later times; and it is often the later versions, rather than the originals, which have survived.²¹

(3) Geographical works and travellers' accounts

Concerning the very important geographical literature in Arabic, for which the later 3rd/9th and 4th/10th centuries were a golden age, it is unnecessary to write at length, since this whole genre has recently been examined on a magistral scale by André Miquel.²² The geographical writers were often travellers as well, hence with personal experience of the lands which they described. Thus the earlier author Ibn Khurradādhbih (wrote in the second half of the 3rd/9th century) had as his main job that of **ṣāḥib al barīd** or postal and intelligence officer under the caliphs, and his geography is essentially an account of roads and stages; and it has been suggested that Ibn Ḥawqal (wrote in the middle decades of the 4th/10th century) may have travelled all over the Islamic world, from Spain, North Africa and Sicily in the west to Khawarazm and Transoxiana in the east, as a **dā'ī** or propagandist for the Fāṭimid cause, since he clearly had sympathies with Ismā'īlī Shī'ism. Such writers as these, as also Ibn al-Faqīh al-Hamadhānī, Ibn Rusta, al-Iṣṭakhṛī and al-Maqdisī, all deal extensively with the Islamic East, including Iran, the Caucāsus, Central Asia and Sind. Al-Iṣṭakhṛī and Ibn Ḥawqal, moreover, utilised an important geographical treatise, now lost, but which was apparently in the form of a series of maps with commentaries upon them, by the Sāmānid writer Abū Zayd al-Balkhī, protégé of the vizier al-jayhānī in the early 4th/10th century, himself a noted scholar and author of a road-book, the **Kirāb al-Masālik wa 'l-mamālik**. Most geographical works contain in fact details of the roads and communications system and the stages where fresh mounts could be obtained, and, usually, of local products and specialities also. None, however, approaches in richness of information, much of it what we would now call sociological, the work of Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad, al-Maqdisī which represents the culmination of the classical tradition of geographical writing. At the outset he sets forth his scholarly principles, based on personal observation as far as possible, and then of authentic information from reliable sources and experts:

«Know that I have based this book on solid foundations and have supported it on strong columns, and I have directed all my best efforts towards this end. I have had recourse to the intelligences of the most knowledgeable people (**ūlū 'l-albāb**), and I have asked God -- His name is exalted -- to keep me away from error and mistakes and to bring me to a state of hope and favourable expectation. The most firmly - supported and the most solidly-based part of this work is what I have personally witnessed and comprehended, come to know thoroughly and annotated. It is on this foundation that I have erected the fabric and constructed its columns and pillars.²⁴»

For the Iranian world, al-Maqdisī (whose forebears came from Biyār in Khurasan, modern Biyārjumand, before settling in Jerusalem) gives almost unique information on the peoples, languages, faiths, sectarian groups and, especially, on the **'aṣabiyyāt** or factional strifes in several towns of Iran such as Ray, Nishapur, Zarang and Herat. Some of these **'aṣabiyyāt** had a sectarian religious and legal basis (e.g. rivalry between Ḥanafis and Shāfi'īs, rivalries involving groups like the Karrāmiyya and the Khārijites against the mainstream Sunnis), but there must have been also socio-political factors at work, although we can only guess at the nature of these; and a connection with the para-military groups of vigilantes (**'ayyārūn, ahdāth**) known to have existed here in the Iranian world and further west in e.g. Syria and Iraq, is not to be ruled out.²⁵ One should further mention here the sole geographical work in Persian stemming from this period, the **Ḥudūd al-'ālam** compiled ca. 370/980 in the remote province of Gūzgān in northern Afghanistan. The anonymous author seems to have been more of an armchair traveller than a practical one, but he collected important information on the eastern Iranian lands and the borderlands with India and on the Turkish peoples of Inner Asia, amongst whom the Islamic faith was only just beginning to spread northwards from Sāmānid Transoxania and from Khwarazm.²⁶

Certain travellers' accounts are significant for this period, both in relation to Iran and to Central Asia. Concerning the latter region, Aḥmad b. Faḍlān, an envoy from the caliph al-Muqtadir, journeyed in 309/922 through Iran to Khwarazm and then plunged into the pagan steppes, arriving eventually at Bulghar on the middle volga, whose king had recently become a Muslim. His travel account, long known only from quotations in Yāqūt al-Rūmī's geographical dictionary the **Mu'jam al-buldān**, was discovered in the form of a complete text in manuscript at Mashhad in 1922 by Ahmed Zeki Velidi (Togan); it is full of curious anthropological detail about the ways of life and the shamanist beliefs of the Oghuz Turks (ancestors of the Saljuqs), the Bulghars and the Khazars.²⁷ A slightly later contemporary was the Arabian globe-trotter and courtier of the Sāmānids and Būyids Abū Dulaf al-Khazrajī, who wrote two **risālas**, the first describing his travels across Central Asia accompanying an embassy to the Emperor of China and containing information, at times confused and perhaps in some respects unreliable, on the Turkish tribes of Inner Asia. The second epistle describes his travels within northern and western Iran in ca. 950 A.D. and is more sober and reliable about the local topography and the natural wonders there, often giving information from local legends and tradition.²⁸ Finally, one should mention under this heading the well-known **Safar-nāma** or travel narrative of the Ismā'īlī sympathiser and publicist Nāṣir-i Khusraw, dating from 437 / 1045, in which he describes his journeys through the central Islamic lands to the Holy Cities and to Egypt; since he came from a remote region on the headwaters of the Oxus near where modern Afghanistan, China and Soviet Central Asia meet, he had necessarily to traverse Iran, hence gives much topographical and economic information on it.

(4) Adab works and collections, works on literary biography, etc.

This is really a very extensive category of literature, primarily valuable for the study of polite literature and its practitioners, but one which nevertheless fills out the general picture of a lively and flourishing Arabic culture in the East, one in which New Persian was only just beginning to play a part so that we frequently find authors there described as **dhu 'l-lisanayn**, equally fluent and expressive in both tongues.²⁹

First the caliphal governors and then the largely independent rulers of the Iranian lands almost all adopted the characteristic role of patron and maecenas, gathering round themselves poets and literary men who in turn eulogised their masters and made their fame to redound throughout the Islamic world. Thus we find Abū Tammām (d. 231/845 or the next year) resident at one point of his career at the Ṭāhirid court in Nishapur and praising 'Abd Allāh b. Ṭāhir; al-Mutanabbī (d. 354/965) spent some of the last years of his life in Shiraz at 'Aḡud al-Dawla's court; and Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī (d. 414/1023) spent much of his adult life in the circles of various Būyid viziers and officials at Ray, Isfahan, Shiraz, etc., including those of Abu 'l-Faḍl Ibn al-'Amīd, Ibn Sa'dān and the Ṣāḥib Ismā'īl b. 'Abbād. The splendour of the Sāmānid court at Bukhara is described in a well-known passage from Abū Maṣṣūr al-Tha'ālibī's work of literary biography and anthology, the **Yatīmat al-dahr**, written in the early decades of the 5th/11th century:

Bukhara was, under Sāmānid rule, the meeting-place of glory, the Ka'ba of kingly power, the confluence of the unique minds of the age, the rising-place of the stars of the literary men of the earth and the fair of the outstanding persons of the age.³⁰ This work and its continuation, the **Tatimmat al-Yatīma**, both of them on the poets and stylists of the author's own time, has a third section devoted to the writers of western Iran, in effect the Būyid lands, and a fourth one devoted to those of Khurasan, Sistan, Transoxania and Khwarazm, and sometimes al-Tha'ālibī provides information which is not of a strictly literary nature. Thus we find mention of two Abbasid claimants resident in Nishapur, Abū Ṭālib al-Ma'mūnī and Abū Muḥammad al-Wāthiqī, who were still dreaming of regaining the succession to the caliphal office of their ancestors over a century previously³¹. Many of the writers examined by al-Tha'ālibī are otherwise unknown or very little known; but the whole work displays how, as with the Arabic culture of al-Andalus at the opposite end of the Islamic world, such a culture could flourish on the remoter fringes of the eastern Iranian lands.

Lastly it is worth mentioning one minor genre within **adab** literature which flourished particularly strongly in the Iranian world, that of the «Mirrors for Princes» or manuals of statecraft and advice to rulers, **naṣīḥat al-mulūk**.³² In its Islamic form, the genre goes back to Ibn al-Muqaffa' and his two books of **adab** and his **Risāla fi 'l-ṣaḥāba**, but one can also discern a line of descent from pre-Islamic Iran and its works on practical morality and ethics, the **andarz-nāma** treatises, works which certainly go back to the Sasanid period and which were taken over and given an Islamic veneer. When Ṭāhir Dhu 'l-Yaminayn's son 'Abd Allāh was appointed to Raḡqa in al-Jazīra during the caliphate of al-Ma'mūn, the father Ṭāhir addressed to him a famous letter of advice as to how he should comport himself; the text appears first in Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfur's **Kitāb Baghdād** and then in various later works up to Ibn Khaldūn's **Muqaddima**.³³ During the 5th/11th century, two complete books were written in this vein and in Persian. In 475/1082-3 a minor prince of the Caspian principality of Gurgān, Kay Kāwūs b. Iskandar, wrote a «Mirror for Princes» which he called, after his famous grandfather Qābūs b. Wushmagīr, the **Qābūs-nāma**, and which had a considerable later vogue, being translated more than once, for instance, into Ottoman Turkish. It was in this century, too, that the great Saljuq vizier Niẓām al-Mulk (d. 485/1092), famed amongst other things for the **madrasas** which he founded, the Niẓāmiyyas, composed his **Siyāsat-nāma** or **Siyar al-mulūk**, with the specific aim of urging his masters the Saljuq sultans to model their empire on the examples of earlier despotic rulers in the Perso-Islamic tradition such as 'Aḡud al-Dawla and Mahmūd of Ghazna.³⁴ These works illuminate the general moral

and ethical climate of the age, and they further contain down-to-earth practical advice, in the case of the **Qābūs-nāma**, such as how to buy slaves and horses; but they also contain many historical anecdotes, meant to illustrate specific pieces of advice or courses of action, and these can provide hard historical information when checked against the specifically historical sources.

III

To conclude: Iran in the early Islamic period provides a fascinating spectacle of the reception there of a new faith, Islam, and a new culture, the Arab-Islamic one, by a land which had ancient cultural and religious tradition of its own which were too firmly-rooted in the fabric of national life to be overcome or superseded by the incomers. Hence there begins the process of symbiosis and adaptation which renders Iran a distinct, almost unique, aspect of the Islamic experience.

NOTES

1. See R.N. Frye, **The heritage of Persia**, London 1962, 251.
2. For a masterly exposition of the significance of this heritage for Iran, see Ehsan Yarshater's chapter «Iranian national history», in Yarshater (ed.), **The Cambridge history of Iran. III. The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods**, Cambridge 1983, Part 1, 359-477.
3. Cf. Frye's chapter «Iranian contributions to Islamic culture», in his **The golden age of Persia. The Arabs in the East**, London 1975, 150-74.
4. See H.A.R. Gibb, «The social significance of the Shu'ūbiyya», **Studia Orientalia Ioanni Pedersen Dicata**, Copenhagen 1953, 105-14, repr. in **Studies on the civilization of Islam**, Boston 1962, 62-73.
5. On all these, see G.H. Sadighi, **Les mouvements religieux iraniens au II^e et au III^e siècle de l'hégire**, Paris 1938; Frye, chapter «Heresies and the oecumene of Islam», in **The golden age of Persia**, 126-49; and B. Scarcia Amoretti, chapter «Sects and heresies» in Frye (ed.), **The Cambridge history of Iran. IV. From the Arab invasion to the Saljuqs**, Cambridge 1975, 481-519.
6. This view has been put forward in recent decades by R.C. Zaehner in e.g. his **Hindu and Muslim mysticism**, London 1959.
7. See on these, R. Gramlich, **Die schlitischen Derwischordern Persiens. I. Die Affiliationen. II. Glaube und Lehre**, Wiesbaden 1965-76.
8. See for these, H.F. Schurmann, **The Mongols of Afghanistan. An ethnography of the Mongols and related peoples of Afghanistan**, The Hague 1962; and C.E. Bosworth, **Encycl. of Islam²**, art. «Moghols».
9. For succinct views of these complex developments, see A.K.S. Lambton, **Landlord and peasant in Persia**, London 1953; and Cl. Cahen, **Encycl. of Islam²**, art. «Iḳṭā'».
10. S.M. Stern has some pertinent comments about this process in his «Ya'qūb the Coppersmith and Persian national sentiment», in C.E. Bosworth (ed.), **Iran and Islam. In memory of the late Vladimir minorsky**, Edinburgh 1971, 535-9.
11. See Bosworth, «The interaction of Arabic and Persian literature and culture in the tenth and early eleventh centuries», **Al-Abhath**, XXVII (1978-9), 59-75. Frye has pointed out that the almost exclusive use of Arabic for literary expression and for scholarship lasted longer in western Iran, since it was in the eastern Iranian lands that the renaissance of New Persian language and literature was in full swing by the 4th/10th century, although the effects of this renaissance soon began to be apparent in western Iran also; see his «The New Persian renaissance in western

- Iran», in G Makdisi (ed.), **Arabic and Islamic studies in honor of Hamilton A.R. Gibb**, Leiden 1965, 225-31, reprinted in his **Islamic Iran and Central Asia (7th-12th centuries)**, London 1979, XXII.
12. Bosworth, «The Tāhirids and Arabic culture», **Jnal. of Semitic Studies**, XIV (1969), 49-54, reprinted in his **Medieval Arabic culture and administration**, London 1982, II.
13. See the chapter by G. Lazard, «The rise of the New Persian language», in **Camb. hist. of Iran**, IV, 595-632.
14. For all these historians, see the respective articles on them in **Encycl. of Islam¹** and **Encycl. of Islam²**, and for a good general survey of historical writing on its various levels, F. Rosenthal, **A history of Muslim historiography**, Leiden 1968.
15. The **Encycl. of Islam²** article on al-Mas'ūdī, by Ch. Pellat, is especially useful for a general view of the historian's work.
16. See Rosenthal, **op. cit.**, 141-2.
17. See, e.g., W. Madelung, «Abū Ishāq al-Ṣābī on the Alids of Ṭabaristān and Gīlān», **Jnal. of Near Eastern Studies**, XXVI (1967), 17-57.
18. See W. Barthold, **Turkestan down to the Mongol invasion**, 2nd edn. London 1958, xiii, 10-11; and Bosworth, «Early sources for the history of the first four Ghaznavid sultans (977-1041)», **Islamic Qtl.**, VII (1963), 8-10, reprinted in his **The medieval history of Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia**, London 1977, XIII.
19. Cf. Frye, «City chronicles of Central Asia and Khurasan. The Ta'rix-i Nisābūr», in **60. doğum yili Münasebetiyle Zeki Velidi Togan'a armağan**, **Symbolae in honorem Z.V. Togan**, Istanbul 1950-5, 405-20.
20. Bosworth, **Sistān under the Arabs, from the Islamic conquest to the rise of the Ṣaffārids (30-250/651-864)**, Rome 1968, 111-12.
21. For this genre of local histories, see Barthold, **Turkestan**, 13-17; Bosworth, **The Ghaznavids, their empire in Afghanistan and eastern Iran 994: 1040**, Edinburgh 1963, 12-15; and for bibliographical details of the individual works, C.A. Storey, **Persian literature, a bibliographical survey**, I, London 1927-53, 348-88, updated by Yu.A. Bregel, **Persidskaya literatura**, Moscow 1972, II, 1008-86.
22. In his **La géographie humaine du monde musulman jusqu'au milieu du 11^e siècle**, Paris-The Hague 1973-88; see also Barthold, **op. cit.**, 11-13.
23. Ch. Pellat has endeavoured to unravel the complex often contradictory information about the Jayhāni family; it seems that as many as three members of the family may have been involved in the writing down of geographical material; see his art. «al-Djayhāni» in **Encycl. of Islam²**, Suppl.
24. **Aḥsan al-taqāsīm**, ed. M.J. de Goeje, Leiden 1906, 3; cf. Miquel, **Aḥsan at-taqāsīm... (La meilleure repartition pour la connaissance des provinces)**, Damascus 1963, 11.
25. See Bosworth, **The Ghaznavids**, 163 ff.
26. For this work, see Bosworth, **Encycl. of Islam²**, Suppl., s.v.
27. Togan provided a German translation of Ibn Faḍlān's travel narrative, **Ibn Faḍlān's Reisebericht**, Leipzig 1939, which includes a very full historical and ethnographic commentary; see also Frye and R.P. Blake, «Notes on the **Risāla** of Ibn-Faḍlān», **Byzantine Metabyzantina**, I, 7-37, New York 1949, reprinted in his **Islamic Iran and Central Asia**, XXIX.
28. The first **Risāla** can be read in a German translation with commentary by A. von Rohr-Sauer, **Des Abū Dulaf Bericht über seine Reise nach Turkestan, China und Indien, neu übersetzt und untersucht**, Bonn, 1939, and the second in the edition of the text, English translation and commentary of Minorsky, **Abū-Dulaf Mis'ar ibn Muhallil's travels in Iran (circa A.D. 950)**, Cairo 1955.
29. See on these authors and their frequent mingling of Arabic and Persian linguistic elements with in the same work, Mikhail Zand, «Some light on bilingualism in literature of Transoxania, Khurasan and western Iran in the 10th century A.D.» in **Yādnāme-ye Jan Rypka. Collection of articles on Persian and Tajik literature**, Prague 1967, 161-4; and Bosworth, «The interaction of Arabic and Persian literature and culture», 71-2; and **idem**, chapter «The Persian impact on Ara-

- bic literature», in A.F.L. Beeston et alii (eds.) **The Cambridge history of Arabic literature**. [I.] **Arabic literature to the end of the Umayyad period**, Cambridge 1983, 492-4.
- 30.Ed. Damascus 1304/1886-7, IV, 33; cf. E.G. Browne, **A literary history of Persia, from the earliest times until Firdawsī**, [I], London 1908, 365.
- 31.Barthold, **Turkestan**, 258.
- 32.For this genre, see G. Richter, **Studien zur Geschichte der älteren arabischen Fürstenspiegel**, Leipzig 1932.
- 33.For a translation of this celebrated piece of Arabic prose, made from the text as given by Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr, see Bosworth, «An early Arabic Mirror for Princes: Ṭāhir Dhū l-Yamīnain's Epistle to his son 'Abdallāh (206/821)», **Jnal. of Near Eastern Studies**, XXIX (1970), 25-41.
- 34.See Barthold, **Turkestan**, 25-6; Lambton, «The dilemma of government in Islamic Persia: the **Siyāsāt-nāma** of Nizām al-Mulk», **Iran, Jnal.of the British Institute of Persian Studies**, XXII (1984), 55-66.