

VOLUME **THREE**

I.B. TAURIS

THE HISTORY OF CENTRAL ASIA

The Age of Islam and the Mongols



CHRISTOPH BAUMER

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1. The *Miraj Nameh*, the account of the Prophet Muhammad's midnight journey and ascension to Paradise, tells how, on arriving at the First Heaven, he met Adam, father of the human race. According to tradition and inspired from *surahs* 17 and 53 of the Qur'an, Muhammad made his journey in 621 CE, mounted on Buraq, a winged horse with a human face. The Archangel Gabriel guided horse and rider from Mecca to Jerusalem and then on through the Seven Heavens, Paradise and Hell. The description of the Prophet's ascension is written on the inner edge of the picture frame in Chagatai, a widespread Turkic language of Central Asia under the Timurids, in Arabised Uyghur script. Manuscript on paper produced in Herat in 1436/37 by the calligrapher Malik Bakhshi for Shah Rukh (r. 1409–47). Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, manuscrit suppl. Turc 190, fol. 9v.¹

Introduction

Just as God has given the hand several fingers, so he has given mankind several paths.

GREAT KHAN MÖNGKE explains Mongol religious policies to the Franciscan William of Rubruck in 1254.¹

By 'several paths' he means several religious messages.

Between the ninth and the fifteenth centuries, Central Asia was an important political, economic and cultural hub on the Eurasian continent; in the first half of the thirteenth century it was the pre-eminent centre of power. The most important factors that led to the hegemony of Central Asia were the ideology of Islam and its development through engagement with Iranian culture, the flourishing of the sciences, the spread of Turkic-Muslim peoples and dynasties, the perfection of mobile warfare by the Mongols and their encouragement of trade. The political and military dominance of Central Asia in the thirteenth century was helped by relatively weak adversaries on the outer borders of the Mongols, and by the inability of European states and Russian city-states to combine their forces and adapt to the Mongols' military tactics. The Mongol aggressors formed a freshly unified nation, while Europe remained a hotchpotch of kingdoms and principalities frequently at war with each other.

When the armies of the Arabs, strengthened by warriors from Mesopotamia and Iran, conquered south-western Central Asia, they brought with them Islam, a religion that offered many advantages. Islam was easy to understand and follow and was open to people from all social classes. But even more decisive was the fact that it offered rulers an ideological tool to break down the borders between clans and tribes. Turkic tribal leaders in particular used Islam to commit their heterogeneous followers to a shared system of beliefs and to found and establish new dynasties (such as those of the Seljuks, Karakhanids or Ghaznavids). Another, crucial advantage of Islam lay in the summons to *jihad*, the holy war against unbelievers, which newly converted rulers and their horse warriors reinterpreted as a licence for raids on their non-Muslim neighbours. Although it was Arabs who conquered the south-west of Central Asia, the local dynasty of the Samanids, who were of Iranian origin, soon took over and freed Islam from the straitjacket of Bedouin ideas. At the same time, Central Asian and Iranian dynasties of officials in the Muslim caliphate of the Abbasids, such as the Barmakids and Buyids, usurped power and began to restrict

the authority of the caliphs, the representatives of the Prophet, to religious affairs. Between the middle years of the eighth and eleventh centuries, humanities and sciences flourished, especially the exact sciences like mathematics, algebra, geometry, astronomy, geography and medicine, whose advances were quite unparalleled. This was a time when the window for new discoveries in the Muslim-Iranian world² was wide open, for Islam as shaped by the open-minded tolerance of the Iranians set few limits on intellectual curiosity or on the translation of works from classical Antiquity, long forgotten in Latin Europe, and from India. This same liberal spirit could be found among the rulers, high dignitaries and rich merchants at the time, who supported scientists and philosophers and created large libraries, similar to today's oligarchs building up extensive art collections or financing sports teams.

In the mid-eleventh century Central Asian hegemony spread across the Muslim world thanks to the Turkic Seljuks. The eastern Iranian book (knowledge and scholarship) and the Turkish sword (Turkic armies) now combined to dominate the Abbasid caliphate. This balance was brought to an abrupt end by Genghis Khan and his successors, when they overran and destroyed the Chorasmanian-Abbasid world between 1219 and 1258. The Mongol conquerors and later Timur-e Lang treated captives and civilians with extreme brutality – for them the life of a non-Mongol was worth considerably less than that of a horse. Unlike their Muslim predecessors, the Mongols were not driven by any religious motivation. They were secular rulers who used whatever ideology served their purposes best. This also meant that they lacked any worldview that could sustain the creation of a new state, and their cultural and political footprint remained small – in contrast to the Muslim Arabs whose legacy spread throughout the world. On the other hand, the Mongols granted religious freedom, on condition that religious practices did not violate the laws of Genghis Khan.

Genghis Khan's family regarded the Mongol conquests as a kind of family possession, and even more than a century after the death of the conqueror nobody was allowed to assume the title

of khan unless he was related to Genghis. While Genghis Khan's descendants, especially the dynasties of the Yuan in China and the Il-Khanids in Iran, tried to create an orderly system of government within their sphere of influence, Timur-e Lang, a century later, gave no administrative structure to the territories he conquered. As a result, very soon after his death his realm was broken up into warring dynasties led by his various sons and grandsons.

The age of the Mongols saw a great increase in contacts between Central Asia and Western Europe. On a political level, the Mongol forays into Eastern Europe and Syria confronted the Latin princes and Crusaders with the problem of dealing with the 'Tartar' threat. But at the same time the fact that the Mongol elite, and even Genghis Khan's family, included a considerable number of Nestorian³ Christians, seemed to promise fertile ground for the Roman Catholic Church. And Mongol support of commerce encouraged Latin merchants to trade with Asians. The Italian mercantile republics, with their own warships and merchant fleets, were particularly active. It is remarkable that the Mongol Il-Khanids, when they encountered their first equal adversary in the Near East in the form of the Egyptian Mamluks, radically changed their strategy towards the Latin kings and popes in the 1270s: before they had behaved like arrogant conquerors,

demanding unconditional submission – as God willed – from the Latins, but now they became supplicants and tried to enter into military alliances with the Latin powers against the Mamluks. The resulting flurries of diplomatic contacts did not yield any concrete results, but now there was at least a regular exchange between Central Asia and Western Europe, something which had a significant influence on the development of geographical knowledge, art and textiles in the West.

As in the previous two volumes of the present work, Arabic, Turkic, Mongolian and other Asiatic place and personal names are rendered in linguistically correct transcriptions while mostly omitting diacritical signs. For Chinese names, the Pinyin phonetic system for transcription is used.

Iranian-Muslim Dynasties in South-West Central Asia

'I am the son of the noble descendants of Jam [the mythological king of Iran, Jamshid], and the inheritance of the kings of Persia has fallen to my lot. [. . .] I am reviving their glory, which has been lost and effaced by the long passage of time.

So say to all the sons of Hashim [the Abbasids], "Abdicate quickly, before you have reason to feel sorry! [. . .] Return to your country in the Hijaz [the Prophet's homeland in Arabia], to eat lizards and graze sheep."

YAQUB IBN AL-LAYTH AL-SAFFAR (r. 861–79), founder of the Saffarid dynasty of eastern Iran.¹



2. The prayer hall of the mosque in Damghan, Iran, built in 760. It stands on the former Silk Road, which led from Samarkand to Mashhad and onwards to Rayy in the province of Tehran, and is one of Iran's oldest surviving mosques. Photo: 2014.

The mid-eighth century represented a significant turning point for south-west Central Asia, particularly for the areas of today's Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, western Afghanistan and Khorasan. It formed the conclusion of a transitional period characterised by wars, which had begun with the expeditions of conquest by the Umayyad general Qutaiba ibn Muslim (in office 705–15) in Transoxania, known to the Arabs as Mawarannahr. After the death, in 709, of Khunuk Vardan Khudah, the ruler of Bukhara and Vardana, the capture of the Sogdian prince Dewashtich

of Panjikant in 722, the failed attempts to regain independence by Ghurak, king of Samarkand, who died in 737 or 738, and the murder of Suluk, the khagan of the Türgesh, in 738, no important leaders of Sogdiana or its ally the Türgesh Khaganate emerged to lead the resistance against the Arab invaders.²

The resistance of the Sogdian cities was hampered by their own political disunity, which stopped them developing a coordinated defence. An additional complication was that their actual suzerain, the Chinese Empire under the Tang dynasty, which had wrested supreme

power over Transoxania from the Western Turkic Khaganate in the 650s, proved to be a 'paper tiger'. The Sogdian delegations made numerous requests for military aid, but received only verbal promises in return, for in the first half of the eighth century China was involved in a costly war with Tibet. After the victorious Pamir campaigns of the Chinese general Gao Xianzhi in 747 and 749–50, it did look as though China might pursue strategic aims in Mawarannahr too. But the crushing victory of Arab forces led by Ziyad bin Salih in the battle of Talas in July 751 put a damper on Chinese expansionist politics, and four years later the An Lushan rebellion forced Emperor Suzong to recall all the troops stationed in Central Asia to the Chinese heartland.³ With the fall of the Türgesh and the retreat of the Tang, the last chances of alliance for the Sogdian princedoms also disappeared. Subsequent rebellions in Mawarannahr were no longer struggles for independence from the Muslim caliphate but social and religious revolts by heterodox Islamic movements. Later, in the first half of the ninth century, local governors and military commanders within the *Umma al-Islam*, the global community of Islam, mounted successful attempts at political independence. They ruled independently in south-west Central Asia and, while recognising the spiritual authority of the caliphs, paid them only nominal taxes.

1. Socio-religious Conflicts under Early Abbasid Rule

Sogdian resistance was further undermined by two other developments: on the one hand, the introduction of tax reforms and granting of an amnesty for Sogdians who had taken up arms by governor Nasr ibn Sayyar in 741, and on the other the beginning of integration of discontented non-Arab local Muslims, the *mawali*, who suffered from discrimination. The uprisings in Samarkand in 720 and 728 had given a boost to the Murjite movement in the 730s and beyond. The Murjites, led by Harith ibn Surayj and inspired by Shi'ite and Kharijite⁴ ideas, fought for the emancipation of native and immigrant Arab Muslims, agitated for tolerance for the theologically uneducated *mawali* and demanded exemption from the special tax known as *djizya*.⁵ Since the ruling Umayyads – who ran the caliphate more like a business enterprise dominated by Arab tribes for their own profit than as a community of Muslims with equal rights – were bitterly resented in Mawarannahr, the anti-Umayyad, Abbasid propaganda of Abu Muslim found a receptive audience among local *mawali*. The Abbasids invoked

Muhammad's uncle al-Abbas and were thus also able to mobilise Shi'ites, who were only prepared to recognise members of the family of Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet; the Umayyads on the other hand were considered usurpers by the Shi'ites. Abu Muslim Khorasani (whose last name, ending with 'i', signifies that he came from Khorasan) gathered together the anti-Umayyad forces and from 747 to 748 drove the Umayyad governor Nasr ibn Sayyar out of Central Asia. While securing his power in Khorasan, Abu Muslim sent his general Qahtaba ibn Shabib Ta'i westward, and in the winter of 749–50 the latter overthrew the Umayyads.⁶

The last of the Umayyads, Marwan II, who fled to Egypt, was succeeded as caliph by Abu'l Abbas al-Saffah (r. 749–54), a great-great-grandson of Muhammad's uncle al-Abbas. He founded the Abbasid dynasty, which ruled until it was crushed by the Mongols in 1258. But with the accession of Abu'l Abbas, no descendant of Ali came to power, so that the Shi'ites' hopes were again disappointed and they continued to represent a source of socio-political unrest. For their part, the majority of the Abbasids owed their seizure of power to Abu Muslim and his army; it was not to be the last time that a Central Asian Muslim determined the appointment of a caliph who suited him. At first it was Iranian-speaking politicians who guided the destinies of the caliphate, later Turkic mercenaries and commanders.

The rebellious Abbasids had risen against the Umayyads not only because of their refusal to grant them equality with the Arabs, and in particular with the descendants of the aristocracy of Mecca, but also because they deemed the Umayyads excessively worldly. For the Abbasids, Islam was not only the religion of the ruling Arabs, but also the essential basis of an empire in which all the faithful, that is all Muslims, should enjoy the same status. But this raised a fundamental question – which tendency of Islam should serve as the basis of the state? For only a generation after the death of the Prophet in 632, three mutually hostile Islamic religious denominations had emerged: the Sunnis, the Shi'ites and the Kharijites. When the Abbasids took power, no monolithic Islam had existed for a century. Before seizing power, the Abbasids' propaganda had skilfully left open the question of what was the 'real' Islam.

The Most Important Early Islamic Denominations

The close interweaving of religion and politics which characterised Islam from the start accounts for the fact that conflicting sects came into being so soon after the death of Muhammad. For Muhammad was not only a prophet and founder of the religion, but also a military commander, a lawgiver and the leader of all Muslims. When the Prophet died in Mecca in 632, he left behind neither a doctrine of his own composition nor a clear order of succession. As far as the *surahs* (chapters) of the Qur'an are concerned, in Muhammad's lifetime these were mainly learned by heart by public Qur'an readers and passed on by oral tradition. It was only after Muhammad's death that his secretary Zayd ibn Thabit (d. 655) began their transcription on the orders of the first caliph Abu Bakr (r. 632–34). Zayd completed this first manuscript before Abu Bakr's death, after which it passed into the possession of Muhammad's widow Hafsa bint Umar, the daughter of the second caliph, Umar. But since several versions in various dialects were circulating, the third caliph, Uthman ibn Affan (r. 644–56), gave Zayd the task of codifying the Qur'an. Around 650, Uthman issued the text of the Qur'an that is still authoritative today, written in the dialect of the Quraysh tribe, which ruled Mecca – the dialect out of which standard Arabic later developed – and ordered the destruction of all other versions.⁷ The enforcement of Uthman's version of the Qur'an provoked unrest among the supporters of other versions, who felt they suffered discrimination. Uthman's version, however, was not entirely conclusive, so the Umayyad minister al-Hajjaj ibn Yusuf (d. 714) brought out a new text which, unlike Uthman's, was vocalised and furnished with diacritic marks.⁸ This version of the Qur'an, produced by Uthman and reworked by al-Hajjaj, is recognised by Sunnis and Shi'ites, but not by the Kharijites, who reject individual *surahs* as apocryphal.

Since Muhammad united in his person the roles of religious, political and military leader of the new community of faith, his successors claimed the same functions for themselves. For this reason the question of the succession in the early days of Islam was an eminently political one, which was also resolved by military means. All three main branches of Islam emerged more as a result of political disputes, especially rivalries between leading families, than because of theological considerations. After Muhammad's death, the majority of the Muslim tribal leaders appointed one of his first followers, Abu Bakr (r. 632–34), as caliph; that is, as the Prophet's successor. Abu Bakr was succeeded by two further early followers of Muhammad, Umar ibn al-Khattab (r. 634–44) and Uthman (r. 644–56), and it was from their entourage that the Sunnis emerged. After Uthman's murder by rebels who objected to his nepotism, Muhammad's son-in-law Ali ibn Abi Talib (r. 656–61), who had married the Prophet's daughter Fatima, was appointed the fourth caliph by the rebels. Several notable figures, however, refused to swear loyalty to Ali; the most important of these were Muawiyya, the governor of Syria, a relative of the murdered caliph, and Aisha bint Abu Bakr, the youngest wife of Muhammad.

The coalition led by Aisha was defeated by Ali in 656 in the so-called Battle of the Camel.⁹

As the historian al-Tabari reports, Ali committed a decisive error in the Battle of Siffin against Muawiyya in 657: although his army was on the brink of victory, he allowed himself to be duped by a trick of Muawiyya's and persuaded by the latter's ambassador to submit to a court of arbitration. Fearing a certain defeat, Muawiyya had Qur'ans fixed to his soldiers' lances, hoping his opponents would not fight against the holy book.¹⁰ While the arbitration remained without consequences, a significant number of Ali's supporters perceived his agreement to it as a betrayal of Islam and the heritage of the Prophet and turned away from him. For these disillusioned companions of Ali's, arbitration meant yielding to a merely human, imperfect authority, while a victory in battle would have represented the judgement of God. In handing over control of victory, Ali was committing treason against God's verdict. These rebellious supporters were called Kharijites, which in Arabic means 'those who went out', or 'the rebels'. Four years after the Battle of Siffin, the Kharijites, pursued by Ali, planned a double attack on Muawiyya and Ali. Muawiyya (r. 656–80) survived and founded the Umayyad dynasty, but Ali perished.¹¹ Thus the Shi'ites lost their first imam. By the Battle of Siffin at the latest, the Islamic community had split into three branches, at first primarily distinguished by their conflicting opinions on the rightful succession to the Prophet; later, theological differences also emerged between them.¹²

The Sunnis

The Sunnis form the majority of Muslims. They call themselves *ahl al-sunnah*, which means in Arabic 'people of the tradition' of Muhammad. This tradition *sunnah* consists of the words, actions, habits, practices and tacit approvals of the Prophet as recounted by his companions in the *hadiths*, the 'reports', at first recounted orally and later transcribed and preserved in collections, of which those known as 'six books' enjoy canonical status. All Muslims distinguish quite clearly between God's words, as the Prophet received them in revelations and passed them on as *surahs* of the Qur'an, and Muhammad's own words.¹³ The chosen companions of the Prophet include the first four caliphs, Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman and Ali, who are called by the Sunnis *al-rashidun*, the 'rightly guided ones'. With the fifth caliph, Muawiyya, the caliphate was transformed into a dynastic political system. The Sunnis recognise the *hadiths* as a normative corpus, so that these, after the Qur'an, form the second pillar of their jurisprudence.

► 3. Aerial shot of the shrine in Mashhad, Khorasan, Iran of the eighth Twelver Shi'ite imam Ali ibn Musa al-Ridha, who died in 818. The two wide, concentric circular paths were laid in the 1970s. Photo 1976/78.



While the canonical character of the Qur'an and the *hadiths* became generally recognised, divergent versions soon came into being with regard to their interpretation in the context of Islamic jurisdiction. Four traditional schools of jurisdiction, *madhabs*, emerged from these. Since Islamic law knows no actual separation between religious and civil areas of application, the *madhabs* also took on features of religious sects and political interest groups. Of the four groups named after their founders, the **Hanafi**, founded by Abu Hanifa (699–767), form not only the oldest and largest group, but also the most liberal. Abu Hanifa represented an egalitarian Islam, teaching equality of the *mawali* with Arab Muslims. Furthermore, for Abu Hanifa, the *mawali*, who lived in a polytheistic location and knew little or nothing of the Qur'an and the religious duties laid down in *sharia* law, the Islamic legal system, were equally to be considered as true believers, as long as they led a moral life.¹⁴ He also allowed those *mawali* who knew no Arabic to pray in their own language. Methodologically, the Hanafi allowed wide latitude to analogical reasoning which adapted the commandments or judgements found in the Qur'an and the

sunnah with the help of the understanding of a new situation, leading to the cultivation of independent schools of thought. While the **Shafi'i**, who followed the teaching of Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi'i (767–820), also used analogical reasoning for the deduction of legal rules, al-Shafi'i himself largely rejected independent doctrines and moved the *hadiths* into the foreground. It is not surprising that the Hanafi, who saw Arab Muslims and *mawali* as equal, enjoyed by far the greatest popularity in Central Asia.¹⁵

The two other schools of law were very conservative, strict, and, in the case of the **Hanbali**, elitist. Ahmad ibn Hanbal (780–855) was convinced of the natural superiority of Muslim Arabs, since it was the Arabs who had produced the Prophet and his early travelling companions.¹⁶ In accordance with his dogmatic understanding of Islam, ibn Hanbal rejected analogical reasoning and independent doctrines, and invoked only the Qur'an, the *sunnah* and the consensus of the first generation of Muslims. As a result of the literal exegesis of the Qur'an in the Hanbali school of law, anthropomorphic notions developed, as can be seen from a striking



4. Shi'ite pilgrims make their way along the 850-kilometre-long road from Tehran to Mashhad, Iran. Pilgrims regard enduring the slow, strenuous journey to their destination as an act of merit. The red flag shows from left to right (above) the names Ali, Allah and Muhammad, (below) al-Husain, al-Hasan and Fatima and in the centre Gamar ibn Hashem, brother of the third imam and his general. Photo: 2014.

formulation of Hanbali doctrine of the eleventh century: 'Our God can be seen, is established on his throne; his speech is eternal, his prophet Arab.'¹⁷ The **Maliki** school, founded by Malik ibn Anas ibn Malik (ca. 711–95), was led less by the *hadiths* than by the consensus of the first Muslim generations, the ordinances of Caliph Umar and in particular the lifestyle and norms of the first three generations of Muslims who lived in Medina, where the Prophet had been exiled since 622. For Malik ibn Anas the early community in Medina represented a sort of 'living *sunnah*'.

The disagreements between the schools of law were conducted not only on the level of verbal argument, in the form of sermons, disputations and polemical writings, but also as violent confrontations and actual street battles, for example in the eleventh and twelfth centuries in Baghdad. The extent of intolerance within Islam can be recognised from the reply of a leading Hanbali to Vizier Nizam al-Mulk (1018–92), when the latter asked him to conduct himself in more moderate fashion: 'Those people [supporters of the Ash'ari theological school¹⁸] claim that we are unbelievers, while we claim that anyone who does not believe what we believe is an unbeliever. So how can there be peace between us?'¹⁹

The Shi'ites

The term Shi'ites denotes the followers of the 'Shi'at Ali', the family of Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet. On the death of Muhammad, individual tribes and groups opposed the appointment of Abu Bakr as caliph and came out in favour of Ali ibn Abi Talib; but it was only six months later, after lengthy attempts at mediation by Umar, that Ali swore an oath of loyalty to Abu Bakr to preserve the unity of the Muslim community. After the murder of the fourth caliph, Ali, whom the Shi'ites revere as the first imam, and the triumph of Muawiyya, Ali's eldest son al-Hasan (d. 670), the second imam, retired to Medina, as did his younger brother al-Husain (d. 680). But when Muawiyya introduced a hereditary order of succession and designated his son Yazid I (r. 680–83) as his successor, many Iraqi cities rebelled, including Kufa. Al-Husain allowed himself to be deceived by their promises to actively support his legitimate claim to the caliphate, and left for Kufa with his followers. But at Kerbala, before reaching Kufa, al-Husain encountered a strong army led by Yazid, who killed the small band down to the last man.²⁰ As Katajun Amirpur puts it, al-Husain's lonely martyr's death at Kerbala forms the 'identifying moment of the Shi'ite faith'²¹: al-Husain was killed by his Sunni enemies and betrayed by his Shi'ite followers for lack of the promised support. It is only by their readiness to do penance and suffer martyrs' deaths as followers of al-Husain that Shi'ites believe they can atone for their collective sin at Kerbala. This readiness to atone and suffer where necessary characterises the history of the Shi'ites, and it inspired the Shi'ite Iranians in the revolution of 1978–79 against Shah Mohammad Reza, the 'modern Yazid', as well as in the extremely costly Iran–Iraq War of 1980–88

against the Iraqi aggressor Saddam Hussein, who had massive support from the West, Russia and China.

In principle the Shi'ites do not recognise a separation between political and religious power, since the Prophet was the leader in both spheres. In addition, he bequeathed to the faithful not only the book of God, the 'silent Qur'an', but also his family, the 'speaking Qur'an', *Koran an-natiq*.²² For this reason, only a descendant of Muhammad can rightfully be appointed as an imam, as 'leader' or 'model',²³ and by the same token the Sunni caliphs lack legitimacy. In practice, the larger Shi'ite groupings mostly avoided violent resistance and submitted to Sunni state authority.²⁴ The Ja'faris and Imamites, for example, chose a quietist lifestyle according to the principle of *taqiya*, 'caution', which means that Shi'ites may practise their religion and rituals with caution and, if necessary, in secret, and also that the imam is not required to rise up against unlawful and unjust rulers.²⁵ But disagreements soon arose within the Shi'ite community about the correct lines of succession and where one of these lines broke off. Thus, for example, the **Zaidis**²⁶ recognise as the fifth imam not Muhammad al-Baqir and his successors, but his brother Zaid. Similar succession disputes led to the splitting off of the Sixer Shi'ites, known as **Ja'faris**, and the Sevens Shi'ites, the **Ismailis**. In contrast to the quietist Sixer and Twelver Shi'ites, the Ismailis sometimes departed from the *taqiya* principle, rebelled and formed their own mighty dynasties, for example the Fatimids in North Africa (909–1171), or powerful revolutionary organisations such as the **Nizaris**, also called **Assassins** (1094–1256/71), who fought the Abbasids in Syria and Iran with guerrilla tactics and assassinations.²⁷

In 816/17 a unique opportunity presented itself to the **Imamites**, the Twelver Shi'ites, to gain power peacefully, when the Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mun (r. 813–33), who resided in Merv, named the eighth Shi'ite imam, Ali ibn Musa al-Ridha, as his successor. Such an order of succession offered a chance of closing the deep gulf within Islam, or at least of bridging it. But individual Abbasid dignitaries in Iraq rebelled in the face of this innovative arrangement and the numerous conversions from the Sunni to the Shi'ite faith, and in 818 the eighth imam died quite suddenly in Tus, presumably poisoned. His grave in the eastern Iranian city of Mashhad is one of the most significant of Shi'ite pilgrimage sites.

After anti-Shi'ite politics had hardened since Caliph al-Mutawakkil (r. 847–61), who had placed the tenth and eleventh imams under house arrest, the Shi'ites performed a U-turn on the death of Imam al-Hasan al-Askari in 873. They proclaimed that al-Askari had brought his son Muhammad to safety, away from the caliph's henchmen, and that Allah had transported this twelfth imam, Muhammad ibn Hasan al-Mahdi, into minor seclusion in 874 and major seclusion in 941. In accordance with the eschatological beliefs of the Imamites, this hidden imam would one day return. They also claimed that during this period of absence all regimes were actually illegal.²⁸

The theology of the Imamites diverges from that of the Sunnis in essential respects.²⁹ Among these are, first, belief in the Mahdi, the



5. Since it was shelled by Russian artillery in the winter of 1911/12, the Imam Reza (Ridha) Shrine complex in Mashhad, Iran, has remained open 24 hours, 365 days a year. The green triple-shell dome² in the middle of the photo belongs to the Gauhar Shad Mosque, built by Shah Rukh's wife, Gauhar Shad, in 1416–18. To the left we see the golden dome of the mausoleum. The name Mashhad-e Moqaddas means 'place of martyrdom'. Photo: 3 September 2014, birthday of the eighth Shi'ite Imam.

twelfth imam; second, the veneration of the imams as martyrs, who bore the guilt of the sinful believers, and third, the conviction that the Qur'an, though eternal, was created, which allows far greater scope for its interpretation by learned legal scholars, called *mujtahid*. The Sunnis consider the Qur'an as uncreated, just like Allah himself, and believe that the *surahs* reproduce God's exact words. For the Shi'ites and the suppressed Sunni Mu'tazilites,³⁰ the Qur'an contains God's words only insofar as its content derives from him, but its form and language are marked by the personality and time of Muhammad. This differentiation allows the distinction between a literal, 'outer' meaning of the Qur'an and a hidden, 'inner' meaning, whose exegesis is the responsibility of the *mujtahid*. In addition, the Shi'ites interpret the ban on pictorial representation of living creatures, in particular of humans, less strictly, so that portraits of Ali, of his wife Fatima, the daughter of Muhammad, and of their two sons al-Husain and al-Hasan, are to be found in important shrines in Iran. In this context, in Shi'ite popular belief Fatima enjoys a veneration equal to that

of the cult of the Virgin Mary in the Catholic Church, and which is totally foreign to the Sunnis.

In the veneration of Ali, the **Nusayris** or **Alawites**, who emerged in the late ninth or tenth centuries, went even further than the Imamites. They follow a secret syncretic-gnostic doctrine, in whose centre is the belief in three emanations of the single God, which manifest themselves cyclically. Ali is venerated as one such emanation.³¹ Among conservative Sunnis the Alawites are considered infidels.

The Kharijites

In contrast to the quietist Imamites and Ja'faris, the Kharijites, who had broken with the fourth caliph Ali after the Battle of Siffin in 657, formed an egalitarian and militant group which held closely to the Qur'an and *sunnah*. For the Kharijites, the choice of a political and religious leader did not depend on his ancestry, but on his abilities. The caliphate was by no means reserved to the Alids (the descendants of Ali), but any Muslim who was capable and free from sin was electable



as leader of the Islamic community, a black slave as much as an Arab noble or an Alid. Such an egalitarian feature was particularly appealing to the urban *mawali* of Central Asia and Iran. The Kharijites fought the Umayyads and Abbasids because these dynasties improperly monopolised the caliphate, and condemned the Shi'ites for not being strict enough in their observance of the *sunnah*.³²

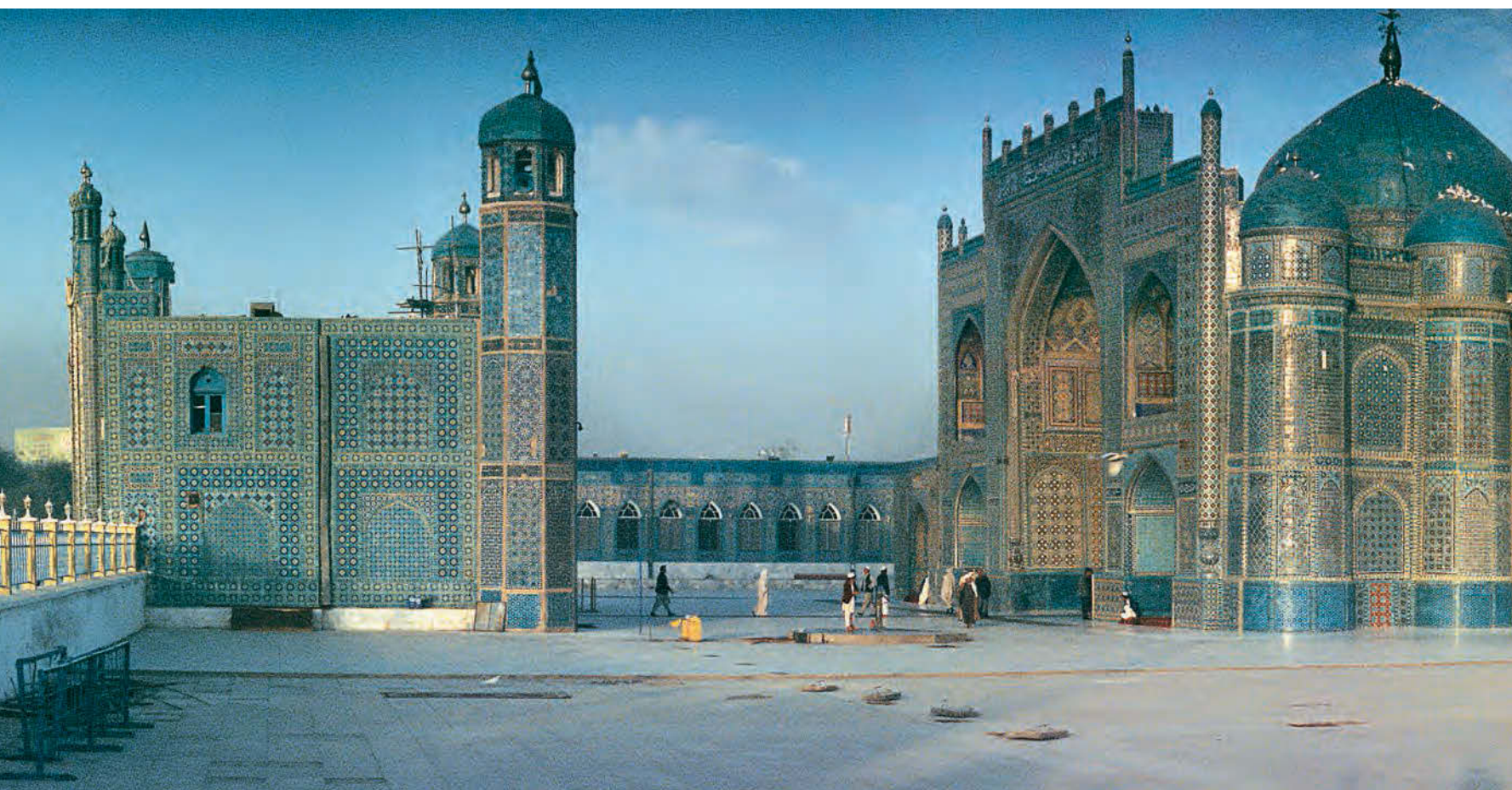
After the debacle of Siffin, Ali turned against his disloyal followers and in 658 crushingly defeated them in battle. Three years later, surviving Kharijites murdered Caliph Ali and at the same time rose against Muawiyya and his Umayyad followers. Beaten many times by the Umayyad armies, the Kharijites, dispersed over the whole empire, were divided on the question of how strictly the *sunnah* should be followed. This further weakened their power. Nevertheless, repeated Kharijite uprisings took place in Mesopotamia and Iran,³³ and finally in the 30-year uprising in northern Iraq from 866 to 896. In the east of the Abbasid Empire, where the *mawali* represented a higher proportion of believers than in the west,

autonomous areas under Kharijite control persisted for a long time, in particular in the east of Khorasan, in Badghis, around Herat and in Sistan.³⁴ But tribes of Arab origin, dissatisfied with the ruling dynasties of caliphs, also joined the Kharijites. In Sistan, the reign of **Hamza bin Adharak al-Khariji** (d. 828), from the Helmand province of Afghanistan, which lasted more than 30 years, was particularly notable. In 795 or 796 he raised the banner of revolt and controlled Sistan right up to the time of his natural death in 828, though without being able to hold his own in the capital, Zaranj. Abbasid governors sent against bin Adharak were either killed or had to make extensive compromises with him. Even after his death, Kharijite military leaders controlled rural areas and blocked important routes. It was not until 865 that Yaqub bin al-Layth al-Saffar, founder of the Saffarid dynasty,³⁵ was able to kill the leading Kharijite, Ammar bin Yaser. He solved the problem of the Kharijite rebellions by integrating rebel units in his own army, and sources after the eleventh century scarcely mention them.³⁶

The young Abbasid kingdom was challenged by rebellions, not only in its south-eastern provinces, but also in the north-eastern ones. Here the murder of Abu Muslim in February 755 provoked several uprisings. The first Abbasid caliph, Abu'l Abbas al-Saffah (r. 749–54), who in seizing power destroyed the hopes of his Shi'ite allies that he would pass on the throne to an Alid, soon felt threatened by the growing power and prestige of Abu Muslim, from Merv, who had placed him on the throne. Abu Muslim, who ruled practically independently in Khorasan and Mawarannahr, had not only succeeded in 750 in putting down the Shi'ite uprising of Shari bin Shaykh, but had also won in 751 an outstanding victory over a Chinese army at Talas and extended his sphere of influence to the north.³⁷ Moreover, Abu Muslim sympathised with heterodox and non-Islamic beliefs such as reincarnation and rebirth,³⁸ which gained him support among critics of Islam. The Abbasid

elite faced the danger that he might use his increased power to topple them and declare himself caliph. Al-Saffah's successor, the Sunni al-Mansur (r. 754–75), lured his rival into a trap and had him murdered at the beginning of 755.³⁹

The power vacuum in south-west Central Asia that resulted from Abu Muslim's murder encouraged several socio-religious uprisings.⁴⁰ Groups discontented with the Abbasid regime rose up in the name of Abu Muslim, and under the cloak of Islam began spreading pre-Islamic ideologies of Zoroastrian origin. The first to revolt, in 755, was a companion of Abu Muslim called **Sunpad** (or Sinbad, d. 756), who with his army even reached Rayy 15 kilometres south of Tehran, but on the march to Hamadan was put to flight by Abbasid troops and died in 756.⁴¹ The former Abbasid missionary **Ishaq al-Turk** then rebelled around 756/57 with his movement, called Abu Muslimiyya, and preached that Abu Muslim had been



6. Rebuilt in 1481 by the Timurid sultan Husayn Bayqara, the Blue Mosque in Mazar-e-Sharif, Afghanistan, was later restored several times. The name of the city means 'Grave of the Saint', a reference to the fourth caliph Ali ibn Abi Talib (r. 656–61). According to local legend, the Prophet's son-in-law and founder of the Shi'ite faith is said to have been buried here. The burial site is highly revered by both Shi'ites and the Sunni Uzbeks of northern Afghanistan. The powerful symbolism of the Blue Mosque was recently emphasised by the fact that it was from here that the Uzbek warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum chose to launch his rebellion against the Communist regime of President Najibullah on 19 March 1992.³ Photo: 2010/11.

an apostle of Zoroaster, was now living in secret in the mountains and would one day return as a prophet.⁴² This message represented an amalgam of the eschatological beliefs of the Twelver Shi'ites and the Zoroastrians. As Richard Frye explained, 'it should be noted that the Shi'ite belief in a saviour or mahdi, and the Zoroastrian expectation of the return of a messiah, called Vahram-i Varjavand from a mythical "copper city", in the early Abbasid period, at times seemed to coincide'.⁴³ Soon after this, further south in Badghis, Herat and Sistan, there was a revolt led by **Ustadh Sis** (d. 768), who also propagated eschatological beliefs. Ustadh Sis was taken prisoner and executed in Baghdad.⁴⁴ A little later, in 776, **Yusuf bin Ibrahim** (d. 778), also called Yusuf al-Barm, revolted in Badghis. He presented himself as an extreme Kharijite and also promoted Zoroastrian ideas. Like Ustadh Sis, Yusuf was taken prisoner by Abbasid troops and executed.⁴⁵

Hashim ibn Hakim, known as **al-Muqanna** (d. 783), not only claimed to be a prophet, but even believed himself to be an emanation of God and the Mahdi of Islamic eschatology, the Messiah.⁴⁶ Hashim was originally an officer of Abu Muslim from Merv or Balkh, later an adviser or vizier of the Abbasid governor of Khorasan Abd al-Ja'far (in office 757/58–59/60), who was accused by the eleventh-century historian Gardizi of having sympathies with the movement of Ishaq al-Turk.⁴⁷ When al-Ja'far began to show signs of insubordination, and Hashim began to pose as a prophet, Caliph al-Mansur had the rebellious governor executed and ordered Hashim to be imprisoned in Baghdad, but after a few years he set him free again. Hashim returned to Merv and from about 768/69 proclaimed himself to be both a prophet and the incarnation of the spirit of God: 'I am the one who showed myself to people as Adam, then in the form of Noah, also in the form of Abraham, Moses,





7. The fourteenth-century Timurid city walls of Damghan, Turkmenistan. Within the walls there is a mausoleum built in honour of the Khorasani military leader, Abbasid agitator and Islamic missionary, Abu Muslim (718–55). Photo: 2014.

then in the guise of Jesus, Muhammad the Prophet, in the guise of Abu Muslim, and now in this guise which you see.’ In a letter to the district authorities of Khorasan he stated more precisely: ‘There is no other God but me. He who follows me will go to paradise, but he who does not accept me will rest in hell.’⁴⁸ Hashim became known as al-Muqanna, ‘the veiled one’, because his face was always covered by a green veil. His followers explained this by saying that normal people would be unable to bear the radiance of his face; but his opponents claimed that in fact he was concealing disfigurement caused by a war wound. Like the Mazdakites, his followers wore white clothing, so that the movement was called *al-mubayyidin*, ‘those clothed in white’, and he preached Mazdakite principles such as the abolition of private property. His entourage consisted of impoverished peasants and mountain dwellers as well as urban craftsmen and small traders.

Around 775/76, when Hashim was again threatened with imprisonment, he crossed the Oxus with his warriors and took possession of some mountain fortresses in the Kesh area, today Shahr-i Sabz in south-eastern Uzbekistan. After a raid against Bukhara he entered an alliance with the Karluks, who ten years earlier had captured Semirechie from the Türgesh,⁴⁹ and with the military support of the Karluks he conquered Samarkand and Termez. The historian Abu Bakr al-Narshakhi (ca. 899–960), who came from the oasis of Bukhara, reported in his *History of Bukhara*: ‘Muqanna invited the Turks and permitted them [to take] the life

and possessions of the Muslims. Many troops came from Turkestan in the hope of plunder.’⁵⁰ In order to protect the oasis complex of Bukhara from these plundering horse warriors, from the end of 782 or the beginning of 783 the Abbasid governor Abdul Abbas al-Fadl ibn Sulayman al-Tusi had the fortresses from the fifth century CE at the north-eastern end of Greater Bukhara restored, and linked them with a long wall, which Narshakhi calls ‘Kanpirak’ (fig. 9).⁵¹

In Samarkand, al-Muqanna had coins minted with the inscription ‘Hashim, Abu Muslim’s avenger’. Caliph al-Mahdi (r. 775–85) now realised that control of Mawarannahr was threatening to slip from the Abbasids’ grasp, but his counter-offensive was not successful until, around 780, he gave the supreme command to the governor of Herat, Said al-Harashi. Now the Karluks abandoned al-Muqanna – they had not entered the alliance with him out of religious convictions, but only to be able to plunder. Al-Harashi first captured the fortress commanded by al-Muqanna’s brother, and then began to lay siege to the self-styled emanation of God in his mountain fortress. In or shortly before 783, when his situation became desperate, Hashim poisoned his wives, killed his slaves and threw himself into a burning furnace.⁵² After the victory over the Mubayyidites, Abbasid troops crossed the Syr Darya and invaded the Karluk region. Ultimately, all these socio-religious popular uprisings failed; it was only later that Islamic commanders aspiring to independence succeeded, thanks to their loyal armies, in liberating themselves from the Abbasid yoke.

Rebellions by Kharijite and extreme Shi'ite groups were not restricted to the east of the Umayyad and Abbasid kingdom, but also caused turmoil in its western half. These included, for example, the revolutionary movements of the Kaysaniyya and Hashimiyya, which came out of al-Mukhtar's uprising in Kufa of 685. A further development of the Hashimiyya was the revolt of Abdallah ibn Muawiyya, which shook the Iranian province of Fars from 744 to 748. After the death of ibn Muawiyya, another movement, the Harbiyya, emerged, whose beliefs included reincarnation and a cyclical concept of history. A high point of all these heterodox movements was the revolt of Babak al-Khurrami in Azerbaijan of 816–37.⁵³ It was the general Haydar ibn Kavus Afshin from Ustrushana who captured Babak in 837 after a war lasting three years.⁵⁴ Even though some of the many uprisings in east and west were partly inspired by neo-Mazdakite thought, it is evident that in the early days of Islam radical religious or socio-religious groups already existed which rejected an Islamic regime that did not correspond to their own religious beliefs. For them, the regimes of other Muslim denominations, such as those of the Sunni rulers, had no legitimacy, and they held it their duty to conduct a holy war, a *jihad*, against these rulers by military or terrorist means (such as targeted murders).

2. The Barmakids and Tahirids

Of course not all leading figures of Iranian origin in south-west Central Asia were hostile to the Abbasids. Many cooperated with the rulers in distant Baghdad⁵⁵ and with their governors. Individual families, such as the Barmakids, formed a powerful dynasty of officials within the kingdom; others, such as the Tahirids, began their careers as officers and later became de facto independent. The forebear of the mighty family of the **Barmakids** (ca. 730s–803) was **Barmak**, who, as the historian al-Masudi reports, came from a distinguished Bactrian family, which held the hereditary rank of 'high priest' of the famous Buddhist temple of Balkh, the 'Naubahar'.⁵⁶ As Sir Henry Rawlinson presumed as early as 1872, 'Naubahar' corresponds to the Sanskrit *nava vihara*,⁵⁷ which means 'new Buddhist monastery', and the family name Barmak is derived from the Sanskrit word *pramukha*, the hereditary title of the monastery administrator.⁵⁸ The temple of Navasanghârâma (Naubahar) visited by the Chinese pilgrim monk Xuanzang in 630 and described by him in detail,⁵⁹ destroyed in the days of Caliph Muawiyya,⁶⁰ must have been a magnificent building. The

geographical compendium *Hudud al-'Alam*, produced anonymously in 982–83, mentions that wall paintings and splendid artworks were still to be admired in the ruins.⁶¹ As the calligrapher and local historian Mo'in al-Din Mohammad Zam'chi Isfizari (ca. 1446–1510) describes, the ruins of the temple and fragments of the wall paintings still existed even in the late fifteenth century,⁶² seven centuries after the first Arab conquest of the city.

The first link between a Barmakid and a Muslim caliph at the time of Hisham ibn Abd al-Malik (r. 723–43) is historically confirmed. At that time Barmak converted to Islam⁶³ and resided as a physician at the caliph's court in Resafa. However, according to the Korean pilgrim monk Huichao (ca. 700–after 780), by the end of the 720s most of the residents of Balkh were still Buddhists, despite the Arab occupation.⁶⁴ Barmak's son **Khalid ibn Barmak** (d. 781/82) began his career in Gorgan and Tabaristan (north-east



8. The self-styled prophet Hashim ibn Hakim, called al-Muqanna and regarded as a heretic by mainstream Muslims, was besieged and defeated in southern Uzbekistan in 783. Manuscript dating from 1307 of *The Chronology of Ancient Nations* by al-Biruni (973–1048). University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, gouache on paper, Oriental Manuscript Collection. Ms. 161, fol. 93v.



9. The medieval fort of Ganj Tepe in the north-eastern sector of the 'long wall' of Bukhara in Uzbekistan. The remains of the long wall called Kanpirak by al-Narshakhi run to the left of the canal. Photo: 2013.

Iran) as an Abbasid propagandist and officer, and later Caliph Abu'l Abbas al-Saffah gave him control of the army ministry and the government tax department (*diwan al-Kharaj*), which was concerned with taxation and land tenure.⁶⁵ Under al-Mansur he occupied various positions as governor and is believed to have designed the plan for the new palace and administration complex of Baghdad for the caliph; the circular ground plan with a diameter of 2,700 metres was modelled on pre-Islamic architecture, such as the Parthian Hatra or the Sassanid palace complexes of Firuzabad (Gur) and Takht-i Sulaiman.⁶⁶ Khalid's son **Yahya bin Khalid** (d. 806) served as vizier to Caliph al-Mahdi (r. 775–85) and as tutor to the future Caliph Harun al-Rashid. Under the brief rule of al-Hadi (r. 785–86) Yahya ended up in prison, because in a conflict between the caliph and his brother Harun he had supported the latter. When al-Hadi died suddenly in 786, Harun al-Rashid (r. 786–809) appointed Yahya as his vizier and, a year later, as his seal-bearer, so that he became 'absolute ruler of the government'.⁶⁷ Yahya al-Barmaki further consolidated his enormous power by making his sons **Fadhl ibn Yahya** and **Ja'far ibn Yahya** governors in key provinces; two further Barmakids held important posts, **Musa ibn Yahya** as a

military commander and **Mohammad ibn Khalid** as a majordomo. In addition, Ja'far presided over the mint and the combined postal and intelligence service, so that the three Barmakids Yahya, Fadhl and Ja'far formed an effective triumvirate, whose power and sphere of influence increased still further through the caliph's relocation to the border city of al-Raqqah on the central Euphrates, 600 kilometres away.

Thanks to their positions, the leading Barmakids became immeasurably wealthy. But not only did they lead a life of luxury, they also distinguished themselves as generous patrons of mathematics, medicine, astronomy and philosophy. As Frederick Starr notes, the Barmakids stood in a tradition of intercultural communication, since the Naubahar monastery contained a centre for the translation and publication of Buddhist texts from India, which then reached China.⁶⁸ In Baghdad, the Barmakids, above all Yahya ibn Khalid, had scholarly works from both Greek and Sanskrit translated and published. To disseminate the newly acquired knowledge, in 794/95 Fadhl and Ja'far ibn Yahya opened Baghdad's first paper mill, which also served the city's administrative departments. By replacing parchment, which was

vulnerable to forgery, with paper, which was resistant to it, the brothers also reformed the administration of the state.⁶⁹ The patronage of Greek and Indian scholarly works by the Barmakids, who were of Central Asian origin, gave a very important impetus to Islamic scholarship, ushering in an era in which Islamic humanities and exact sciences flourished – several centuries before a similar development began in Western Europe.

At the end of the eighth century, the unprecedented power of the Barmakids, their popularity in Islamic Central Asia and their wealth began to make the caliph uneasy, and in 799 he removed Fadhīl from all his official positions. Then, in 803, Harun ordered the decapitation of Ja'far, who for several years had been the most powerful of the Barmakids, had his brothers arrested and placed their father, Yahya, under house arrest. At the same time he confiscated all the Barmakids' assets, with the exception of those of Mohammad ibn Khalid.⁷⁰ In destroying this dynasty of officials, the caliph was demonstrating that even the most powerful dignitary remained a servant who could be replaced at any time. Various contemporary historians have speculated as to Harun's further motives. Assumptions were made about Harun's rage over the sexual consummation of an originally only nominal marriage between his sister Abbasa and Ja'far ibn Yahya, his envy of the luxurious and profligate lifestyle of the Barmakids, their interest in non-Islamic texts and the fact that Ja'far maintained an army near Baghdad which was loyal to him and only nominally subject to Harun. Harun foresaw that the combination of an army committed to the Barmakids with their inexhaustible financial means, and the birth of a son of Barmakid-Abbasid descent, might become a threat to his authority and that of his descendants.

The overthrow of the Barmakids, who had made a name for themselves in Khorasan as fair and just governors and moderate tax collectors, alienated the local population from the central government in Baghdad. The anger of the Khorasanis was all the greater when Ali ibn Isa ibn Mahan, the new governor whom Harun had appointed in place of Fadhīl al-Barmaki, enforced inflated and arbitrary taxes by brutal means. In addition, Ali ibn Mahan failed to extinguish the rebellion of the Kharijite Hamza bin Adharak al-Khariji, although, as reported by Gardizi, he proceeded against the rebels with extreme cruelty: "Two stout branches of a tree were tied together with strong ropes connecting the two of them, and the two legs of a quietist Kharijite were each tied to one of the two branches. Then the rope was released, and the strength of these two branches thus released would split the man in two."⁷¹

In 806, the local resentment led to the revolt of the governor of Samarkand, Rafī bin Layth, a grandson of the last Umayyad

governor of Khorasan, Nasr ibn Sayyar. The uprising was widely supported, and Rafī received military aid from the Oghuz, Karluks and Tibetans, so that the caliph, Harun, had to intervene personally. But on his way to Khorasan, at the beginning of 809, Harun became ill and died near Tus, while his son al-Ma'mun was already in Merv.⁷² The four grandsons of Saman Khudah, a landowner from Balkh, named Nuh, Ahmad, Yahya and Ilyas, played a significant role in the suppression of the uprising and the capitulation of Rafī bin Layth. In gratitude, Caliph al-Ma'mun ibn Harun bestowed on them the governorship of four important cities and regions.⁷³ Later, in the last quarter of the ninth century, descendants of these four brothers founded the illustrious Samanid dynasty.⁷⁴

The unfortunate order of succession of Harun al-Rashid had two consequences: first, it brought about civil war and internecine strife in the caliphate, and secondly, the military commitment of the Central Asian provinces to the later victor al-Ma'mun led to the defection of these regions from the central government in Baghdad. The first of these de facto independent dynasties in Muslim Central Asia were the **Tahirids** (821–73). In 802, Caliph Harun had divided his dominion between his three sons: Muhammad, called al-Amin, was to become caliph and rule the western provinces; Abdullah al-Ma'mun, the designated successor to al-Amin, was to be in charge of the regions east of Hamadan; and al-Mutamin was given the province of al-Jazira (Upper Mesopotamia). Soon after taking power, Caliph al-Amin (r. 809–13) removed his brother al-Mutamin and demanded that Ma'mun should hand over the eastern provinces to him. When al-Ma'mun refused, al-Amin deprived his brother of his right of succession and designated his son Musa as his successor. In 811 he sent Ali ibn Isa ibn Mahan to Khorasan with a large army of Arab warriors. Al-Ma'mun secured the support of the general **Tahir ibn Husain** from Herat (in office 808–21, r. 821–22),⁷⁵ who had already distinguished himself as an outstanding strategist in the war against Rafī bin Layth. Although Tahir faced overwhelmingly superior forces at Rayy, he destroyed Ali's army as well as a second one sent against him, then took Baghdad in 813 and had al-Amin beheaded.⁷⁶ After Abu Muslim, this was the second time that an eastern Iranian general had placed a new caliph on the throne. Tahir's victory also meant the triumph of the Khorasani troops, who now formed the backbone of the Abbasid army, over the Arabs of Iraqi descent.

► 10. The ruins of Bam, the Iranian city destroyed by the earthquake of 26 December 2003. The citadel was built in the tenth century under the Samanid dynasty and in 1002 withstood an attack by the Ghaznavid Sultan Mahmud (r. 998–1030). Photo: 2001.





The new caliph, al-Ma'mun (r. 813–33), appointed Tahir governor of the comparatively insignificant provinces of al-Jazira and Syria, but also chief of police in Baghdad, so that Tahir, with the help of his son Abdallah ibn Tahir, controlled the capital city. On becoming caliph, al-Ma'mun, who was popular with the inhabitants of Khorasan and Mawarannahr, remained in Merv, so that the focus of the realm shifted to Central Asia. At the same time, he extended the province of Khorasan to include the entire Muslim part of Central Asia, presumably to bring more effective administration to this exposed region, which was vulnerable to raids and attacks by steppe warriors of Turkic origin.⁷⁷

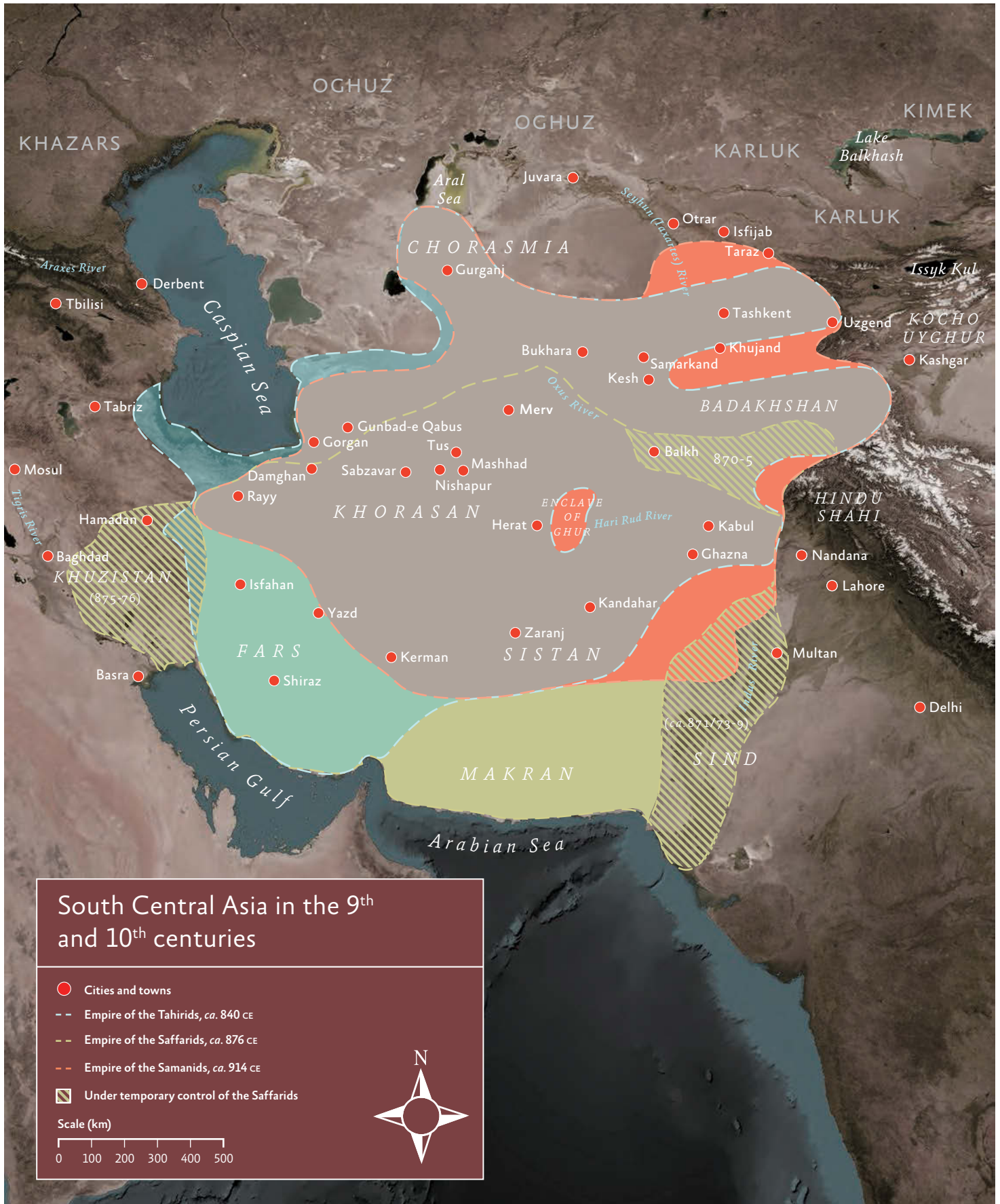
But in the absence of the caliph the western provinces were shaken by unrest, so that in 818–19 al-Ma'mun returned to Baghdad and, it seems, had his designated successor, Imam Ali ibn Musa al-Ridha, poisoned.⁷⁸ In the spring of 821, the caliph appointed Tahir governor of the vast province of Greater Khorasan, which extended from Rayy and Shiraz in the west to Tashkent and Herat in the east. Tahir ibn Husain was now the second most powerful man in the Abbasid Empire, and his position resembled that of a viceroy of the east. At the same time, Tahir's son Abdallah took over the province of al-Jazira governed by his father in the west. On arrival in Khorasan, Tahir did not hesitate to assert his independence, having coins minted without the name of the caliph on them, and removing his name from Friday prayers.⁷⁹ But before Tahir could introduce further measures to consolidate his authority over the Islamic part of Central Asia, he died suddenly towards the end of 822. Tabari reports that a slave who had been given to Governor Tahir by al-Ma'mun's vizier Ahmad poisoned his master on the orders of the caliph.⁸⁰

Tahir was succeeded by his son **Talha** (r. 822–28) in Khorasan, while his brother Abdallah stayed in Jazira. As a result the Tahirids held a position comparable to that of the Barmakids, though with the significant difference that the ruler of Khorasan was in command of troops, who considered themselves bound in loyalty to him rather than to the distant caliph. Like the earlier governor, Ali ibn Isa, Talha did not succeed in freeing Sistan from the Kharijite Hamza bin Adharak al-Khariji. The rather colourless Talha was succeeded by his brother **Abdallah** (r. 828–44/45), who transformed his capital, Nishapur, into a splendid metropolis. Unlike Tahir, Talha and Abdallah remained nominally loyal to the caliph and refrained from any conspicuous provocation. Nishapur was the most important city in Greater Khorasan, above even Merv, Herat and Balkh, and developed into a centre of philosophy and literature. In 1221 it was razed to the ground by the Mongols.⁸¹ The city of Nishapur, and with it the Tahirids, owed their wealth not only to their power and

the significant location of the city on one of the most important trade routes, but also to the highly lucrative slave trade. The Tahirids and the Samanid dynasty that succeeded them undertook military expeditions to the north-east, where they captured Oghuz and other young Turkic men, whom they then sold in the western caliphate. In order to meet the growing demand for Turkic slaves, the Tahirids commanded their vassals in today's Afghanistan to supply them with slaves. From the buyer's point of view, young male members of Turkic tribes made ideal slave soldiers. Since these tribes were barely organised, they were unable to offer unified resistance to raids by the Tahirids and Samanids, so that young men were relatively easy to 'procure'. Secondly, these men grew up in the steppes of South Kazakhstan and the mountains of Afghanistan and Baluchistan as natural warriors, who from their childhood tended their herds on horseback and defended them against robbers. In order to make good soldiers and officers, they only needed military training, in particular in discipline and in fighting in formations.

The main purchaser of young slaves was the caliph in Baghdad, who acquired them to build up his personal bodyguard.⁸² The aim in buying Turkic and also Caucasian military slaves (called in Arabic *mamluk*, pl. *mamalik*) was to create a professional army of slaves, in order to break the power of the eastern Iranian-Khorasani troops stationed in Baghdad and its environs. Thus, within a short time, a further change took place in the ethnic composition of the armies under the caliph's control. Up to the conquest of Baghdad by Abu Muslim, Arab warriors predominated, but later professional soldiers from Khorasan and Mawarannahr formed an important group, until, in the mid-ninth century, they were replaced by Turkic slave soldiers. It was Caliph al-Mu'tasim (r. 833–42) who forced the building up of a Mamluk army – his mother had been a harem slave of Turkic origin.⁸³ However, a professional army stationed in the capital held great dangers for its nominal 'owners', the caliphs, as Caliph al-Mutawakkil (r. 847–61) learned to his cost. The centre of power shifted from the caliph to the Turkic commanders, and al-Mutawakkil's attempt to rein them in failed; in 861 he was murdered as part of a plot by Turkic officers. Subsequent caliphs were often little more than pawns of their own slaves. The disproportionate power of Turkic slave commanders only ended when a northern Iranian dynasty of officials, founded by three brothers, the Shi'ite Buyids (934–1062), seized power in Baghdad in 945. A century later, in 1055, the Seljuks conquered Baghdad, establishing Turkic sovereignty of the caliphate.⁸⁴

Under Caliph al-Mu'tasim relations between Abdallah ibn Tahir and the caliph deteriorated sharply. But Abdallah, who not only ruled the eastern half of the empire, but also, thanks to his position as a





11. The view from the citadel of the eastern side of Bam's third curtain wall. Photo: 2001.

military and police commander, had troops of his own at his disposal in the capital city,⁸⁵ was much too powerful for the caliph to be able to depose him. Abdallah further strengthened his position when in 839 he crushed the rebellion of Mazyar, the ruler of Tabaristan, who enjoyed the support of Haydar ibn Kavus Afshin. But Haydar, who had hoped for the defeat and downfall of Abdallah and his own appointment as new governor of Khorasan, was incarcerated and died in prison in 841.⁸⁶

Abdallah was far more than just an outstanding military commander. He was concerned with finding ways to improve agriculture, whose importance he described as follows: 'God feeds us by their [the farmers'] hands, welcomes us through their mouths and forbids their ill treatment.'⁸⁷ He had canals and irrigation systems constructed in Khorasan and Mawarannahr to safeguard the water supply of cities such as Tashkent. Moreover, 'he assembled all the legal scholars of Khorasan and some of those from Iraq, and he commissioned them to compose a book on the legal aspects and regulation of such channels. This book was called the *Kitab-i Qunni*, "Book Concerning Irrigation Channels".'⁸⁸ Finally, Abdallah was convinced of the value of a general education for all social

classes: 'Knowledge must be accessible to the worthy and unworthy; knowledge will look after itself and not remain with the unworthy.'⁸⁹ There is evidence that formal education was open even to poor children of peasants, something quite revolutionary for the time.

Abdallah was succeeded by his son **Tahir ibn Abdallah** (r. 845–62), who, before becoming governor of Khorasan, led campaigns against the Turkic Oghuz in the steppes north of Mawarannahr. But in the mid-ninth century the near-absolute power of the Tahirids began to crumble, when they started fighting among themselves in the west, and the region of Sistan rebelled. Tahir ibn Abdallah was not succeeded, as he had wished, by his brother Mohammad bin Abdallah, who preferred to stay in Baghdad and Fars, but by the young and inexperienced son of the late governor, **Muhammad ibn Tahir** (r. 862–73, d. ca. 890). According to Gardizi, he led a dissolute life: 'He plunged himself into wine drinking, and became occupied with music and singing and with merrymaking.'⁹⁰ Thus he failed to control the Shi'ite rebellions that sprang up in Tabaristan, Dailam and Gilan, between the Caspian Sea and the Elburz mountains. Hasan ibn Zayd (r. 864–84) founded the Zaydi emirate of Tabaristan (864–900; 914–28), which lasted until 928, when the Samanids

deported the last emir to Bukhara. The death blow, however, came from the south, when Yaqub ibn al-Layth conquered Kerman in 869, and Herat and Pushang in 871, and two years later marched against Nishapur. Muhammad's paternal cousins welcomed the intruder, and when Muhammad's messenger haughtily demanded of Yaqub ibn al-Layth⁹¹ that he should show his document of appointment issued by the caliph, he drew his sword and cried: 'This is my document of appointment and standard!'⁹² Yaqub then occupied Nishapur in 873 and deposed Muhammad ibn Tahir, allowing him to move to Baghdad three years later. There Muhammad and other Tahirids still held some positions up to 891, but then lost their influence in the west as well. Since the four governors of Greater Khorasan rarely made any public displays of independence between 822 and 873 and remained loyal to the caliph, leading historians such as Bosworth and Frye are of the opinion that 'the Tahirids were not a separate dynasty, but merely the hereditary governors of Khorasan'.⁹³

3. The Saffarids

The Saffarid dynasty, which lasted only 39 years (861–900), was in many respects a novelty. For one thing, unlike the Barmakids, who came from a respected dynasty of officials, or the Tahirids, the descendants of army officers, the Saffarids were a family of simple tradespeople. Secondly, the dynasty's aggressive founder, **Yaqub ibn al-Layth al-Saffar** (r. 861–79), was even confident enough to launch an attack on the caliphate itself in Baghdad. Thirdly, Yaqub was an ardent Iranian nationalist, who for the first time shattered the territorial integrity of the Abbasid Empire and set up a military empire of his own. Yaqub and his three brothers Amr, Ali and Tahir grew up in Sistan and came from humble origins. By trade Yaqub was a coppersmith (in Arabic *saffar*, the word from which the name of the dynasty is derived). Amr is believed to have been a muleteer, Ali a



12. The Magok-i Attari Mosque in Bukhara, Uzbekistan dates from the ninth or tenth century and has a twelfth-century portal. The inscription on the blue ceramic tiles over the entrance arch was added during restoration work carried out by the Uzbeks in the sixteenth century.⁴ Photo: 2004.

carpenter and Tahir a mason. In the mid-ninth century, the security situation in Sistan was precarious, since many regions were controlled by Kharijites and the smaller Sunni towns and villages formed militia groups against them. These local troops, known as *ayyars*, fought the Kharijites in the name of orthodoxy, but at the same time were active as robber bands.⁹⁴ The ibn al-Layth brothers joined one of these *ayyars* around 852; they broke the power of the Kharijites and in 854 drove the Tahirid governor out of Zaranj. In 861 Yaqub overthrew his leader and appointed himself ruler of Sistan.

Yaqub was proud of his eastern Iranian origin and despised Arabs as ignorant philistines; at the same time he commissioned poets to attribute to him a descent from Sassanid kings:

I am the son of the noble descendants of Jam [the mythological king of Iran, Jamshid], and the inheritance of the kings of Persia has fallen to my lot.

I am reviving their glory, which has been lost and effaced by the long passage of time.

I am openly seeking revenge for them; although men have closed their eyes to recognizing their regal rights, I do not do so.

With me is the banner of Kawi (alam al-Kabiyan), through which I hope to rule all nations.

So say to all the sons of Hashim [the Abbasids], "Abdicate quickly, before you have reason to feel sorry!" We have gained power over you by force, with our lance-thrusts and cuts from our sharp swords.

Our forefathers gave you kingly power, but you never showed proper gratitude for our benefactions.

Return to your country in the Hijaz [the Prophet's homeland in Arabia], to eat lizards and graze sheep.

*For I shall mount the throne of the kings, with the aid of my sword blade and the point of my pen!*⁹⁵

During the years that followed, Yaqub made his peace with the subjugated Kharijites, conquered the rutbil of Zabulistan and in 870/71 undertook a looting campaign to Ghazna, Gardez, Kabul, Bamiyan and Balkh. Yaqub sent dozens of gold and silver statues plundered from Buddhist and Hindu temples to the caliph in Baghdad, and his brother and successor Amr did the same in 896. Yaqub then seized Herat, Badghis and, in 873, Nishapur, where he captured Muhammad ibn Tahir. Next, Yaqub led his army west, to Fars in southern Iran; Caliph al-Mu'tamid (r. 870–92) panicked and tried to placate him by confirming his rule of Khorasan, Tabaristan, Gorgan, Fars and the city of Rayy. Yaqub interpreted



13. Earthenware bowl with a stylised bird. Nishapur or Samarkand, Samanid dynasty, tenth century. The David Collection. Inv. no. 10/1975.



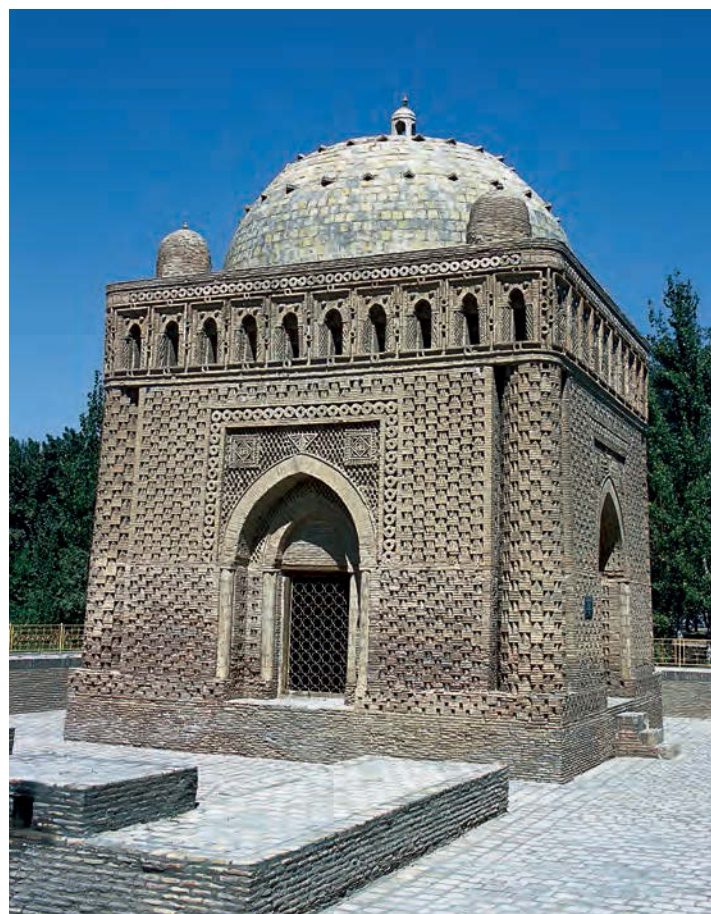
14. Earthenware bowl with two wrestling men surrounded by birds. Nishapur, Samanid dynasty, tenth century. The David Collection. Inv. no. 13/1975.

this decree as a sign of weakness and marched on to Baghdad, where however, al-Mu'tamid's brother, the regent al-Muwaffaq (in office 870–91), inflicted a crushing defeat on him.⁹⁶ After Yaqub's death in 879 his brother **Amr ibn al-Layth al-Saffar** (r. 879–900) took power, but had to defend his rule in Khorasan, with interruptions, up to 896. Amr's attempt to wrest Chorasmia from the Samanids, the former vassals of the Tahirids, and at the same time obtain from the caliph the transfer of power over their region in Mawarannahr, failed miserably, for Ismail ibn Ahmad Samani defeated Amr at Balkh, captured him and annexed Khorasan.⁹⁷ So ended the rule of the Saffarids in Khorasan, and their military empire soon collapsed, for their own administration was weak and outside Nishapur consisted mainly of unscrupulous tax collectors.

After the fall of Amr ibn al-Layth, representatives of the Saffarids were able to survive in Fars and Sistan up to 913. After chaos had broken out in Sistan after the murder of the Samanid Ahmad ibn Ismail, the *ayyar* of Zaranj chose the Saffarid **Abu Ja'far Ahmad ibn Muhammad bin Khalaf** (r. 923–63) as their ruler. Abu Ja'far, who was murdered by his slaves, was succeeded by his son **Abu Ahmad Khalaf** (r. 963–1003), who then had to struggle for two decades against Turkic warlords and Tahirid sympathisers to secure his position. But in 1000, Mahmud of Ghazna forced him to make tribute payments and three years later to abdicate.

4. The Samanids

In contrast to the Saffarids, the Samanids (819/875–999)⁹⁸ created an empire that was more than merely military; it was a highly developed state, which also endeavoured to encourage scientific and philosophical enquiry. In this sense, the Samanids were the only Iranian dynasty that formed a real state in Muslim Central Asia. After its fall in 999, a rapid Turkification took place in present-day Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Afghanistan, and the dynasties that followed were, with the exception of the Ghurids,⁹⁹ either Turkic or Mongolian. The ancestor of the Samanid dynasty was a Zoroastrian nobleman from Balkh or Termez, **Saman Khudah** (eighth century),¹⁰⁰ who claimed descent from the Sassanid general and usurper Vahram Chobin.¹⁰¹ In the 720s or 730s Saman Khudah came to Merv and converted to Islam. Saman's son **Asad** (eighth century) was also a Muslim and his four sons took part in quelling the rebellion of Rafi bin Layth,¹⁰² for which, around 819, Caliph al-Ma'mun rewarded them with the governorship of four important cities and



15. The tenth-century Samanid mausoleum in Bukhara, Uzbekistan where Emir Nasr ibn Ahmad (r. 914–43) is believed to have been laid to rest.⁵ Photo: 2004.

regions: **Nuh ibn Asad** (r. 819–41/42) was given Samarkand, **Ahmad ibn Asad** (r. 819–64/65) Fergana, **Yahya ibn Asad** (r. 819–55) Čač and **Ilyas ibn Asad** (r. 819–56) Herat.¹⁰³ As the historians Gardizi and Juzjani (1193–after 1260) report, 'Ahmad was the most useful and experienced', so that in time, in addition to Fergana, he also gained authority over Samarkand and Čač and extended his sphere of control eastwards as far as Kashgar.¹⁰⁴ On his death, Ahmad bequeathed Čač to his son **Yaqub ibn Ahmad** (dates unknown) and the more important Samarkand to **Nasr ibn Ahmad ibn Asad ibn Saman** (**Nasr I**, r. 864/65–88, as representative of his brother Ismail 888–92). After Yaqub ibn Layth's victory over Muhammad ibn Tahir in 873, Emir Nasr ibn Ahmad became de facto independent ruler of Mawarannahr, with Samarkand as his capital. When a year later Chorasmian troops occupied and looted Bukhara, Nasr sent his brother **Ismail ibn Ahmad ibn Asad ibn Saman** (governor of Bukhara 874–88, r. de facto in the united empire 888–92; de jure 892–907) to that city, where he was warmly welcomed by the population and installed as governor. In 875 Nasr I received the confirmation of his investiture from Caliph al-Mu'tamid.



16. The enthronement of the Samanid ruler Abu Salih Mansur ibn Nuh (r. 961–76) in 961. From *Jamia al-Tawarikh*, a history of the world by Rashid al-Din Hamadani (1247–1318) produced around 1307 in Tabriz, Iran. Vellum, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, Oriental Manuscript Collection, 20 f.118r.

After Ismail had refused for several years to pay the taxes his brother Nasr demanded, Nasr marched on Bukhara but was defeated and taken prisoner by Ismail. Instead of moving to Samarkand, the more important city in economic terms, Ismail moved the capital to Bukhara and sent his defeated brother back to Samarkand. After Nasr's death in 892, Ismail officially became emir of all Transoxania; he is therefore considered the founder of the united Samanid Empire. In 893 he undertook a campaign in the north, into the territory of the Karluks, where he forced the ruler of Taraz, in the south of Kazakhstan, to convert to Islam. At the same time he ordered that the Nestorian cathedral of Taraz be turned into a congregational mosque; presumably the same happened in the neighbouring city of Merke.¹⁰⁵ The real purpose of this and further military expeditions to the north, though, was not to convert infidels but to acquire slaves¹⁰⁶ and to weaken the tribes of Turkic horsemen. In the same year, he put an end to the semi-independence of Ustrushana, which had been a Samanid vassal state since 822/23. Six years later, around 899, the Saffarid ruler Amr ibn al-Layth al-Saffar demanded that Ismail should recognise Amr's suzerainty. Ismail responded: 'My answer to you is with the sword.'¹⁰⁷ After Ismail had destroyed a first

Saffarid army sent against him at the Oxus, in the following year Amr ibn al-Layth attacked Balkh, where he was captured by Ismail. Immediately afterwards, a Samanid force occupied the Zaidi emirate of Tabaristan, and when the latter rebelled, in 902 Ismail advanced as far as Rayy.

The Samanid Empire now included Mawarannahr, Fergana, Kashgar, Ustrushana, Khorasan, Tokharistan, Kabulistan and Tabaristan. In the north, the Karluk vassals guarded the frontier, and in the south, the empire continued to expand towards Sistan, Ghazna and Kandahar.¹⁰⁸ Since the Samanids considered themselves staunch representatives of Sunni Islam and warriors against Shi'ites, above all against the Zaidis, and at the same time harboured no intention of toppling the Abbasid ruler, they formed a bulwark for the rump caliphate against invasions by Turkic peoples. With the fall of the Samanids a century later, the floodgates opened, and, from about 1025/27, Turkmen and Seljuk invaders poured in. Meanwhile, Ismail's successor **Ahmad ibn Ismail Samani** (r. 907–14) succeeded in capturing Sistan, but at the beginning of 914 was murdered by his own slave soldiers before he could deal with a Zaidi rebellion in Tabaristan. Narshakhi describes

what happened: ‘He had a rule, viz. – he had a lion which was fastened by a chain at the door of the house where he slept, so if anyone sought to enter the house the lion would destroy him. That night, when he was sad, [because of the rebellion in Tabaristan] all of his domestics grieved and forgot to bring the lion. He fell asleep and a group of the amir’s slaves entered [the tent] and cut off his head.’¹⁰⁹ The murder of Ahmad shows that he, too, surrounded himself with Turkic slave soldiers.

Emir **Nasr ibn Ahmad (Nasr II, r. 914–43)**, known as al-Said, ‘the Fortunate’, was only eight years old when his father Ahmad was murdered, so that at first it was the vizier (prime minister) Abdallah Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Jaihani who conducted the business of government. As soon as Nasr II came to the throne, several revolts broke out in Nishapur, Tabaristan and Rayy, and were difficult to put down. Three of Nasr’s brothers also rebelled, and he imprisoned them in the citadel at Bukhara until 929. In 943, high-ranking officers who resented the emir’s Ismaili sympathies forced Nasr II to abdicate in favour of his son Nuh. Ismaili missionaries were massacred, and Nasr

died a few weeks after his abdication.¹¹⁰ For the leading Samanid officials and the religious scholars or *ulama* of Bukhara, who saw themselves as campaigners for Sunni Islam, the growing influence of Shi’ite, and in particular Ismaili, missionaries in Samanid territory was unacceptable, the more so since local Sunni rulers and the caliph were hard pressed by the Shi’ite Buyids in the west of the Abbasid realm. In 945 the Buyids actually succeeded in unseating the caliph and downgrading him to a merely spiritual leader.

The reign of Emir Nasr II represented the cultural zenith of the Samanids, thanks not least to two outstanding viziers. The state was organised in a similar way to that of the Abbasids, with a central government consisting of ten ministries, diwans, presided over by the prime minister or vizier, and similar organisations in the provinces. Vizier al-Jaihani (in office 914–22 and 938–41) was not only a prudent statesman, but also the author of a geographical compendium, now lost, which provided the basis for later geographical works such as the *Hudud al-Alam* of 982–83. Presumably al-Jaihani’s geographical work also served as one of



17. The Khodja Mashhad complex in Tajikistan, dating from between the ninth and eleventh centuries. On the right of the picture is the ninth-century eastern domed hall, which was the mausoleum for the Shi’ite missionary Khodja Mashhad. The tenth- and eleventh-century western domed hall, seen on the left, was a mosque. Unfortunately, the present restorers used modern, industrially produced bricks. Photo: 2008.



18. The brick-built Gunbad-i Qabus tower tomb in Gorgan, Khorasan, Iran. The 56-metre-high mausoleum was built in 1006/7 by the Ziyarid Prince Shams al-Ma'ali Qabus ibn Wushmagir (r. 977–81, 997–1012) on an artificial mound 15 metres high. It is the oldest tomb tower in Iran. Ten pilasters, each with a 3 metre projection, emphasise the tower's soaring height. Prince Qabus is famous for his patronage of the polymaths Ibn Sina (Avicenna, ca. 980–1037), and al-Biruni (973–1048). Photo: 2014.