

# CENTRAL ASIA UNDER THE Umayyads AND THE EARLY ʿAbbasids\*

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\* See Map 1, pp. 426–7.

## Part One

# THE APPEARANCE OF THE ARABS IN CENTRAL ASIA UNDER THE Umayyads AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF ISLAM

(C. E. Bosworth)

## Central Asia on the eve of the Arab incursions

Central Asia in the early seventh century was, ethnically, still largely an Iranian land whose people used various Middle Iranian languages. In Transoxania there was a network of Sogdian city-states whose people used the Sogdian language, but there was possibly some knowledge in the main towns at least of the Middle Persian Parthian language, because of the strong cultural influence of the adjacent, powerful Sasanian empire. However, Sogdian survived for at least two or three more centuries, especially in the countryside and in mountainous areas, with such modern descendants as Yaghnobi. In Bactria, the provinces along the upper Oxus river, now part of the Republic of Tajikistan and northern Afghanistan, political control was exercised by epigoni of the Hephthalites. North of the Hindu Kush, such a leader of the Hephthalites (in Arabic sources, *Hayātīla*) as Tarkhān Nīzak was to put up a strenuous though ultimately unsuccessful resistance to the incoming Muslim Arabs. In Khwarazm, an ancient Iranian civilization still flourished under the indigenous dynasty of Afrighid Khwarazm Shahs, whose names, but not their chronology, are known to us from the native scholar al-Birūnī's *Kitāb al-Āthār al-bāqīya* [Chronology of Ancient Nations], known to modern scholars as the *Chronology* and written in c. 1000–1003. Along the northern fringes of Transoxania, and in the deserts surrounding the oasis region of Khwarazm, were Turkish tribes of the south-western group, such as Karluk, Kimek, Kīpchak and Oghuz, and these were probably already infiltrating into the settled, agricultural lands of Transoxania and Ferghana.

From the religious point of view, no single faith was dominant throughout the region. In East Turkistan, the Tarim basin and its fringes, the Indo-Iranian culture of such centres as Khotan and Kocho was still vital, although soon to yield to the Uighur Türks, and

this culture was still dominated by Buddhism. Likewise, Buddhism was strong in Bactria; Balkh, and its famed monastery of Nawa Vihara (Arabized as *Naw Bahār*), was a major centre of the faith. But Buddhist influence in Sogdia had been waning for some time and when the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Hsüan-tsang arrived at Samarkand c. 630, he found Buddhism there in full decline, and Zoroastrianism, backed by the military and cultural prestige of the Sasanian empire, in the ascendant. Christianity was also strong, however, with Nestorians, Jacobites and Melkites all represented in Transoxania and Khwarazm. There was a Christian bishop at Merv in 334 and probably one in Samarkand by the sixth century. Manichaeism and other dualist faiths were represented, with the followers of Mani finding a particularly favourable reception among the Uighurs in East Turkistan; and neo-Mazdakites are mentioned also in Samarkand.

Watered by such rivers as the Zarafshan, the Amu Darya (Oxus) and the Syr Darya (Jaxartes) and their tributaries, the regions of Transoxania and Khwarazm were fertile, flourishing agricultural areas. The adventurous merchants of their cities carried on long-distance trade through Inner Eurasia, so that we know of the existence of Sogdian trading colonies as far east as northern China and Khwarazmian ones as far west as southern Russia.

## The appearance of the Arabs

Having overthrown the Sasanian empire, the Arabs first crossed the Oxus in 653–4 during the caliphate of °Uthmān (644–56), but such vital crossing-points as Amul-i Shatt and Tirmidh (Termez) were not secured until some time later; only then was it strategically wise for the Arab commanders to commit large bodies of troops for raids across the river. Hence it was not until 674, under the first Umayyad caliph Mu°āwiya I (661–80), that his general °Ubayd Allāh b. Ziyād crossed the Oxus and defeated the forces of the Bukhār Khudāt, the local Sogdian ruler of Bukhara. Civil warfare and an anti-caliph who set himself up in rivalry to the Umayyads held back Arab progress; the Sogdian city-states, meanwhile, sent fruitless embassies to Peking to induce the Chinese emperor, who claimed a vague suzerainty over Central Asia, to intervene.

It was the Arab general Qutayba b. Muslim al-Bāhili, governor of Khurasan and the East from 705 to 715, who first established a firm Arab hold in the lands beyond the Oxus. He conquered Bukhara and Paykand in 706–9; he made Tarkhān and then Ghūrak, the rulers of Samarkand, his vassals and he built mosques and introduced the practices of Islam into these cities; he repelled invasions in 707 and 712 by the Kaghan of the Eastern Türks, whose help had been called in by the alarmed Sogdian princes; he fought and in 710

killed the Hephthalite leader Tarkhān Nīzak in Tukharistan, the district of Bactria south of the middle Oxus; he campaigned in the middle Syr Darya lands; and he twice invaded Khwarazm in 712, killing the local shah and inflicting considerable damage on the fabric of local Khwarazmian culture, without however securing any significant foothold for Islam.

After Qutayba's recall and death in 715, however, Arab fortunes suffered sharp reverses over the following two decades or so. In 728 the Kaghan of the Türgesh (Western Türks) inflicted a crushing defeat on Arab troops who had invaded Ferghana (the so-called 'Day of Thirst') and allied with the Sogdian princes, so that by that year, of their former possessions across the Oxus the Arabs held only Samarkand and Dabusiyya. The Arab and Muslim position was not re-established until the appointment to Khurasan of another governor of genius, Nasr b. Sayyār al-Kinānī (738–48). He alleviated the discontent of the local peoples who had converted to Islam but were still forced to pay the *jizya* (poll tax) to the Arab treasury; he conciliated the rebel in Bactria and Transoxania, al-Hārith b. Surayj; and he penetrated into Ferghana again. But his successes were negated by the growing danger to Umayyad control in the eastern provinces of the caliphate, stemming from the propagandist, missionary movement (*da'wa*) of Abū Muslim al-Khurāsānī and other pro-°Abbasid leaders from among the Arab settlers in Khurasan. Nasr b. Sayyār was forced to abandon the eastern provinces of the caliphate by 748 and, retreating westwards, he was killed by the advancing °Abbasid army (see Part Two below).

## Part Two

# CENTRAL ASIA UNDER THE EARLY °ABBASIDS

(O. G. Bolshakov)

## The course of the °Abbasid revolution and its significance

In the 740s the Umayyad caliphate was in the throes of a deep internal crisis. To the discontent of the subject population, who did not enjoy the same rights as the Arabs and were unable to acquire them even by adopting Islam, was added the growing dissatisfaction of the Arabs themselves with Umayyad rule. That dissatisfaction shattered the unity which

had secured their dominion over a vast territory almost twice as large as the Roman empire at the zenith of its power.

The various strands in the anti-Umayyad movements in Muslim society itself may be subsumed under two main groupings: the egalitarian Kharijites and the Shi°ite charismatic tendency. The Kharijites fought to re-establish the original state of equality between members of the Muslim community; they also opposed social disparities and the inherited power of the caliphs who, they believed, should be chosen by the community from among suitable candidates irrespective of their origins. All of these views were summarized in a slogan calling for a return to the Qur'an and the way of the Prophet. The Shi°ites, however, wished hereditary power to be vested in the family of the Prophet, meaning the descendants of °Alī, who, in their belief, embodied the divine grace inherited from Muhammad and transmitted from one divinely chosen head of the community, the imam, to the next.

The Umayyads managed to quell the uncoordinated rebellions of the Kharijites and Shi°ites so long as the bulk of the Arab population remained aware of its common interests, but the gradual build-up of resentment at the actions of individual caliphs and their governors, the rivalry between individual tribes and the memories of old conflicts divided them into a multitude of hostile groups unrelated to either social or religious doctrines. The detonator of the explosion which destroyed the Umayyad caliphate was provided by Khurasan, where all of these contradictions could be seen at their most acute.

In the year 744 the caliph al-Walīd II was killed, ushering in a period of internecine strife. There were three caliphs in the space of seven months. Provincial governors were unable to keep up with political changes and tried to take advantage of the situation; the Kharijite movement was everywhere on the increase. The caliph Marwān II, who came to power at the end of 744, succeeded in pacifying the heart of the empire, Syria and Iraq. In Kufa the Shi°ites swore an oath of allegiance to °Abd Allāh b. Mu°āwiya (the great-grandson of the Prophet's cousin) as caliph; after a hard struggle he was expelled from Iraq but found support in Iran.

In Khurasan a pre-existing enmity between two groupings of Arabs increased against the background of this political instability: the northern Arab tribal grouping of the Mudar (Tamīm, Qays and Kināna) and the southern Arab tribes (Yemenis), who were joined by the northern Arab group of Rabī°a. This was an ancient rivalry involving an ever-growing number of grievances.

The governor of Khurasan at that time was Nasr b. Sayyār, a member of a small tribe, the Layth, from the Mudar group. Although this old warrior was a skilled politician, he was unable to reconcile the opposing sides, partly because he himself had played a part in several armed conflicts in over half a century of activity. In the summer of 744

Nasr b. Sayyār, fearing that the internecine strife might spread to Khurasan, incarcerated the leader of the southern Arab grouping, Juday<sup>c</sup> b. °Alī al-Kirmāni. Juday<sup>c</sup> managed to escape from prison in the citadel of Merv and took refuge in the settlement of his tribe, protected by 3,000 loyal troops. Although Nasr did not pursue him, the Merv oasis was pervaded by an atmosphere of armed conflict that the least spark could ignite into open war.

This situation was exploited by the °Abbasids, the descendants of the Prophet's uncle °Abbās, to spread their propaganda. The °Abbasid movement had sprung up in the 720s, when the °Alid imam °Abd Allāh b. Muhammad b. al-Hanafiyya bequeathed his secret organization before his death to °Abbās's great-grandson Muhammad. He allegedly passed on to him a 'green scroll' said to contain a secret meaning entrusted to °Alī by the Prophet together with the right to the imamate. Great care was taken to ensure that this organization, based in Kufa, was kept secret: only the most trusted individuals met the imam, usually in Mecca during the pilgrimage, when such meetings could not arouse suspicion. Propaganda was conducted on behalf of an unnamed imam 'from the Prophet's family pleasing to Allah'. This anonymity widened potential support, as such a description of the imam corresponded to the expectations of the Shi'ites. Many propagandists sent to Khurasan died, but no one was able to betray the name of the imam as they did not know for whom they were canvassing support. Moreover, the Imam Muhammad restrained his supporters from premature action, awaiting a favourable moment. The Imam Muhammad died in 743 before that moment arrived. He was succeeded by his son Ibrāhīm.

At the height of the disturbances caused by the murder of al-Walīd II, the head of the °Abbasid organization Abū Salama al-Khallāl appeared in Khurasan, with instructions from the new imam. After spending four months in Khurasan, Abū Salama returned safely to the imam with money that had been collected in the region. As Ibrāhīm took a liking to the intelligent slave accompanying him, Abū Salama made a gift of him to the imam. Ibrāhīm freed the slave, making him his confidant and giving him the name °Abd al-Rahmān and the *kunya* (patronymic) of Abū Muslim. In 745 Abū Muslim arrived in Khurasan and Merv as the imam's plenipotentiary representative.

In the meantime, the situation in Khurasan had become even more involved and tense. In the spring of 745 the leader of the Kharijites of Khurasan, al-Hārith b. Surayj, who had been pardoned by the caliph, returned from the 'land of the Turks' with a detachment of battle-hardened troops. Nasr b. Sayyār attempted to win him over with rich gifts and promises of high office, but the inflexible Kharijite responded that he required nothing and would support whoever promised to follow the Qur'an and the way of the Prophet.

Al-Hārith's stance drew many supporters to him and he became a potent political force in Merv.

At the end of March, al-Hārith attacked Nasr b. Sayyār with the support of Juday° al-Kirmāni, and together they managed to expel Nasr from Merv to Nishapur. The victors immediately began to settle accounts with each other, and before a month had gone by, al-Hārith was killed in a battle with Juday°. After establishing a firm hold in Merv, Juday° decided to deal a final blow to Nasr. In a battle near Merv al-Rudh, Juday° was defeated, but Nasr lacked the forces to defeat his rival decisively. The stalemate near Merv al-Rudh continued into the winter. Juday°'s son °Alī sent him a detachment of 1,000 men with supplies and clothing, but supporters of Nasr attacked him on the way and looted the baggage train. On learning of this, the inhabitants of Merv rebelled against °Alī. Juday° had no other option but to seek a reconciliation with Nasr. At the beginning of 746 the rivals returned to Merv.

At that time Abū Muslim was in western Khurasan. The Imam Ibrāhim decided that the long-awaited moment had finally arrived (particularly since all of the caliph's forces were engaged in crushing rebellions in Iraq and southern Iran) and ordered Abū Muslim to prepare a rising in the Merv oasis. Another tragedy developed there: the son of al-Hārith killed Juday° al-Kirmāni at Nasr's instigation. This further exacerbated relationships between the northern and the southern Arab tribes (the latter were led by °Alī, the son of Juday° al-Kirmānī).

The head of the °Abbasid organization in Merv, Sulaymān b. Kathīr, gave Abū Muslim a hostile reception, but a majority submitted without question to the order of the imam. At the end of April 747 he dispatched messages throughout Khurasan calling for the start of the rebellion. On 25 Ramadan (9 June) 747, two black banners (the colour of the °Abbasids) sent by the imam were raised in the settlement of Safizanj and the rebels clothed themselves in black. By the time of the feast at the end of the Ramadan fast, 4,000 men had assembled under the banners of Abū Muslim. Calls for the overthrow of the Umayyad tyrants, and the transfer of power to a caliph from the Prophet's family who would follow the Qur'an and the way of the Prophet, drew a great variety of malcontents and opposition groups to Abū Muslim: from Shi°ites and Kharijites to local *dihqāns* (landowners) and to slaves who had been promised their freedom. The slaves, however, were dispatched to a special camp and not issued with arms.

Nasr b. Sayyār did not at first realize which was the greater of the dangers facing him. Instead of nipping the rebellion in the bud, he continued his struggle against °Alī al-Kirmānī and the new leader of the Kharijites, Shaybān, who had appeared in Merv. A small cavalry detachment which was dispatched against Abū Muslim was defeated and its

commander taken prisoner. Abū Muslim rapidly seized the initiative; capturing a village, he blocked Nasr's path to Nishapur, and his emissaries stirred up rebellion in Merv al-Rudh, Amul and Zamma, Talaqan and Nasa. But he did not attack Nasr, proposing instead that he join the movement and promising to hand over its leadership. When Nasr rejected this proposal, Abū Muslim enlisted the support of °Alī al-Kirmānī. Nasr turned to the section of the Arab population that had not so far been involved in internecine strife, appealing to them to defend Islam and the Arabs against heathens, slaves and the Arab rabble. This call was well received; Nasr was joined by Shaybān and there were desertions from Abū Muslim's camp. But Nasr still did not attack Abū Muslim, who neutralized Nasr's efforts by demonstrating his piety in every possible way. As a result, he managed to split Nasr and Shaybān and to attract new supporters.

Finding himself in a hopeless situation, Nasr made a desperate appeal to the caliph, Marwān II, for help but the governor of Iraq, Ibn Hubayra, who was hostile to Nasr, intercepted all his messages. Abū Muslim now decided to attack. He moved his forces up to Merv and, after waiting until a battle had begun between Nasr and °Alī, entered the town without any opposition on 14 or 15 February 748. Abandoning his family to their fate, Nasr fled from Merv to Nishapur with a small escort and began to assemble his forces there. Shaybān also refused to swear allegiance to Abū Muslim and departed for Sarakhs. Abū Muslim dispatched the army of Qahtaba b. Humayd against them. Qahtaba routed Shaybān and then defeated a 2,000-strong force under the son of Nasr b. Sayyār near Tus. The road to Nishapur was open and Nasr was obliged to retreat westwards to Simnan.

It was only then that the caliph realized the danger threatening him. On his orders, a Syrian army was summoned from southern Persia, where it had crushed a rebellion led by °Abd Allāh b. Mu°āwiya. But instead of blocking the road from Khurasan to Iraq, its commander marched further north to Gurgan. Qahtaba surrounded this force and defeated it one month later. Nasr fled further west and died in Sava as Qahtaba entered Rayy. At the same time, another of Abū Muslim's commanders, Abū Dāwūd, took control of Balkh and the whole of Tukharistan after several battles.

Qahtaba remained in Rayy for five months. The governor of Iraq, Ibn Hubayra, used this time to assemble troops. In the spring of 749 Qahtaba's path was blocked by large forces of the Syrian army which had been stationed in Isfahan and Nihavand. Qahtaba and his main force defeated the Isfahan contingent, while his son besieged the army at Nihavand. On 26 June 749 the Nihavand garrison surrendered after a four-months' siege. Ibn Hubayra assembled some 53,000 troops and pitched camp at Jalula, awaiting Qahtaba's attack; at the same time, an army from Syria advanced through northern Kurdistan (Shahrazur), threatening Qahtaba from the rear. His defeat seemed certain, but by means of a diversionary



movement he succeeded in luring Ibn Hubayra out of the fortified encampment and placing him in an unfavourable position. Ibn Hubayra was thus unable to organize any resistance to the ʿAbbasid army on its advance to Kufa, in spite of the fact that Qahtaba was killed in a chance skirmish, leaving the army without its talented commander.

The Umayyads' only consolation was that they had discovered the name of the ʿAbbasid imam and were able to arrest him. But the Imam Ibrāhīm's arrest came too late to change the situation. The ʿAbbasid army was unstoppable in its advance on Kufa, which it entered on 29 August 749. Ibrāhīm was killed on the order of the caliph, but had managed to pass on the message that in the event of his death the imamate would pass to his brother, Abu 'l-ʿAbbās ʿAbd Allāh. Abu 'l-ʿAbbās (who was later proclaimed caliph, with the title al-Sāffāh) arrived secretly in Kufa with a group of relatives and an escort. For six weeks Abū Salama concealed the imam's abode, intending to come to an agreement with one of the ʿAlids and pass on to them the fruits of victory. When all those who had put themselves forward as claimants refused to take power, and the imam's arrival became known to some of the people from Khurasan, Abū Salama organized a ceremony at which allegiance was sworn to the new caliph on 28 November 749. In his first speech he promised to establish peace and justice and, as a first indication of the advent of a new era, he increased the troops' pay.

Marwān II made one further attempt to halt the advance of the ʿAbbasid army, assuming personal command of a large force which went to meet it. In a decisive battle on the banks of the Greater Zab, Marwān was utterly defeated. He retreated to Syria but found no support there either. Continuing to retreat before the ʿAbbasid army, Marwān eventually reached Upper Egypt, where he was killed at Busir (July–August 750).

The establishment of ʿAbbasid rule disappointed many of those who had participated in the movement which had brought them to power. The Shiʿites and Kharijites soon realized that their slogans had been exploited by the ʿAbbasids to conceal their true aims. The universal prosperity which had been expected did not materialize, and the promised justice and reconciliation within the community took the form of repression and executions. The new rulers were especially harsh in dealing with the Umayyads. All the men of the family unlucky enough to fall into the victors' hands were killed, and even the dead did not escape punishment: the remains of almost all of them were disinterred.

## The aftermath of the ʿAbbasid revolution and the fall of Abū Muslim

After the victors' enemies came the turn of their comrades-in-arms: those who had shown disrespect at some time or who simply proved embarrassing by virtue of the fact that the new rulers were indebted to them for their accession to power. Abū Muslim began to take reprisals against them immediately after his victory. The first casualties were ʿAlī al-Kirmānī and his sons; at a word from Abu 'l-ʿAbbās, an assassin was dispatched to deal with Abū Salama; Sulaymān b. Kathīr also met a violent end.

The Shiʿites, who had been recent allies in the struggle against the Umayyads, responded by organizing uprisings. In the spring of 751 in Bukhara, one of the strongholds of Arab power in Transoxania, a rebellion was mounted by the Shiʿite Sharīk (or Shurayk) b. Shaykh, who declared that he had not followed the family of Muhammad in order to shed blood and break the law. He was supported by some 30,000 men. Ziyād b. Sālīh, who was sent to crush the uprising, could not have dealt with the rebels without the aid of the local ruler, the Bukhār Khudāt, and the Bukharan *dihqāns*.

The position of the local Iranian nobility was ambiguous. Some, like the Bukhār Khudāt, became faithful supporters of the new dynasty which had promised to give them equal rights with the Arabs if they accepted Islam; others exploited the internecine strife in the Arab camp to restore their independence. These were assisted by the intervention of the Chinese, whose policy towards the West was active in those years. In 748, when Abū Muslim's forces were pursuing Nasr b. Sayyār, Chinese forces seized and destroyed the town of Suyab, the headquarters of the Kaghan of the 'yellow' Türgesh. At the same time, the commander-in-chief of the Western Regions, Kao-hsien-chih, was subjugating minor principalities in the Pamirs and the upper reaches of the Indus. Two years later he appeared in the eastern part of Transoxania, having been called to the assistance of the Ikhshid of Ferghana against the ruler of Chach (later, Tashkent). The ruler of Chach was taken prisoner, sent to the imperial court and executed. His son turned to the Arabs for assistance. In response, Abū Muslim sent Ziyād b. Sālīh to him while he himself established his base in Samarkand. The Arab army advanced to Talas or Taraz (modern Jambul) where it was besieged, but on receiving reinforcements from Abū Muslim, went over to active operations. In July 751 it encountered a Chinese army of 30,000 men. The outcome of the battle was decided by the rising of the Karluk in the rear of Kao-hsien-chih. Attacked on two sides, the Chinese force was annihilated and its commander, surrounded by bodyguards, fought his way with difficulty through the mass of fugitives. The Arabs found themselves in possession of a substantial booty and a large number of prisoners, among whom were

skilled silk-weavers and paper-makers. The weavers were sent to the caliph's textile workshops in Kufa, while the paper-makers remained in Samarkand to establish a paper-making industry which subsequently played a major role in the development of book production in the Muslim world.

At the same time, Abū Muslim subdued Sogdiana by fire and the sword, while the governor of Balkh, Khālid b. Ibrāhim, invaded Khuttal (whose ruler fled to Ferghana and thence to China) and then marched north to Kish, where he defeated and killed its ruler. Abū Muslim became the absolute ruler of Khurasan and Transoxania, having at his disposal a loyal army such as not even the caliph controlled. He had become a danger. The caliph instigated a rising by Ziyād b. Sālih, who had become the governor of Bukhara and Sogdiana, but a majority of commanders remained loyal to Abū Muslim. Ziyād fled but died at the hands of a *dihqān* with whom he had sought shelter. Vexed by this failure, the caliph's brother, Abū Ja'far, determined to kill Abū Muslim at his next audience.

An opportunity to dispose of the 'custodian of the dynasty', as the °Abbasids referred to Abū Muslim, presented itself in the year 754, when Abū Ja'far al-Mansūr became caliph on the death of Abu 'l-°Abbās al-Saffāh and fate willed that Abū Muslim should again demonstrate his loyalty by crushing a revolt organized by the uncle of the new caliph. Al-Mansūr ordered the surrender of the booty acquired in the course of the operation and when Abū Muslim arrived to seek an explanation, the caliph ordered him to be killed.

The troops accompanying Abū Muslim accepted the news of his execution after receiving 1,000 dirhams each. There was a different reaction in Khurasan, however. The Zoroastrian Sunbād rose to avenge Abū Muslim's death. The rebellion encompassed all of northern Persia from Nishapur to Rayy. After 70 days, it was brutally repressed and women and children were killed as well as men, a circumstance which indicates that the rebellion was a popular one and not simply an army revolt. Such large forces had to be employed in crushing it that the customary summer campaign against Byzantium in Anatolia was not conducted that year.

The reaction of the population of Khurasan to the murder of Abū Muslim demonstrated the complex nature of the movement that he had led. Originating in Arab-Muslim circles, it had won the support of substantial numbers of people of differing social status, religious conviction and ethnic attachment. Whether they had accepted Islam superficially or through inner conviction, they infused it with the ideas that were dominant in their native environment. In the doctrines of the radical Shi'ites (*ghulāt*) concerning the imamate, there is already an idea foreign to the original ethos of Islam, i.e. the incarnation of a divine emanation and its possible transfer by inheritance. In some sectarian groups, reverence for the imam came to resemble the worship of a human being as a god, something which is

fundamentally incompatible with Islam. Thus the Rāwandiyya (to which Abū Muslim is thought to have belonged) were so convinced of the divinity of al-Mansūr that the commander of his guard appeared to them to be the Archangel Jibrāʾīl (Gabriel). Such behaviour so discredited the caliph in the eyes of orthodox Muslims that when members of the sect surrounded his palace at Qasr Ibn Hubayra in Iraq in order to worship him, he ordered their dispersal and, in the event of resistance, their slaughter.

Such ideas were often combined with a belief in the transmigration of souls. This could mean the incarnation not just of the divine spirit but of the spirit of any revered individual. Thus the idea of the imamate became separated from its essential ingredient: the inheritance of the right to rule the Muslim community within the family of °Alī. Abū Muslim also became the object of this type of worship. The Rizāmiyya, who worshipped Abu ʾl-°Abbās, considered that Abū Muslim had become the imam after his death, disagreeing only on the identity of Abū Muslim's successor. Some refused to accept his death and awaited his return (the sect of the Abū Muslimiyya), and this encouraged the appearance of leaders of popular movements following Abū Muslim.

Some medieval sources and, after them, some modern researchers, have linked the name of Abū Muslim with the movement of the 'wearers of white' (Arabic, *al-mubayyida*; Persian, *safīd-jāmagān*), a neo-Mazdakite sect whose distinctive feature was white clothes (or a white banner) as a symbol of purity or else in opposition to the colour black espoused by the °Abbasids. Their doctrine contained a call for equality of social status and property within the community and also a belief in reincarnation. However, as we shall attempt to demonstrate below, there is no convincing evidence of their link with the Abū Muslimiyya. Certainly, the fact that medieval authors lumped a number of beliefs and groups together under the title of *al-mubayyida* on the basis of their external appearance, without having any idea as to the content of their doctrine, does not inspire confidence in this identification.

On all the evidence, Abū Muslim was an orthodox Muslim (or at least appeared so to his entourage) but, as we have seen, the first person who sought to avenge him was a Zoroastrian priest. Another member of his movement, Is'hāq the Turk, who had organized a revolt at roughly the same time, described himself as a follower of Zoroaster, who would soon appear to the world and establish justice. In 757 Abū Muslim's commander, together with his successor Khālīd b. Ibrāhīm, were killed by followers of Is'hāq. The next governor, °Abd al-Jabbār, who had punished a group of Shi'ites for trying to enlist support for the descendants of °Alī, himself raised a revolt one year later and formed an alliance with the 'wearers of white', who were led by Barāz-banda.

## The consolidation of ʿAbbasid power

In spite of isolated rebellions and revolts, ʿAbbasid power was consolidated in Khurasan and Transoxania to such an extent that Arab troops (from Ferghana?) are stated in the Chinese sources to have helped to crush a rebellion in China during those years (757–8). The Türgesh, who tried to win Transoxania from the Arabs for nearly twenty years, weakened their position through constant internecine strife and were supplanted by the Karluk, who in 766 seized control of the Türgesh pasturelands in Semirechye.

One of the most important factors in the stabilization of the situation in Transoxania was the new attitude of the local *dihqāns* towards the Muslim authorities. The advent of the ʿAbbasids was more than the replacement of one dynasty by another: it brought about major alterations in the social and military structure of the caliphate. In the first place, it meant an erosion of the Arabs' dominant social position and the introduction of equal political rights for all Muslims, Arab and non-Arab alike. Some Iranians were even convinced that the ʿAbbasids intended to eradicate the Arabs in Khurasan; this seemed the only possible explanation for the order allegedly given to Abū Muslim by the Imam Ibrāhīm to kill all the Arabs there. (There is no evidence that this order was in fact given.) All that can be said is that in Syria and Jazira (Upper Mesopotamia), the army from Khurasan treated the local Arabs, who provided support for the Umayyads, as enemies. According to a Christian historian of the end of the eighth century, the 'Persians' slaughtered the Arabs like lambs.

The change in the situation was reflected in different ways in those regions which had been a part of the caliphate for a century and in those which had only recently been incorporated into it, such as Transoxania. In Iran, much of the local nobility and many local officials had already adopted Islam and had been absorbed into the new state prior to the accession of the ʿAbbasids. They immediately provided support for the new dynasty. In Transoxania, as we have seen, the first response to the overthrow of the Umayyads was the restoration of independence. The defeat of the Chinese, on whose assistance many local rulers of Transoxania counted, and the harsh reprisals carried out against unruly *dihqāns*, obliged the leading *dihqāns* to seek a reconciliation with the new dynasty and to become its loyal vassals.

By this time, many leading positions in the government structure were already occupied by people from Khurasan by right of precedence as 'sons of the ʿAbbasid revolution' and also because of their experience of work in a bureaucracy, which the Transoxanian landowners lacked, managing their small domains in a patriarchal manner. Arabs continued to occupy high posts in the army, whereas Iranians or Tajiks gained the upper hand in the civil administration. From the earliest years of Abu 'l-ʿAbbās's reign, the most important

department, the *dīwān al-kharāj* (concerned with taxation and land tenure), was headed by Khālid b. Barmak, the son of the former chief priest of a Buddhist temple in Balkh. He also became, in effect, the first vizier in the history of the caliphate. This high administrative post was possibly influenced by the Sasanian administrative tradition and may have constituted a revival of the institution of the vizier (*buzurg farmāndār*) or it may, on the other hand, have been an indigenous development within the Arab ministerial tradition. With the evolution of the post of vizier under the caliphate, genuine state budgets began to be drawn up for the first time, and offices sprang up for various departments with extensive staffs of officials who engaged in correspondence with the provinces and prepared estimates and accounts. An influential stratum of officialdom, the Irano-Islamic class of secretaries (Arabic, *kuttāb*, Persian *dabīrān*), was formed which considered itself as the main support of the state. Their knowledge of the complex system of the *kharāj* (land tax), which took account not only of the quality of the land but of the produce of the crops sown, made the officials of the *dīwān al-kharāj* the guardians of knowledge which was inaccessible to the uninitiated and was passed on by inheritance.

The choice of site for the new capital was an indication of the ʿAbbasids' break with the Umayyad tradition of looking towards Syria and the culture of the Mediterranean. Al-Mansūr (754–75) inspected several sites, all in Iraq, before settling on the little village of Baghdad on the western bank of the Tigris 30 km upstream from the former Sasanian capital of Ctesiphon. The foundations of the new residence, which received the official appellation of Madīnat al-Salām (City of Peace), were laid in the year 762. Baghdad at once became an international city. The 30,000-strong army of al-Mansūr which lodged in the city contained detachments from every part of Iran and, in particular, from Khurasan. The builders of Baghdad, some of whom remained in the city after it was built, represented all the countries of the Near East. The local population, who spoke Aramaic and some Persian, was mixed with Arabs from Kufa, Basra and Wasit. Some districts which were called after different areas of Transoxania accommodated troops from those areas. A new Muslim culture gradually took shape in this ethnic cauldron, thereafter solidifying in different language traditions.

When compared with the luxury with which the ʿAbbasids and their large retinue surrounded themselves, the way of life of the Umayyads seemed almost ascetic; the expenditure of the caliph's court was equivalent to the entire tax revenue from a large region. The finance department diligently sought means of increasing the income from taxes. The cadasters were reviewed and taxation was increased in a number of areas of the Near East. There are no indications, however, that similar measures were adopted in Khurasan and Transoxania during the initial period of ʿAbbasid rule, although the collection of taxes

must have given rise to problems. In most regions of Khurasan and Transoxania, the amount of taxation for districts was determined by agreements which specified only the overall amount of the tribute, the levying of individual taxation being the duty of the local landowners. As more inhabitants of an area adopted Islam, the potential for the collection of the *jizya* was reduced, and the extent of the commercial duties levied on Muslim traders and craftsmen was restricted. Payment of the fraction which could not be collected from them was imposed on non-Muslims. Additional requisitions could be added to those amounts at the request of the authorities. This policy created a divided society, not between Arabs and non-Arabs as before but between Muslims and non-Muslims. Another reason for the new wave of tension was the rupture of the stereotype of social thinking that had maintained the stability of social relations. The Islamic world had changed in a single generation; everything was now new, unfamiliar and unstable. The seeds of popular rebellions with the most extreme slogans were easily sown in such a situation.

## Political, social and sectarian dissent in the early ʿAbbasid period

This dissent was early and most clearly demonstrated in the four-year peasant war conducted by Hāshim b. Hakīm, nicknamed al-Muqannaʿ (The Veiled One), who came from a family connected with Abū Muslim’s movement. He himself had taken part in the rebellion of ʿAbd al-Jabbār supporting the view of Abū Muslim as the imam. After the rebellion was defeated, al-Muqannaʿ found himself in a Baghdad prison, from which he escaped to his homeland, reaching a village near Merv. There he began to preach that he thenceforth embodied the divine spirit which had been incarnate in Abraham, Jesus, Muhammad and Abū Muslim. His fellow countrymen reacted with the usual scepticism to such revelations from someone who was well known to them, refusing to take him seriously. Al-Muqannaʿ found more receptive ears for his propaganda, however, in Transoxania, where there was much discontent, for the reasons indicated above. The presence of a colony of Manichaeans in Samarkand may have provided a breeding-ground for neo-Mazdakite ideas, and the doctrine of transmigration may well have found a response also in the southern regions of Transoxania, where Buddhist temples had stood in the recent past.

By the spring of 776 the agitators dispatched by al-Muqannaʿ to spread the word had raised a rebellion in the region of Kish (modern Kitab and Shahr-i Sabz). Hāshim then moved to the region, establishing himself in an inaccessible mountain fortress somewhere in the upper reaches of the Kashka Darya. At that time the ‘wearers of white’ had seized two small towns in the Bukhara oasis. Al-Muqannaʿ had supporters in Samarkand, which

also joined the rebels. Jibrāʾīl b. Yahyā, who had been sent by the caliph al-Mahdī (755-85) to crush the rebellion, spent four months trying unsuccessfully to deal with the ‘wearers of white’, and then moved on to Samarkand, which he succeeded in occupying. This partial success did not basically alter the position of the rebels; in the year 777 they occupied the entire valley of the Kashka Darya with the exception of a few towns, extending their power southwards to Termez, where they inflicted a significant defeat on government forces and occupied Samarkand with the support of the Turkish Karluk.

The governor of Khurasan was unable to be of much assistance to the local authorities as he was occupied in crushing the revolt of Yūsuf al-Barm in Fushanj. Only after the latter was defeated did the new governor, Mu<sup>c</sup>adh b. Muslim, manage, in the spring of 778, to reach Transoxania with a large army. By the end of the year the rebels had been pushed back to the region of Kish, but the onset of winter brought military operations to a halt. The effectiveness of action by the government forces was hampered by rivalry between the governor and the commander of the army, al-Harashī, who did not appreciate the governor’s interference. Mu<sup>c</sup>adh eventually retired from the fray and al-Harashī was left to deal with al-Muqanna<sup>c</sup> alone. He tried to storm the latter’s fortress but was beaten off. He then threw all his forces against Nevaket (the site of Kamay-tepe 40 km southwest of Shahr-i Sabz), which was defended by the brother of al-Muqanna<sup>c</sup>. Only when the defenders had thrown themselves upon his mercy was al-Harashī able to proceed to a siege of the fortress, which dragged on for nearly a year. Exhausted by the lengthy siege, the supporters of al-Muqanna<sup>c</sup> defending the lower part of the fortress entered into negotiations with al-Harashī, surrendered it and were pardoned. Al-Muqanna<sup>c</sup> remained in the citadel with his immediate retinue, and when he saw that the position was hopeless, committed suicide, after first poisoning his wife and killing his favourite slave. In order to preserve the image of a prophet who had risen to heaven, al-Muqanna<sup>c</sup> ordered those who remained alive to burn his body, but they did not do this properly: on discovering the charred remains, the victors cut off the head and sent it to the caliph.

Muslim historians always recall that al-Muqanna<sup>c</sup> declared himself to be an incarnation of the divinity but they never mention the social aspects of his teachings. They ascribe to him the abolition of property and the introduction of promiscuity, but there is no information on the division of the property of the rich or the persecution of the *dihqāns*. His movement was obviously not aimed at the landowning classes. It was anti-Islamic in tendency, bringing together all of the forces in Transoxania that were discontented with the new dynasty in a final attempt to remove it and return to the old way of life. This may explain why, out of eleven names of supporters of al-Muqanna<sup>c</sup>, only two were Muslim names. The rejection of al-Muqanna<sup>c</sup>’s ideas by most of the towns confirms the hypothesis



that the bulk of the rebels were peasants and inhabitants of remote mountain regions in the upper reaches of the Kashka Darya where the old beliefs still persisted.

The fierce, four-year war had a harmful effect on the economic situation in Transoxania. Samarkand, which had changed hands three times, must have suffered no less than during its worst period in the 730s. This is probably one reason why debased silver dirhams associated with the names of the governors Musayyab b. Zuhayr (Musayyabī) and Ghitrīf b. ʿAtāʾ (Ghitrīfī) started to be minted in Transoxania (see below, Chapter 20).

The rebellion of al-Muqannaʿ marked a clear divide between two periods in the history of Transoxania. Its defeat signified the definitive triumph of Islam. Major changes had taken place in the country in the thirty years between the revolt of Abū Muslim and the defeat of al-Muqannaʿ. The *dihqāns* had lost political power. As early as 760 the Ikhshīd of Sogdiana had stopped minting his own money, at roughly the same time as the Bukhār Khudāt. The Ikhshīd of Sogdiana disappeared from the historical stage, whereas the Bukhār Khudāt retained some semblance of power. After the execution of the Bukhār Khudāt for his support of the ‘wearers of white’, however, his descendants became common landowners. Minor *dihqāns* became ordinary subjects.

In the towns that had been city-states headed by *dihqāns*, pride of place was occupied by the Muslim military-administrative élite which bought up the land and palaces of the *dihqāns*; this process can be quite clearly traced in Bukhara. Small towns where the *dihqāns* had lived were, with the loss of the latter’s political role, transformed into villages, whereas tradesmen and craftsmen gathered in the large towns to be near the wealthy customers who received salaries from the new authorities.

By that time it was either Arabic that was most widely used there or else the New Persian language brought by the Iranians, who had already become Muslim and been integrated into the new state system. The use of Sogdian was becoming an anachronism; it remained a language of local usage only, of no use in Baghdad to those who hoped to make a name for themselves at the court of the caliph.

The suppression of the rebellion of al-Muqannaʿ enabled the ʿAbbasids to start extending their dominion beyond the Syr Darya, an area under the sway of the Karluk, whose control extended as far as Kashghar at that time. At the beginning of his reign, al-Mahdī sent troops to Ferghana, but the areas beyond the river were cut off from the caliphate by a revolt and the Karluk invaded the region of Samarkand. Possibly al-Mahdī demanded after the revolt that the rulers of those regions accept his authority. But that account is suspect, since it is difficult to believe that the king of Tibet declared his obedience to the caliph as the Arab author asserts. In the year 791 the Uighurs defeated the Karluk near Besh-balīk, and Ghitrīf b. ʿAtāʾ seized the opportunity to send troops to expel the Karluk from

Ferghana. Fadl b. Yahyā al-Barmakī, who replaced him, secured from the Afshin (local ruler) of Ferghana recognition of his status as a vassal of the caliph. At the same time he sent troops against the Kabul Shah. His forces carried out a raid, seizing a great deal of booty, and returned to Sistan. Fadl b. Yahyā, himself an Iranian, managed to find a common language with the local *dihqāns* and raised a large militia during his governorship which he called the ʿAbbasid militia. A part of this militia was sent to serve in Baghdad.

Al-Muqannaʿs rebellion obliged the governors of Khurasan to introduce order in the spheres of tax assessment and water use. Fadl b. Sulaymān al-Tūsī (783–7) lowered the level of the *kharāj*, which had been raised under the previous governor al-Musayyab, and he eliminated misuse of water by the élite, who had seized extra shares of water in the Merv oasis in order to water their fields. The use of water in other areas was also regulated. Fadl b. Sulaymān’s governorship also witnessed the start of the work, which continued until the year 830, of building a wall around the entire Bukhara oasis.

This period of relative well-being for Khurasan came to an end with the arrival of the new caliphal governor, ʿAlī b. ʿĪsā b. Māhān, who mercilessly looted the country entrusted to his care. The complaints sent to Hārūn al-Rashīd (786–809) remained unanswered, as the caliph’s closest counsellors had been bribed with gifts from ʿAlī b. ʿĪsā. Yahyā al-Barmakī attempted to open the ruler’s eyes to ʿAlī’s abuses, but the caliph was blinded by the richness of the gifts that he received from the governor. Rebellions broke out in the regions under the authority of ʿAlī b. ʿĪsā in response to his abuses. In 797 in Sistan there was a revolt of the Kharijites led by a local landowner, Hamza b. Ādharak or ʿAbd Allāh, who traced his origins back to the legendary Iranian King Tahmāsp. The son of ʿAlī b. ʿĪsā who was sent to deal with him was defeated. Other attempts to suppress the rebellion also proved unsuccessful. Only the capital of Sistan, Zaranj, remained in the hands of the caliph’s governor: the rest of the region was in the hands of the Kharijites, who did not recognize the authority of the caliph and therefore paid him no taxes (see below, Chapter 2).

At the same time (in 799) Abu ʿl-Hāsib Wuhayb b. ʿAbd Allāh raised a revolt in Nasa (near present-day Ashgabat). The rebels took possession of a considerable area of Khurasan and even reached Merv, where the residence of ʿAlī b. ʿĪsā was located. It was not until 802 that ʿAlī b. ʿĪsā managed to defeat and kill Abu ʿl-Hāsib Wuhayb. An even more dangerous rebellion occurred in the year 805. It was led by Rāfiʿ b. al-Layth, allegedly the grandson of Nasr b. Sayyār. At first, it involved no more than a romantic scandal; Rāfiʿ decided to marry a married woman illegally, was arrested, fled and, in order to be able to

marry, raised a rebellion among the *ʿayyārs*<sup>1</sup> of Samarkand. The townspeople, who were incensed by ʿAlī's oppression, willingly supported him. With their assistance he defeated the forces under the command of ʿAlī's son which had been sent against him. The people of Samarkand were supported by all of Transoxania.

Hārūn al-Rashīd eventually came to accept the complaints levelled against ʿAlī b. Īsā and dispatched a new governor, who arrested him and launched a war against Rāfiʿ. Having witnessed the failure of all attempts to put down the rebellion, the caliph decided to lead the struggle against it in person, but died in Tus on the way to Merv in 809.

## The achievement of a degree of stability under al-Ma'mūn

On Hārūn al-Rashīd's death, the caliphate was divided de facto into a western half, ruled over by the caliph al-Amīn (809–13), and an eastern half whose governor was his brother al-Ma'mūn. The latter adopted the simplest solution, lowering the *kharāj* by one-quarter and opening talks with Rāfiʿ. On receiving a pardon and having been appointed governor of Transoxania, Rāfiʿ surrendered and the rebellion petered out after the reduction in the *kharāj*. Many landowners from Khurasan took part in the suppression of the rebellion, leading their own military detachments. Among them were four brothers of the Samanid family from the region of Balkh who, ten years later, were rewarded for their loyal service to al-Ma'mūn (by then, caliph: 813–33) by being awarded lifelong control of what were to become the appanages of Ferghana, Chach and Herat, thus establishing the Samanid dynasty in Transoxania.

Under the rule of al-Ma'mūn (in 813 the forces of al-Ma'mūn overthrew and killed al-Amīn, but al-Ma'mūn remained in Merv for a further five years), the gradual decentralization of the caliphate began. Al-Ma'mūn was the son of Hārūn al-Rashīd by an Iranian slave girl, and therefore close to the Iranian élite which was in control of the administration and the army. His residence in Merv further strengthened his close relationship with the area. It was to members of the Khurasanian élite that he entrusted the administration of extensive provinces. Thus in 821 Tāhir b. al-Husayn was appointed governor of all Persia. On his death, he was succeeded by his son and the Tahirid governors controlled the region for some fifty years.

The empire of the ʿAbbasids, with its diverse ethnic and religious composition, maintained its unity primarily by force of arms, thanks to a huge army whose maintenance

<sup>1</sup> Members of armed young fraternities among the townspeople, found in several cities of the eastern Iranian lands and regions as far west as Syria at this and in subsequent periods (see below, Chapter 18)

absorbed the greater part of the budget. Under the °Abbasids, the all-Arab forces which had directly established the authority of the conquering people were replaced by a professional army and by the militia of the Persian *dihqāns* supporting the dynasty who gradually supplanted the Arab tribal levies, thereafter recruited only for major campaigns. Lacking the support of any ethnic or social group (only the senior officials were genuinely loyal to the empire, but they served the state machine rather than the caliph), the caliphs were obliged to look for an armed force which would release them from reliance on overly independent military commanders or the forces from Khurasan. This force was a guard of professional slave soldiers (*ghilmān*, *mamālīk*, plurals of *ghulām*, *mamlūk*). Slaves had been employed as bodyguards even under the first caliphs, but it was only at the end of al-Ma'mūn's rule that they became the nucleus of the caliph's army, when his successor al-Mu'tasim (833–42) purchased 3,000 Turkish *ghilmān*. Surrounded by the *ghilmān*, later caliphs eventually became playthings in the hands of their own slaves.

The incorporation of Khurasan and Transoxania into the caliphate assisted their integration into the wider Islamic world, increasing commercial and cultural exchange. The intensive development of the Transoxanian towns and the growth of their populations from the end of the eighth century onwards was a consequence of this. The formation of the new Iranian-Muslim culture had, however, some negative effects. In the area of written culture a considerable proportion of the literary heritage in Middle Persian, Khwarazmian and Sogdian was lost as was, in the visual arts, a rich tradition of monumental painting.