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The history of Óabaristān's principalities in the first centuries of Islam before the Mongol period

Thesises

I. Óabaristān. The medieval name of present-day Māzandarān, although not without problems of identity, this region is one of the historical regions of medieval Iranian world comprising Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia.

The title of my dissertation: The history of principalities of Óabaristān in the first centuries of Islam before the Mongol period. The present author's modest aim is to shed light on the early medieval history of this Northern Iranian area. My thesis mainly focuses on the events of the four most important local dynasties, i.e. those of Dābūyids, Qārinwands, Bāwandids as well as Bādūspānids.

Due to official regulations concerning my essay the length of this thesis become limited and shortened. One can wonder why I created such a long title? My main aim was to describe as precisely as I could the subject of my thesis from the 7 century A. D. (the fall of the Sasanians and the possible beginning of the geopolitical independence and political role of Óabaristan in the history of Early Islamic Iran) up to the eve of the Mongol conquest of Iran which otherwise coincides with the decay and the definite fall of the second branch of the most powerful local family of the early 13. century the Bawandids caused by the invasion of Khwarizmian Empire. Albeit one has to acknowledge that it was not an easy thing to define these chronological measures of the present thesis. Keeping in mind that the interval between the Khwarizmian conquest and the first Mongol invasion of Iran in 1221 was only ten years the present author chose the later date as a final event in the title of his thesis.

One can ask why shouldn't we choose the history of one of these dynasties instead of four? It is a well known fact that the history of some Caspian dynasties didn't finished on the eve of the Mongol period but lasted until the 14-16. centuries and on the basis of this fact it could have been advisable to focus only on one local family and to continue it up to its definite fall instead of analyzing the historical problems of the whole region in a less wider scope.

Our answer is that the historical problems of Northern Iran are extremely complex and one cannot hardly investigate the events of only one dynasty separating it from the neighbouring

provinces and principalities in the same time. There are many contacts, various influences and other different religious, political impacts on this area which strongly connect these local families with each other.

The other issue which can be argued for is why did the present author prefer these four dynasty excluding others from his analysis? Why aren't the Ziyarids and the so called shiite (Zaydite) rulers chosen for this work? The reason I preferred these four families i.e. the Dābūyids, the Qārinwands, the Bāwandids as well as the Bādūspānids is that though they always retained their own characters and these noble families had sometimes a strongly different political interest and clashed with their neighbours with the bloodiest enmity and cruelty they were however descendants of the same tradition. Probably all of them came from the late Sasanian aristocracy thus creating a strong continuity between Preislamic Persia and the Islamic period during these centuries. Thinking that the Arab conquest of Iran is more or less responsible for the escape or the massacre of the Sasanian aristocracy in general the long physical continuity and survival of some noble dynasties in Northern Iran seems very fascinating and at least noteworthy. As for the historical contacts between late Sasanian period and the caliphate it is very rare and less known that a region in Iran could maintain its genuine dynasties. Although Óabaristān itself also became part of the Islamic *oicoumene* from the 8th century on, but the process of islamization and infiltration of Islamic social and cultural elements differed slightly from other Iranian regions. The local elite before and after the Islamic conquest is composed of mainly the members of the „ancien régime” ie. of the local warlords and princes with their strong Sasanian social and cultural background.

Due to the geographical isolation, mountainous regions, steamy and often intolerable submediterranean climate and thick forests of Óabaristān this phenomenon caused many difficulties for various Muslim conquerors from the 7th century AD. The geographical and climatical difficulties helped strengthening the positions of these local families against foreign invaders and this fact explains their continuation long after the fall of the Sasanian Empire.

But there is another answer for the question why we chose this topic? It is a very simple: the author's curiosity. When taking into account the various regions of early medieval Persia Óabaristān seemed to be a relatively unsolved and less frequented subject than other provinces, regions of this epoch. Besides, the number of articles written on this area are very limited. These facts have strongly induced the author to pursue its studies to this direction. So far only a few scholars have dealt with the early medieval historical aspects of Óabaristān.

Our thesis was also determined by the primary sources. After throwing light on the problems of the historiography of Óabaristān it seems that our thesis can focus first of all on fields of political history, military history, genealogy and historical geography of the region.

As to the social and economic history of this period concerned the sources of Óabaristān generally lack any information in this manner, so we had to rather to avoid these aspects from our thesis thinking that our intentions were restrained by the very limited possibilities in these fields.

Thus we intended to write a very detailed political history comprising all of the problems, aspects which have either remained open and have been unsolved or have become the subjects of heated discussions.

The results of our work can be summarized as follows:

1. The reinterpretation of historical, cultural, genealogical aspects of the history of the above mentioned four dynasty on the basis of our primary and secondary sources, archeological evidences, epigraphy, numismatics and modern research. Though one must acknowledge that these aspects certainly strengthened the positivist character of our work. However when looking over our sources we are always confronted with very simple problems which is due to the relatively untouched character of our subject. Only the history of Dābūyids and the uprising of the Qārinwand Māzyār has gained wider publicity so far thus our aim is rather to concentrate on the other more neglected aspects of early medieval Óabaristān.

2. Beside the thorough analysis of historical events we make an effort to clarify the general tendencies in the early Islamic history of Óabaristān and its neighbouring regions. What kind of influences, foreign impacts can be detected in this period? Are there similar phenomena or every subperiod has its own characteristic?

3. It is very fascinating that when using our local chronicles it became clear that these primary sources (Ibn Isfandyār, Marʿašī ʿs Āmulī) have many archaic features which in many cases testify that many Preislamic beliefs, legends and myths flourished in Óabaristan already in the first decades of Islam. These phenomena have a very important impact on the history of early Islamic Óabaristān throwing light on some elements of the court life of these petty kingdoms.

II. From the fall of the Sasanid empire up to the Arab conquest (651-760 A.D.). This period can be characterized as the age of the complete independence of Óabaristān which unlike other provinces, regions of Persia valiantly resisted the Arab military expeditions and maintained its independence. It seems that Óabaristān was unified under the so called Dābūyid dynasty while we have only scanty informations about the other noble families from

this first period. It is noteworthy that the Dābūyids remained committed Zoroastrians as it is attested from their coinage and successfully defended Óabaristan against various Arab incursions during these decades.

2. From the Arab conquest up to the uprising of Māzyār (760-839 AD). These few decades after the complete annihilation of the Dābūyids by the conquering Arab armies witnessed the emergence of other noble families such as Qārinwands and Bāwandids. Thus the beginning of this period coincides with the age of a powerful ^c Abbāsīd Caliphate and its end shows the birth of the first regional semi-independent states in the eastern part of the caliphate. As for the inner conditions of Óabaristān one can see a strong division between *kūhistān* the mountainous region governed by local princes and *sāhil* the very thin but fertile Caspian coast ruled by ^c Abbāsīd governors. As for the islamization it was a relatively slow process and the most important families of the *kūhistān* didn't convert to Islam until the first half of 9th century AD thus protecting their Preislamic roots.

At the end of this period the Qārinwand Māzyār successfully united these petty principalities of the *kūhistān* and extended his influence on the *sāhil* also. Thus he became a strong rival and opponent of the Óāhirids in Eastern Iran. But the ambitions of Māzyār finally failed to improve and to create a new empire because of the immediate and hostile Óāhirid interference.

3. Óabaristān in the intersection of political clashes, dynastical conflicts and foreign invasions (ca.840-1000 AD). In this period the political importance of the local principalities of Óabaristan apparently weakened, and Óabaristān itself became a place of „clash of civilizations”. Thus mainly sunni political powers coming from Khurāsān or Central Asia (Óāhirids and Sāmānids) fought shiite political rivals from the South or West (Zaydites, Buwayhids and other Daylamite clans). Óabaristān visibly loses his asylum-like character in these decades and itself becomes a divided „petty empire”. The more these conflicts become permanent in Óabaristān the more the various parties increase. This refers to a relatively divided political map of Óabaristān at that time. The lack of a central power in the province induced constant disintegration of Óabaristān. The clashes of different branches of the Qārinwand dynasty after the fall of Māzyār resulted the weakening political role of Northern Iran and soon these branches of the same family in the same time fight each other as the allies of other newcomers like the Zaydite shaykhs from Gilān or the Óāhirid amirs of Central Asia! Sometimes one can see quick and surprising changes in this system of alliances.

One can detect similar phenomena from the second half of the 10th century when the cadet branches of the Bawandids become the political supporters of either the Būwayhids or the

eastern Ziyārid-Sāmānid confederation which eventually led to the decline of the Kā'ūsīd Bāwandid rule in Óabaristān.

4. The so called „dark age” of Óabaristān (ca. 1000-1090). Although the eleventh century AD was not at all a dark age in any parts of Iran, but the history of Óabaristān somehow deserved this name. The reason of this name is the deficiency of our primary sources regarding Northern Iran. Although it is doubtless that the local families survived as it is clear by some rare archaizing bilingual (Arab and Pahlavi) epitaph from otherwise unknown Bawandid princes but the disintegration prevailed temporarily over the idea of a well-organized state of Óabaristān. Besides, this epoch coincides with the Seljuq conquest of other parts of Iran which again caused the isolation of the petty princes of Óabaristān.

5. The rise and splendour of Óabaristān at the time of the Ispahbadiyya branch of the Bāwandids (end of 11th century – up to the beginning of the 13th century) This period can be characterized as the golden age of medieval Óabaristān. Although the time when Óabaristān flourished saw the gradual decline of the Seljuq empire and it surely contributed to the heyday of this province. However, such powerful and talented Bāwandid rulers such as Íúsām al-Daula Šahryār, °Alā al-Daula °Alī and first of all Šāh Ghāzī Rustam themselves strove a lot for reinforcing and reuniting their land. The successor states of the Seljuqids could not extend their power and could not influence their contemporaries in Óabaristān at that period and were much weaker than their predecessors in controlling Northern Iran. The independent Bawandid rulers successfully filled this vacuum with their emerging power and political ambitions for the extension of their territories were far beyond Óabaristān. After the first inner struggles and court intrigues Šāh Ghāzī Rustam succeeded in conquering many areas that traditionally never belonged to Óabaristān. He acquired such ancient and very prosperous cities such as Simnān, Qum, Ray reaching as far as Kāšān! In fact Šāh Ghāzī Rustam not only conquered these cities but he himself wanted to extend his power to such remote areas like Dihistān but his efforts eventually failed to control these eastern areas when clashing with Oghuz tribes there.

That nearly 25 years between 1141 and 1166 of Šāh Ghāzī Rustam's rule marked the zenith of the Bawandid power in the history of Óabaristān when after earlier vicissitudes this Caspian province undoubtedly became the strongest political centre of Northern Iran.

After these decades of splendour and the reign of Šāh Ghāzī Rustam one can see the gradual but steady political decline due to many inner dynastical skirmishes and the emerging other local dynasties at the end of the 12th century.

The newly created Khwārizmian Empire became the main rival and archenemy of the Bawandids at that time when it attacked aggressively the Bāwandid domains in the area of the Caspian Sea and Northern Iran. The other local power which caused serious setback to the Bawandids in this period was the militant Ismailite state. Already in the time of Šāh Ghāzī Rustam they sometimes harrassed western Bawandid territories but they were defeated by the vigorous Bawandid ruler. After the demise of Šāh Ghāzī Rustam the Ismailites meddled in the dynastical struggles of the Bāwandid family thus gaining significant territories from them. The Ismailites played an active role in the extinction of the second branch of the Bāwandids by killing various members of the Ispahbadiyya line.

Besides, we can see again the disintegration of Óabaristān and the emergence of power of another local dynasty the Bādūspānids. Perhaps they were supported both by late Seljuq rulers and Ismailite forces against their Bawandid rivals in Western Óabaristān (in Rūyān). Presumably they were also of local origin but their ancestry cannot be proved before the 12th century. Thus the Bādūspānids became the counterweight of the Bāwandids from the second half of the 12th century gaining the support of the Ismailites in their fight against the other local petty kingdoms. In this way the land of the Rūyān the political centre of the Bādūspānids a neighboring area of the Ismailites found itself in the middle of various political manoeuvres between the declining Bawandids and their Ismailite opponents. These process eventually led to the definite fall of the Ispahbadiyya branch of the Bawandids. The fall of the Bāwandids seriously weakened but did not annihilated the Bādūspānids who later became the vassals of the Mongols and thanks to this Mongol protection the Bādūspānid ustāndārs indisputably can be characterized as the most powerful local rulers of Óabaristān in the 13-14th centuries. However, these events are beyond the scope of our thesis. One can see a considerable change in the positions of the Bāwandid and Bādūspānid rulers, the weakening Bāwandids gradually gave way to the emerging power of the Bādūspānids from the end of the 12th century. Vassal and landlord sometimes change their role...

Beyond the thorough analysis of many interesting and indeed very complicated and sophisticated political events it is worth to summarize the main characteristics of our subject. On the basis of the information we acquired from our primary sources it is possible underline the main trends and regularities of the history of these petty kingdoms of Northern Iran.

Due to the historical periodization one can see a certain kind of „tectonical system” of Óabaristān. It can be divided in two main parts: the first is a „rising” or „emerging” phase taking the opportunity that neighbouring states and empires gradually weaken and these

circumstances can help him to reunite its territories and temporarily makes him a notable political centre. Such a process can be observed at least three times in the history of Óabaristān in the Early Islamic period:

1. The fall of the Sasanians and the rule of the Dābūyids (7-8. c.)
2. The decay of the °Abbāsīd Caliphate and the heyday of the Qārinwand Māzyār in the first half of the 9 century until the rise of the Óāhirids.
3. The Bāwandid „renaissance” in the 12th century at the time of Seljuqid disintegration which manifested itself in the greatest ever political power and the conquests of the Ispahbadiyya branch under Šāh Ghāzī Rustam (1141-1166).

These three periods of political unification meant not only advantages in the foreign policy but it also strengthened the inner stability and coherence of Óabaristan and in the same time controlled other local forces. Neither under the Dābūyids, nor under Māzyār and even not up to the last decades of the 12th century there was not any significant political opponent within Óabaristān.

But in the meantime there were also defensive tendencies, which marks the second phase of this „tectonical motion”. Between the periods of political stability Óabaristān became the buffer zone of various political influences and one can see a general political and dynastical disintegration due to the lack of any unifying centre or charismatic local prince. We can distinguish at least three subdivisions in this manner:

1. The Qārinwand-Bāwandid rivalry after the Arab conquest in the second half of the 8th century which ended with the victory of Māzyār over his Bāwandid enemies.
2. The anarchy after the defeat of Māzyār by Óāhirids, the conflicts of the different Qārinwand and Bāwandid descendants with each other and later the various Zaydite, Daylamite, Óāhirid and Sāmānid incursions and military expeditions which created a very fragile political system and chaotic political map until the end of the Christian millennium when – albeit we have only scanty informations about the political events – it seems that Óabaristān was ruled by local clans and tribal chieftains rather than by well organized petty kingdoms.
3. After the death of Šāh Ghāzī Rustam from the end of the 12th century we can observe another general decline in political power of Bawandid rule when the Khwārizmian Empire and the Ismailites along with their Bādūspānid allies led various military expeditions against the Bāwandid estates in and around Óabaristān which eventually led to another „dark age” just before the first Mongol invasions.

The reason of this double system can be explained by the fact that Óabaristān always was a relatively isolated peripheral province. This isolation helped him to preserve its archaic

social and political system, ie. this province was never devastated definitely and during every incursions and after every conquests more or less succeeded in restoring or preserving its original conditions. Otherwise as it is clear from our sources Óabaristān despite its peripheral status was never cut from the rest of Iran and its political events more or less are influenced by the events of the neighbouring empires, the caliphate, the Sāmānids, the Seljuqs etc. Isolation and connection – the two opposing processes simultaneously shaped the history of this region of Northern Iran.

Last but not least there is third lesson which can be drawn from the Early medieval history of Óabaristan. Despite many conquest and relative instability the province of Óabaristān showed strong continuity with the Preislamic Iran as for its society, its local elite and its culture. Óabaristān was and remain a stronghold of pro-Sasanid sentiments much like than other parts of Iran. The rulers of the petty kingdoms of Óabaristān were all the descendants of the „ancien régime”, they were not removed by the Muslim newcomers. And later when these aristocrats themselves were Islamized they nevertheless showed a constant and vivid interest to their regional traditions.

This very conservative political and cultural attitude cannot be separated from the geographical-climatical conditions of Óabaristān which resulted a very special local type of medieval Iranian and Muslim civilization.