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THE APPEARANCE AND ESTABLISHMENT OF ISLAM IN AFGHANISTAN

RÉSUMÉ

L'article est consacré aux premiers raids arabes en Iran, d'abord contre le Séistan puis au Khorassan et en Transoxiane, ainsi qu'à la rencontre avec les Hephthalites. Les rapports avec les autres religions, comme le bouddhisme et les cultes locaux (le dieu Zhun ou Zun au Zamindawar) sont également précisés. Le rôle des Saffarides dans l'avancée de l'Islam vers l'est de l'Afghanistan est examiné, et les raids postérieurs en direction du Ghur et du Kafiristan notés.

SUMMARY

The paper examines the first Arab raids into Iran, at first towards Sistan and then into Khurasan and the Oxus lands, and Arab encounters with the Hephthalites there and with such faiths as Buddhism and local cults like that of the God Zhun or Zun in Zamindawar. The role of the Saffarids in extending Islam into eastern Afghanistan is examined, and subsequent Muslim raids into Ghur and Kafiristan noted.

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Arab arms, and their concomitant the Islamic religion, appeared in what is now Afghanistan as the last stage in the overwhelming of the Sasanid empire, effectively achieved when Yazdagird III was driven eastwards to make a last stand at Merv in 31/651, a stand rendered abortive by his murder there (which gave the city, at least in Persian eyes, the opprobrious epithet of *khudā-dushman* "hostile to the lord"). Merv and Balkh had in fact been the northeasternmost bastions of Sasanid power, with the Ispahbadh of the Khurasanian quarter of the empire governing from the former city. The overrun-

ning of Khurasan was the northern prong of a twofold *Drang nach Osten* by the Arabs. The obvious route here was that along the corridor between the southern edge of the Elburz chain and the Great Central Desert through Ray, the first stages of the historic so-called Silk Route, and this was indeed became the normal way of communication between the caliphs in Syria and then Iraq and the Khurasanian conquests, although a more southerly route via Kirman and across the Dasht-i Lut through the Ṭabasayn was initially the preferred route as easier and safer. In 31/652 Nishapur fell to the Basran troops led by ʿAbdallāh b. ʿĀmir b. Kurayz and his lieutenant al-Aḥnaf b. Qays, and in the following year the last great fortress of Sasanid Khurasan, Marw al-Rūdh, passed into Arab hands after fierce fighting, with the local Marzbān, Bādhān, making his peace with the incomers, thereby retaining his lands and office, in return for tribute.¹ The lands beyond there stretching to the Oxus, with various principalities, some ethnically Iranian and others possibly non-Iranian, which had been feudatories of the Sasanid emperors, now open to further Arab advances.

On the evidence of the anonymous local history, the *Tārīkh-i Sīstān*, the southern prong of Arab advance through Persia first entered Sistan from Fars and Kirman under the leadership of Mujāshīʿ b. Masʿūd al-Sulamī, an exploratory probe despatched by the governor of Khurasan, ʿAbdallāh b. ʿĀmir, in 30/651. Then in the next year, more definitely attested since recorded in the Arabic sources for the conquests, and achieving more success, al-Rabīʿ b. Ziyād al-Ḥārithī was sent against the chief city of Sistan, Zarang. He made a peace treaty with the notables of the province, led by the Marzbān of Sistan (called in the *Tārīkh-i Sīstān* the Ispahbadh Irān b. Rustam b. Āzādhku b. Bakhtiyār) and the chief priest of the Zoroastrians (called in this same source the Mōbedh-mōbedhān), on the basis of an annual tribute of a million dirhams and the delivery of slaves. Soon after this, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Samura was appointed provincial governor in Sistan, and he built a congregational mosque in the chief city Zarang where the great ascetic and proto-Sufi Ḥasan al-Baṣrī is

¹ al-Ṭabarī, I, 2885-8, 2897-2902, tr. vol. XV, p. 90-3, 102-6.

said to have taught for three years in the early part of Mu^cāwiya's reign.¹

Sistan was at this time a profoundly Iranian land. It played a prominent role in the national epic as the home of Rustam-i Zāl and other great heroes, with local lore later incorporated in Firdawsī's *Shāh-nāma*, in Asadī Ṭūsī's *Garshāsp-nāma* and a host of other epics expatiating on the exploits of the heroes of Sistan and Zabulistan, the region to the east of Sistan in the upper Helmand river basin. In religion, Sistan was profoundly Zoroastrian at the time of the Arabs' appearance, with a famous fire temple at Karkūya near Zarang allegedly built by Kay Khusraw and Rustam and dedicated to Keresāspa/Garshāsp, the grandson of Jamshīd, with a cult there in his honour.²

With the arrival of Arab colonists, Islam took root in Zarang itself, although its progress in the countryside was much slower. ^cAbd al-Raḥmān b. Samura's cautious and conciliatory policies did not apparently produce conversions speedily enough, and a new governor of Iraq and the East appointed by the caliph Mu^cāwiya, his half-brother ^cUbaydallāh b. Ziyād b. Abīhi, who had already begun a fierce campaign against the Zoroastrians of Fars, now extended this to Sistan. The hērbadh or priests who tended the sacred fires were killed, from their chief Shāpūr downwards, and the fire temples demolished. The Arabs had secured a firm hold on Fars, but their authority in the frontier region of Sistan was much more tenuous, and the policy of repression there seems to have proved impracticable. According to the local history, a controversy arose in Sistan over the exact status of Zoroastrianism within the scheme of the newly-introduced Islamic faith, culminating in an appeal to the caliph himself. Its adherents claimed that they were monotheists and not polytheists, that their fire temples were the equivalents of the Meccan Ka^cba and that they were *mu^cāhadūn*, people brought into a treaty relationship with the Arabs just like the Christians and Jews. These arguments were admitted as valid, a favourable reply came back from the capital Damascus and the anti-Zoroastrian measures

¹ Bosworth 1968, p. 15-17, 22-23; Zarrīnkūb 1973, p. 23-24.

² Bosworth 1968, p. 1-6.

were abandoned.¹ Such a situation as this one in Sistan must have arisen in various parts of the Persian lands at this time, with the Zoroastrians claiming the status of Dhimmīs, protected people, and *Ahl al-Kitāb*, possessors of a written scripture. Zoroastrianism in Sistan seems to have proved remarkably enduring in this region of such long-standing Iranian traditions. Whereas we do not have documentation for the survival of the faith in other parts of Persia, such as Fars and Azerbaijan, beyond the early fifth/eleventh century, the *Tārīkh-i Sīstān* mentions Zoroastrians as being killed at Zarang by an invading Ghaznavid force in 434/1043 and even two centuries later, in 663/1264, when "dihqāns of the Majūs" in the Lake Zirih region suffered from Il-Khanid and Kart troops endeavouring to repel a Jochid Mongol invasion.²

Parallel to this, however, one should note the deep-rooted strength of Islam in Sistan over these centuries. As the frequency of the nisba of al-Sijistānī or al-Sijzī shows, numerous prominent Muslim theologians, traditionists and philosophers emanated from there. The intensity of Muslim religious feeling amongst certain strata of the people in Sistan (especially those outside the towns which were centres of Sunni authority and learning) is also shown by the presence there until the ninth and tenth centuries of the radical, equalitarian Khārijite movement; the Khārijite leader Ḥamza b. Ādharak or ʿAbdallāh and his partisans held the countrysides of Sistan and Khurasan for some thirty years at the beginning of the ninth century A.D. against all efforts of caliphal forces to master them.³

The Sasanids had been decisively overthrown, and the Sasanid pretenders who were for a century or more to hover round the fringes of Transoxania and Khurasan, hoping for help from the Sogdian princes, the Khāqān of the Western Turks and even from the T'ang emperors of China, never achieved anything. Nevertheless, the struggles of the Arabs to penetrate into Ṭukhāristān, the former Bactria, and then across the Oxus into Transoxania and, in the early

¹ Bosworth 1968, p. 23-25, citing the *Tārīkh-i Sīstān* (see next note) for this episode but noting that it is unconfirmed by the Arabic sources and may conceivably be an invention of later anti-Arab, Shuʿūbī and Persophile hands.

² *Tārīkh-i Sīstān* ed. 1314/1935, p. 369, 401, tr. p. 301, 326; cf. Bosworth 1994, p. 380, 433-34

³ Bosworth 1968, p. 37-42, 91-104.

second/eighth century, along the Oxus valley to Khwarazm, were to be protracted and last for a further century or more,¹ whilst the Islamisation of these lands between the Oxus to the Syr Darya and towards the Aral Sea was to take some two centuries.

In Cisoxania (what the Arab geographers termed *mā dūn al-nahr*, as opposed to Transoxania, *mā warā' al-nahr*), the present northern Afghanistan; in the lands along the Heri Rud valley, the Bādghīs and Gharchistān of Islamic times; and in Gūzgān, the region to the south of Tūkharistan and with Badakhshān to its east, the Arabs faced local potentates who did not hesitate to summon the aid of the Sogdian princes, of the Turks, of the Chinese (the approaches to these last known to us from the Chinese annals), but above all, of the northern Hephthalite kingdom (in Arabic sources, the Hayāṭila). This branch of the great Hephthalite confederation, which had appeared from the north in ca. A.D. 400 and had replaced earlier powers like the Kushans, Kidarites and Chionites (perhaps, however, incorporating these last into their own horde), came to rule over a great swathe of Inner Asian territory extending from the steppes to northwestern India; at this time they controlled much of what is now Afghanistan north of the Paropamisis and Hindu Kush barrier. In the later fifth century, these Hephthalites from their capital Balkh had dominated the Sasanids; the emperor Kawādh I had been an exile amongst the Hephthalites and only regained his throne in 488 or 489 through their support, although some seventy years later Khusraw I Anūshirwān had, with the help of the Hephthalites' enemy, the Qaghan of the Turks, turned the tables on them, annexing the western part of their lands and forcing them back eastwards. Hence after this defeat of 557, the Hephthalite lands in northern Afghanistan seems to have split up into various principalities, some acknowledging Sasanid suzerainty and some that of the Turks. The original religious beliefs of these northern Hephthalites are unclear. Possibly they retained some of the animism of their origins in the Inner Asian steppelands, but when they moved south of the Oxus through eastern Afghanistan and as far as the north Indian plain, they must have encountered Mahāyāna Buddhism, the faith of their predecessors the Kushans, so that it became influential amongst

¹ See in general for these Gibb, 1923; Barthold 1958, p. 180ff.

them. Although by the early seventh century the western borders of Buddhism were apparently receding with the consolidation of Sasanid power in the east and that of its state church Zoroastrianism, Buddhism seems still to have had a foothold in Transoxania and certainly remained widespread in northern and eastern Afghanistan. In Bactria, the Hephthalites made Balkh, in particular, a great Buddhist centre. The vihāra or monastery there of Navasaṅghārāma (rendered in the later Arabic and Persian sources as Naw-bahār and described by early Arab historians and geographers¹) was to have fame in Islamic history from its connection with the Barmakī family of officials and viziers who served the first °Abbasid caliphs and who derived their name from the Sanskrit title of their progenitor, the *pramukha* or hereditary custodian of the monastery.²

The Arabic historical sources describe at length the struggles of the Arabs in northern Afghanistan in the later years of the seventh century and the early ones of the eighth century with Ṭarkhān Nīzak, king of the northern Hephthalites (the first element of his name, thus given by the Arab historians, being an ancient high-ranking Inner Asian title, probably transmitted to the Arabs through Sogdian, but going back to the first Turkish empire and perhaps, ultimately, to its predecessors the Jou-Jan or Juan-Juan³). Towards the end of the seventh century, the Arabs were particularly disunited, with the Umayyad caliph in Damascus and a Zubayrid anti-caliph in Mecca and Medina, and only in 73/692, with the killing of °Abdallāh b. al-Zubayr, did the cause of °Abd al-Malik prevail; within Khurasan itself, the Arabs were racked by inter-tribal feuds; and the people of Bukhara and Sogdia rose and ejected the Arabs [in fact they were not established in Bukhara and Samarqand yet: only raids had took place at this date. The true conquest began with Qutayba]. It was Qutayba b. Muslim al-Bāhilī, the lieutenant of the governor of Iraq and the East al-Ḥajjāj, appointed to Khurasan in 86/705 on the accession of the new caliph al-Walīd, who had to re-establish the Arab position

¹. *Hudūd al-°ālam*, tr. 1937, p. 108, 337.

². Watters, 1904-5, I, p. 108-13; Sourdél 1959-60, I, p. 129ff.

³. See on the title, Golden, *date ?*

Nīzak barred the Arabs' way into Bactria and beyond for a considerable number of years. His power was centred on Bādghīs; and it is generally assumed that he himself was a strong Buddhist. The later Arabic geographer Ibn al-Faqīh al-Hamadhānī records that Nīzak reproached the Barmak who was the father of the well-known Khālid for having (possibly only temporarily) converted to Islam and having deserted the faith of his forefathers, demanding that he apostasise.¹ This must have occurred at a date before Nīzak was finally killed, after a lengthy and fierce struggle for control of northern Afghanistan, in 91/710. Qutayba had been at first uncertain of Nīzak's military strength, hence had made peace with him on a basis of the Hepthalite ruler's contributing troops to the Arab campaigns into Transoxania against the Sogdians and Turks. But in 90/709 the aged Nīzak led a rising against Qutayba of the Hepthalite and Turkish princes of the upper Oxus lands, seeking help also from the Hepthalite kingdom to the south of the Hindu Kush in the shape of the Kābul Shāh, fearing that the Arabs were going to secure an unsailable grip on these eastern fringes of Khurasan. He visited Balkh and the Buddhist shrines in order to invoke divine aid, but was defeated and captured in 91/710 by Qutayba and his brother °Abd al-Rahmān and executed, on the express orders of al-Ḥajjāj and contrary to a promise of amān or safe-conduct which had been promised him.² The collapse of Nīzak's revolt marked the end of Hepthalite power north of the Hindu Kush, but there was a recession of Arab military power across the Oxus after Qutayba's dismissal, revolt and death in 96/715, with the Sogdians in Transoxania calling in help from the Türgesh or Western Turks. Even within Bactria/Ṭukhāristān, the Arabs had to re-assert their control over the local principalities there piecemeal. Thus it was not till 107/725-26 that the then governor of Khurasan, Asad b. °Abdallāh al-Qasrī, was able to attack Gharchistān, the mountainous region northeast of Herat, and compel the Shīr, its ruler, to become Muslim.³ We are now in the regions from which the cache of the "Bactrian documents," which recently came to light and have now been edited and publi-

¹ Ibn al-Faqīh al-Hamadhānī ed. 1885, p. 323-24, tr. 1973, p. 383-84; cf. Bosworth 1994, p. 270-1.

² Gibb 1923, p. 31-32, 36-38; Bosworth, 1986, 1995.

³ al-Ṭabarī, II, 1489, tr. vol. XXV, p. 25.

shed by Nicholas Sims-Williams, must have originated; the mediaeval district of Rōb (modern Rūy), some eighty km south of Samangān,¹ and Gūzgān to its west being specifically mentioned in the documents. Together with the Bactrian-language documents, there is also a smaller number of Arabic-language ones, emanating from the same geographical region and dating to the middle years of the eighth century. It does not seem that much information on the putative beginnings of Islamisation in the lands between the Heri Rud and the upper Oxus can be deduced from them; as was certainly the case in eastern Afghanistan, the process of conversion was clearly a protracted one.²

Hepthalite power had been ended in northern Afghanistan, but was to live on south of the Hindu Kush for as much as two further centuries. The southern branch of the Hepthalites had its centres in the upper Kabul river valley at such places as Bāmiyān, Kapisa (the later Begram, near Charikar) and Kabul itself, and to the south of the Kabul river's tributary, the Logar, in Zābulistān, the region around Ghazna and Gardīz, and in Zamīndāwar and Arachosia/al-Rukhkhaj around the confluence of the Helmand river and the Arghandab. The Kabul river valley in particular, being culturally an extension of the Indian world, was an ancient Buddhist land. Bāmiyān is described by the Chinese Buddhist traveller Hsüan-tsang/Xuanzang, who visited there between 629 and 645, as a great Buddhist centre, with ten monasteries in the region with a thousand monks; the people there venerated the *Triratna* (lit. the "three jewels," sc. the Buddha, the *Dharma* and the *Saṅgha* or community of the faithful).³ The excavation and painting of the caves associated with the two great figures of the Buddha which were carved in the cliffs near the town and which stood there till the recent iconoclastic activities of the Taliban, continued well into the eighth century A.D. The local rulers there were probably of Hepthalite origin and like the princes of

¹ A Ru^ob Khān, ruling over Ru^ob/Rūb and Siminjān, had in the early years of the eighth century assisted Qutayba against Nīzak. See al-Ṭabarī, II, 1219, tr. vol. XXIII, p. 165-66.

² For the documents in the Middle Iranian Bactrian language, see Sims-Williams, 2001, 2007, with a third volume to follow. The Arabic ones have been edited and translated by Geoffrey Khan, see Khan, 2007.

³ Watters, 1904, I, p. 115ff.

Gharchistān, bore the title of *Shīr/Shēr*, deriving from Old Iranian **khshāthriya*- “monarch.”¹ Exactly when they became Muslim is obscure, since the evidence is confused and contradictory. The Arabic historian al-Yaʿqūbī places the conversion of the *Shīr* in the caliphates of the ʿAbbasids al-Manṣūr or his son al-Mahdī, i.e. in the third quarter of the eighth century, sealed by a marriage connection with an Arab commander, and in 176/792-93 the *Shīr* (now with an Islamic name, Ḥasan) took part in an expedition sent by the Barmakid al-Faḍl b. Yaḥyā, at that time governor of Khurasan, against the ruler of Kabul.² Later *Shīrs* are mentioned as present at the ʿAbbasid court in Iraq, and in 229/844, in the reign of al-Wāthiq, one of them functioned as governor over Yemen as deputy for the commander Itākh.³ But from the sources on the early Saffarids we learn of an expedition by the founder Yaʿqūb b. al-Layth to Bāmiyān in 256/870 or two years later, in the course of which pagan, i.e. Buddhist, idols were carried off.⁴ A late Persian source, Shabānkāraʿī’s *Majmaʿ al-ansāb* (which we know enshrines apparently original material on the early Ghaznavids, going back over three centuries before the author wrote his work in the eighth/fourteenth century), states that the first phase of expansion by Sebūktegin, after his succession to power in Ghazna in 366/977, was to add Bāmiyān to his territories, although he makes no mention specifically of its then ruler and whether he was a Muslim or had once again lapsed.⁵ One suspects that, for something like two centuries, there were conversions of the rulers, who then regularly relapsed back into their ancestral faith of Buddhism at some point after the Muslim armies had departed. Unfortunately, we do not have information on the role of Buddhism there during this time or whether the Buddhist monasteries continued to function as centres of religious life and teaching.

There was thus much adherence to Buddhism in the Kabul river valley region of eastern Afghanistan, but the religious situation is more complicated in the regions of Zābulistān and Zamīndāwar. There was certainly a strong presence of Buddhism there in the first

¹ Thus the etymology given by Marquart, 1901, p. 79.

² al-Yaʿqūbī ed 1892, p. 289, 290, tr. 1937, p. 103, 106.

³ al-Ṭabarī, III, 1335, tr. vol. XXXIV, p. 16.

⁴ Barthold Allchin 1960; Bosworth 1994, p. 105-06.

⁵ Shabānkāraʿī ed. 1363/1981, p. 35.

half of the seventh century. Hsüan-tsang states that there were many monasteries there, and in the 1950s to the 1970s the *Italian Archaeological Mission in Afghanistan* excavated a Buddhist site and stupa at Ghazna. The Chinese pilgrim further states that the people of Ghazna sacrificed to many hundreds of gods and venerated the *Triratna*, and that there were large numbers of monasteries and monks following the Mahāyāna Buddhist way.¹ But the religious complexion here also includes the cult of the god Zūn or Zhūn, centred in Zamīndāwar and known to us from both Arabic and Chinese sources. Hsüan-tsang says that within the kingdom of Ts'ao-chü-cha (=Zābul), the god Shun-ta was highly venerated.² Further Chinese sources, those of the authors *Sui-shu* and *Pei-shih*, dating from a generation or so before Hsüan-tsang, mention rich temples there, with priests and devotees and with numerous offerings brought to the shrine of Zūn, and they stress that the cult was not a Buddhist one. Our knowledge of the cult from the Arabic side stems from accounts in the historical sources on the Arab raids from Sistan to Bust and beyond, beginning almost as soon as the Arabs had entered Sistan, with probes by such commanders as 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Samura, al-Muhallab b. Abī Ṣufra, al-Rabī' b. Ziyād and 'Ubaydallāh b. Abī Bakra which obviously encountered strenuous resistance; the full-scale expedition by the latter in 79/698 as far as Zābulistān, where the local ruler, the Zūnbīl, lured on the Arab army into food- and fodder-less desert lands, proved particularly disastrous for the Muslims.³

Nevertheless, despite the Buddhism of these regions of eastern Afghanistan, the characteristic cult there, and above all in Zamīndāwar, was, as mentioned above, that of Zūn or Zhūn. Thus in the account of the Arab conquests by al-Balādhurī, we learn that, after the conquest of Sistan, 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Samura in 33/653-54 penetrated into Zamīndāwar and reached the shrine of Zhūn, the Mecca of the local people, set on a hill. The Arabic and Chinese sources give further specific details about this god and its cult. It was embodied in an idol of gold, with rubies for its two eyes. Set before

¹ Marquart de Groot 1915, p. 262-63.

² Watters 1904, I, 126-27.

³ Bosworth 1968, p. 19-21; Bosworth 1973, p. 268-83.

the temple was a gigantic bone or vertebra from some great sea creature or monster. The cult was well-organised, with priests who claimed magical and curative powers for exercising over devotees. The ruler of Zābul had the title, as has been noted from Hsüan-tsang, of Shun-ta, whose ancient form was, according to Karlgren, *dZ²iuen-d^cat, which Marquart in his classic study of Zābulistān, its ruler and its divinity, followed more recently by Bussagli, interpreted as *Zūn-dādh and connected with the ruler's title given in the Arabic and Persian sources which he read as Zunbīl.¹ However, the early Arabic sources mentioning the raids into this region routinely point the consonant ductus of *z.n.b.y.l as *rutbīl, and there has been much discussion since Marquart's time concerning the exact and correct form of this monarch's name/title, especially by Italian scholars connected with the work in the nineteen-fifties of the *Italian Archaeological Mission in Afghanistan*, most of these regarding the form Zunbīl as the probable reading, although the second element – bīl was never satisfactorily explained.² It now seems probable that the early Arabic sources were on the right track when they read *rutbīl*, and that its ultimate origin lies in the ancient Turkish title *ilteber* (known from usage in the Orkhon inscriptions as the designation of a governor or high military commander), which seems to appear in the Bactrian documents in such corrupt forms as *uilitobēro/hilitber*.³

The exact nature of the cult of Zūn has also been much discussed, without any consensus having been reached. Given the cultural and religious connections of these parts of southeastern Afghanistan

¹ Marquart de Groot 1915, p. 280-81; Bussagli, 1962, p. 81-83.

² See, e.g., Bosworth 1968, p. 34-35; Bosworth 1994, p. 91-95, and the references given in these places, in particular, to the works of e.g. G. Scarcia.

³ The late Alessio Bombaci first suggested a connection between *ilteber* and **rutbīl*, see Bombaci 1970. See now Inaba 2005, p. 2. The reasoning for the term's journeying from Mongolia to Afghanistan is that there were not only Turkish princes or chieftains ruling in Ṭukhāristān and the southern bank of the upper Oxus in the seventh and eighth centuries A.D. as part of the fragmented northern Hephthalite realm (as the attestation there of the Turkish princely title *Yabghu*, in the Arabic sources as *Jabghūya/Jab(b)ūya* undoubtedly attests) but that the rulers in the southern Hephthalite realm, the *Rutbīls*, also included ethnic Turks, whom Inaba takes, specifically, as from the Khalaj tribe. It is true that the Bactrian documents mention the Khalaj, but the present author is not competent to pronounce on the Chinese documentation adduced by Inaba for his assertion here.

with the Indian world, Marquart thought that the cult was neither Buddhist nor Zoroastrian, and suggested that it might have been linked with the old-established shrine of the Sun-God Āditya at Multan in the middle Indus valley, one formerly venerated by the Hephthalites or Hūṇa of northern India, a cult centre built up by the powerful Hephthalite ruler there of the sixth century, Mihirakula. Bussagli noted certain correspondences from what we know of the cult with the institutions of pre-Buddhist divine monarchy in Tibet, including the idea of a physical connection between the heavens and a sacred mountain, by means of which the king might descend, parallel to the descriptions in Arabic sources of the *Zunbīl/Rutbīl* on a sacred mountain. Scarcia thought that the name Zūn or Zūr might be connected with Iranian hero Zāl, father of Rustam, and that, even if the cult of Zūn was not a Zoroastrian one, a region like Zamīndāwar-Zābulistān in close geographical proximity to Sistan and Bust, where ancient Iranian traditions were so strong (see above) was perhaps distantly affected by the prestige of the Sasanid court, with its concepts of the divinely-butressed monarch and its elaborate ceremonial, especially as the *Zunbīls/Rutbīls* were apparently carried in a litter on a golden throne.¹

At all events, the rulers in the Hephthalite kingdom south of the Hindu Kush, the *Zunbīls/Rutbīls* and their neighbours to the north in the Kapisa and Gandhāra regions, the Kābul-Shāhs, offered strenuous resistance to the Muslims, and their attempted introduction of the Islamic faith, over a period of two or even three centuries after the Arabs first appeared in Sistan. Almost as soon as they entered Sistan, the Arabs pushed eastward to Bust and into al-Rukhkhaj, Zamīndāwar and Zābulistān, and from Zarang, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Samura led a force against the shrine of the god Zūn on its hill. He is reported to have broken off a hand of the idol, and he gouged out the two rubies which served for its eyes in order to demonstrate to the Marzbān of Sistan, on his return, that the idol had no power to harm or benefit. It seems that the *Zunbīls/Rutbīls* had their summer quarters in the upland area of Ghazna and Zābulistān and their summer ones in the *garmsīr* or warmer regions of al-Rukhkhaj and the lower

¹ See these authors cited in Bosworth 1968, p. 35 and especially n. 6; Bosworth 1994, p. 92-95.

Arghandab-middle Helmand. The Arabs then pushed further northeastwards and engaged the Kābul-Shāh, who opposed the raiders with a force of seven elephants which at first terrified the Muslims, but these beasts were in the end stampeded back to their own lines. This set the pattern for raids that continued for over two centuries, yet the fierce resistance of the *Zunbīls/Rutbīls* and *Shāhs* meant that there could not at the outset be any systematic policy of annexing territory there or of implanting Islam. The aim was primarily to acquire plunder, above all in the shape of slaves. Only in the time of al-Ḥajjāj, at the opening of the eighth century A.D. when the governor of Khurasan faced a serious rebellion of dissident Arabs of Khurasan led by ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. al-Ashʿath, who latterly took refuge in the territories of the *Zunbīl/Rutbīl*, was there a policy of establishing forward posts up against the *Zunbīl/Rutbīl*'s territories and of imposing tribute in beasts and slaves on him.¹ Over the next decades, the sources record with monotonous regularity that the *Zunbīls/Rutbīls* ceased paying tribute to the Muslims whenever Arab power weakened. They often acted in concert with the parallel line of Kābul-Shāhs, and it seems that the *Zunbīls/Rutbīls* of the time kept up relations with the T'ang emperors even after the Chinese attempts to re-assert their theoretical suzerainty over Central Asia had been halted by the Arabs at the battle of Talas in 133/751, sending envoys to the Chinese court and soliciting help against the Arabs.² It seems that the Arabs for long underestimated first, the strength of the culture and traditions of the indigenous peoples of eastern Afghanistan and their attachment to their ancestral cults, and second, the harsh and inhospitable terrain of much of eastern Afghanistan.

At the time of the rise in Sistan and Bust of the Saffarid brothers, Yaʿqūb and ʿAmr b. al-Layth, sc. the middle years of the third/ninth century, who were to found a mighty military empire in the eastern Islamic world, the *Zunbīls/Rutbīls* still substantially blocked the Muslims' advance. However, Yaʿqūb, with his early background as an ʿayyār and *mutaṭawwiʿ* upholding the Sunni cause against dissi-

¹ Bosworth 1968, p. 33-36, 62; Bosworth 1994, p. 54-55, 95-96

² Bosworth 1994, p. 7, citing Chavannes 1903, and Ghirshman 1948, that the Chinese annals record the arrival of embassies at Chang'an until 753 A.D.

dents in Sistan like the Khārijites, and with his military prowess in securing control over Sistan and much of what is now western Afghanistan,¹ was to increase the pressure. Already in the mid-ninth century A.D. we have an enigmatic attestation of the presence of Islam, in what was later to be the Waziristan region of the frontier region between Afghanistan and British India and now Pakistan, in the shape of an Arabic and Sanskrit inscription from the Tochi valley dating from 243/857² and now in the Peshawar Museum. The correct interpretation of the Arabic has much exercised epigraphists, but a name "Q.m.r ibn ʿAmmār" may be mentioned.³ Yaʿqūb clashed with the *Zunbīl* as early as 250/864, and then again in 255-56/869-70 during the course of operations as far north as Balkh and Bāmiyān, returning via Kabul and Zabulistān, where he gathered a useful plunder of beasts and slaves from the "Khalaj and Turks", and attacked the *Zunbīl/Rutbīl* and his son. It must have been some of the plunder thus gained that Yaʿqūb sent from Kirman as presents for the newly-acceded caliph al-Muʿtamid at Sāmarrā in 256/870; these included fifty gold and silver idols from "Kabul" (used here, one suspects, in a vague sense; some of these could have come from the despoiled shrine of Zūn/Zhūn in Zamīndāwar).⁴ Also mentioned in the sources' accounts of this expedition is Yaʿqūb's seizure on his route homewards of the town of Gardīz near Ghazna, where he reduced the local chief to tributary status; the Muslim names of this chief, from the family of Aflaḥ, seem to indicate that there was at Gardīz a pocket of Muslims, perhaps recently converted; the family was still in existence a century and a half later, with members serving at the court of the Ghaznavid sultan Masʿūd b. Maḥmūd in 421/1030.⁵ More problematically, there may also have been a similar Muslim pocket at Ghazna, for we know of the existence of local rulers there in the mid-tenth century later, when the former Samanid general Alptegin in 351/962, and then his subordinate Sebüktegin some fifteen years later, clashed with a chief from a

1. Bosworth 1994, p. 67ff.; Tor 2007, p. 100ff.

2. Not, apparently, a bilingual one, although the same building seems to be referred to in both languages.

3. See Bosworth 1965, p. 23-24.

4. Bosworth 1968, p. 119-21; Forstner 1970, p. 69-83; Bosworth 1994, p. 98-108.

5. Bosworth 1965, p. 18, 20-21

family apparently named *Lawīk* (whether this was a name or a title is unclear). Some of the Islamic sources attribute Muslim names to these chiefs, but others describe them as being pagans, and this seems more likely. It is clear that, even if nominally or temporarily Muslim, they had been closely linked with the Kābul Shāhs and with the Indian cultural world in general; after Alptegin's death by 352/963, the dispossessed *Lawīks* returned to Ghazna on more than one occasion, encouraged by popular feeling there and with troops drawn from India.¹ Not much is mentioned about an interest by Ya'qūb's brother and successor in Sistan, 'Amr, in the eastern Afghanistan region, but a raid is recorded, by one of his commanders against an idol shrine at Sakāwand in the valley of the Lōgar, a right-bank affluent of the Kabul river, between Kabul and Ghazna, and a holy place frequented, it was said, by pilgrims from all over India; rich plunder was gained by the Muslims, and an attack by an Indian prince from the Hindūshāhīs, the dynasty which dominated the northern basin of the Indus at this time, was warded off.²

The sources are particularly silent on the century between ca. 870 and 970, but this was probably critical for the firmer establishment of Islam in eastern Afghanistan, one strain of which was Khārijism, perhaps brought from Sistan or Bādghīs; the *Hudūd al-ʿālam*, composed only about a decade after the end of this period, notes that the people of Gardīz were Khārijites.³ The succession at Ghazna of Sebūktegin in 366/967 and then of his son Maḥmūd in 388/988, the latter to be built up already in his own time as a Sunni Muslim hero, the hammer of infidel Hindus and of dissident Muslims, must have consolidated the position of Islam in this region by A.D. 1000.

There only remained two particularly remote and inaccessible regions in the interior of Afghanistan where older forms of indigenous religions persisted. The mountainous land of Ghūr in central Afghanistan, probably thinly populated and certainly lacking in towns and substantial settlements, had never been dominated by any outside power, although from time to time the governors and rulers of Khurasan had led slave raids into it. It is probably safe to assume

¹ Bosworth 1965, p. 16-17, 18-21.

² Bosworth 1994, p. 218-19.

³ *Hudūd al-ʿālam* tr. 1937, p. 91; cf. Bosworth 1965, p. 22-24; Bosworth 1994, p. 102-04.

that the Ghūrīs were ethnically Iranian. Although their indigenous tongue is said, in the contemporary accounts of the Ghaznavid expeditions into Ghūr, to have been unintelligible to the incomers, this was possibly some dialectical form of New Persian rather than an early form of Pashto, as suggested by Pashto-speaking Afghan linguistic nationalists of the mid-twentieth century.¹ Nothing is known about the nature of the Ghūrīs' religious beliefs. Our main source for the three Ghaznavid raids into Ghūr led by prince Mas'ūd during his father's reign, the contemporary historian Abu 'l-Faḍl Bayhaqī, has no stories about idol-breaking or the despoiling of shrines, and merely states that after the expedition of 401/1011, teachers were left to instruct the inhabitants of Ghūr in the rudiments of Islam. So far as we know, the Sasanids had never controlled Ghūr, hence it is unlikely that Zoroastrianism ever had a foothold there; the old beliefs of Ghūr probably had little positive content beyond a form of animism, one expressive of its general backwardness and isolation from the surrounding higher cultures. The full Islamisation of Ghūr doubtless took place in the course of the fifth/eleventh century.²

Much more interesting to the historian of religion and the ethnologist concerned with Inner Asia is what we know of the beliefs of the other, even more remote region of Afghanistan which resisted the influence of Islam for a further nine centuries. This was the highly mountainous region of the Pamirs with its valleys running southwards to the middle Kabul river and now on the borders of Afghanistan and Chitral, opprobriously called by the Muslims Kāfiristān "land of the unbelievers" until its Islamisation, when it received its modern name Nūristān "land of light." The people here have their own distinctive group of Indo-European languages, the Kafiri ones. In 411/1020 Maḥmūd of Ghazna led an expedition to the Nūr and Qīrāt valleys to the north of Lāmghān, whose inhabitants were said to worship the lion (a reference to the Sakiya Sinha or Lion of

¹ The late Professor Georg Morgenstierne, the greatest expert of his time on the languages of the Indian-Iranian borderlands, once suggested to the present writer that this language of Ghūr may conceivably have been one of the southeastern Iranian group, now much shrunken and represented only vestigially by Ḫormurī in the Lōgar valley and at Kānīguram in Waziristan and by Parāchī in the Pashaṭ-speaking region of the Kabul river valley (see on Pashaṭ, below)

² Nāẓim 1931, p. 70-73; Bosworth 1961, p. 119, 125-28

the Buddha?); en route for his Indian campaign of 800/1398, Tīmūr listened to the complaints of local Muslims against the depredations of the Kafirs and led an expedition across the Khāwak Pass into western Kāfiristān; and in 990/1582 the Mughal emperor Akbar's younger brother, the governor of Kabul Muḥammad Ḥākīm, made a raid into southwestern Kāfiristān, known to us from the contemporary account of the Qāḍī Muḥammad Sālim who accompanied the Mughal troops as a preacher and inciter to doughty deeds. It seems that the "Kāfirs" at this period included also some Dardic Pashaṛī speakers, still to be found today in the Kabul river valley. Especially interesting in Muḥammad Sālim's *Ṣifat-nāma* is the mention, amongst the mixture of animism and polytheism that constituted the Kāfirs' religion, of the three gods whom the Kāfirs invoked for divine assistance, Pandād, Sh.r.w.y and Lāmandī; Scarcia wondered whether these were not connected with the cult of Shiva, not impossible in view of the Kabul river valley's long exposure to cultural and religious influences from India.¹

It was not until the very end of the XIXth century that the vigorous and forceful Amir of Afghanistan, 'Abd al-Raḥmān Khān, in 1895-96 made a determined and now successful attempt to bring Kāfiristān and its peoples into the Muslim fold. Fortunately, we possess a fair amount of information on the Kāfirs from various travelers and officials of British India, from Mountstuart Elphinstone in the earlier part of the nineteenth century onwards. Most valuable and informative on the social structures and ancient religious beliefs of the Kāfirs is the classic of ethnography by Sir George Robertson, of the Indian Medical Service, who in the early 1890s spent a year amongst the Kāfirs and wrote up his experiences in *The Kāfirs of the Hindu-Kush* (London 1896); the Kāfir pantheon, he noted, was headed by a creator-god Imra, from whom other gods sprang, and there was much emphasis on demons and evil spirits who needed constant propitiation.² But since that time, Afghanistan has been monolithically Muslim; by 1963, the American ethnologist Louis Dupree found in Nuristan only a few very old people who even remembered

¹ Nāzīm 1931, p. 74-75; Scarcia 1965; and in general, Bosworth 1990.

² See Bosworth 1990; Dupree 1973, index s.v. "Nuristan, Nuristani."

the names of their old gods.¹

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¹ See his Introduction to the 1974 reprint of *The Kāfirs of the Hindu-Kush*, p. xx-xxii.

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