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The ‘Abbásid Abna’ and Sāsānid Cavalrymen

PATRICIA CRONE

In a recent publication of great interest M. Zakeri has reopened the question of the identity of the Abna, who appear in the early ‘Abbásid army’. Once assumed to be the physical descendants of the ‘Abbásid caliph’, or the ‘Abbásids and their adoptive members and clients, the abna al-dawlu/al-dawlu al-sha’i were shown by Ayalon in 1964 to be “in all probability, the descendants of the Khurāsānīs who brought the ‘Abbásids to the throne”. This has been generally accepted. In Zakeri’s opinion, however, the Abna were not “sons of the Revolution”, but rather sons of Sāsānid horsemen (ahtaroun): their ancestors had been members of the lower nobility that furnished the cavalry of the Sāsānid empire after Khosrau I’s reforms. In Zakeri’s opinion the revolutionary troops consisted primarily of such recruits, and so the conventional view is one in which the Abna were used as sons of revolutionaries. But the conventional view, according to him, obscures the fact that the Abna belonged to a distinct social group: it was by allying themselves with Sāsānid ahtaroun that the ‘Abbásids came to power.

This thesis is not likely to gain acceptance as it stands, but it highlights some problems raised by Ayalon’s interpretation and successfully casts doubt on current views of the ‘Abbásid revolution, raising numerous minor questions on the way. It is thus worthwhile going through the evidence yet again. Who were the Abna? In ethnic and social terms, what implications for the ‘Abbásid revolution and its aftermath?

The term Abna

Zakeri’s identification of the Abna as descendants of the lower nobility of the Sāsānid rests first and foremost on the term Abna itself. Members of the Sāsānid gentry were known in Persian as a’zād, “free (men)”, and so their descendants were called abna al-a’zād, “sons of


3 B. Lewis in Els, s.v. “a’zād”.

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The three soldiers dispatched by Khusrū I to conquer Yemen were Persians, and so their descendents in Yemen were called 'abd al-furs al-firs, "sons of Persians/Persia", or al-Abūnī for short.5 The troops that raised the 'Abbāsid to the throne were known as abīd al-bawāl, and so (according to the conventional view) their descendents were called abīnī al-bawāl, "sons of the revolution/new era/dynasty", or al-Abūnī for short. Zakari tacitly assumes that in each case it is the term abīnī that carries the ethnic and social connotations, not the word with which it is in construct, and so the very term Abūnī comes to mean Persian gentry; "Whether in Yemen, Khurāsān, or Baghdad, they were similar in origin, social background, and attachment to the caliphate traditions of the Sāsidīds. The titles banāt, abnāt, 'Abūnī, etc. were used only when the Persian nobles and landholders were involved."

But the tacit assumption is wrong, of course, as Zakari would no doubt be the first to admit (he plainly is not lacking in scholarly competence); it is only because he does not make it explicit that he manages to retain it. But if it is discarded, there is no reason why abīnī al-ādīr, abīnī al-furs and abīnī al-bawāl should be identified. The sheer fact that a man could in principle belong to all three categories obviously does not mean that he must in fact have done so. Abūnī simply means "descendants."

The descendents of the Sāsidīd gentry were usually known in Arabic as abīnī al-ādīr, rather than simply abīnī, because the polity in which they had been abīnī no longer existed: they were not gentry, but of genory descent.6 The Yemeni abīnī al-furs were similarly called "people of Persian descent" because, having been born and grown up in the Yemen (and often having Yemeni mothers), they were no longer real Persians. In the same vein a commander who joined a Banū expedition to India in the reign of al-Mahdi appears as abīnī al-ādīr: he was a Bāari of Yemen origin.7 When al-Mutawakkil was referred to as abīnī al-ādīr in 232/847, the reference is to soldiers of Turkish parentage born in Iraq.8 Al-Jāḥiz observes that the Khurāsānī abīnī al-ādīr wa'lahārīn whose fathers settled in Farghānā look the same as the natives of Farghānā, that there is no difference between abīnī al-māzāla and abīnī al-māzāla ibn khātib12 and that people automatically asume the abīnī al-ādīr wa'lahārīyāt to be "filāli al-ādīr.13 Here the reference

5 Zakari, pp. 83ff, 265ff.
7 Zakari, p. 287. Note also his conviction that the subgroup of Tābitīn known as the Abūnī must have been transhumant by origin (pp. 290ff).
8 In unspoken, or perhaps, spoken language, several names and professions (e.g. al-baṣara, al-baṣara, al-baṣara, al-baṣara) are used to denote honorifics (e.g. al-baṣara, al-baṣara, al-baṣara, al-baṣara), but they never confront the question.
9 Al-Jāḥiz, p. 267, explains abīnī al-ādīr is a Aramaicism meaning the same as abīnī al-ādīr with reference to S. N. Briend, "The Persianization of the Sāsidīd Gentry and Their Identification with the Sāsidīd Dynasty", in _The Persianization of the Sāsidīd Gentry and Their Identification with the Sāsidīd Dynasty_, ed. S. N. Briend (Leiden, 1988), 215ff. The Sāsidīd line is described as "the line of the Sāsidīd Gentry, and the frequency with which the gentry are called abīnī al-ādīr in pre-Islamic contexts (e.g. Zakari, pp. 287, 295), abīnī al-ādīr al-ādīr thereafter, suggests that the latter expression is Aramaic Arabic.
10 Tab. iii, 136ff. (p. 158).
11 In unspoken, or perhaps, spoken language, several names and professions (e.g. al-baṣara, al-baṣara, al-baṣara, al-baṣara) are used to denote honorifics (e.g. al-baṣara, al-baṣara, al-baṣara, al-baṣara), but they never confront the question.
12 Tab. iii, 136ff. (p. 158).
13 In unspoken, or perhaps, spoken language, several names and professions (e.g. al-baṣara, al-baṣara, al-baṣara, al-baṣara) are used to denote honorifics (e.g. al-baṣara, al-baṣara, al-baṣara, al-baṣara), but they never confront the question.
14 Jāḥiz, "Turk", C. 31-i, 2. 4. 5. = 616.
15 Jāḥiz, "Turk", C. 262. 4, 2. 5. 7. = 651.
16 Tab. iii, 136ff. (p. 158).
17 Tab. iii, 136ff. (p. 158).
18 Below, notes 28, 53. This and the following expression may of course also refer to people of jāhilīd descent. Note all the jāhilīs described as abīnī al-ādīr are necessarily descended from members of the jāhilīd army (e.g. Ibn Sa'd, al-Ṭabarī, al-Mas'ūdī, ed. S. C. Colin and E. Lévi-Provençal (Leiden, 1949-)).
19 Below, notes 28, 53. This and the following expression may of course also refer to people of jāhilīd descent. Note all the jāhilīs described as abīnī al-ādīr are necessarily descended from members of the jāhilīd army (e.g. Ibn Sa'd, al-Ṭabarī, al-Mas'ūdī, ed. S. C. Colin and E. Lévi-Provençal (Leiden, 1949-)).
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21 Below, notes 28, 53. This and the following expression may of course also refer to people of jāhilīd descent. Note all the jāhilīs described as abīnī al-ādīr are necessarily descended from members of the jāhilīd army (e.g. Ibn Sa'd, al-Ṭabarī, al-Mas'ūdī, ed. S. C. Colin and E. Lévi-Provençal (Leiden, 1949-)).
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The ‘Abbāsid Abnā’ and Sāṣāniyān caliphal family

abnā’-al-dawla/da’saw in his famous account of why he preferred freedmen to them (told in 169/783); informed that the abl khurāṣāni were likely to be alienated by this preference, he responded that freedmen did not want and could not be asked to do anything where another (i.e. a Khurāṣāni) would invoke his status as ‘the son of your dawla and veteran in your da’wa and the son of a man who hurried to your cause (man sawāhī illā da’wa’tika)’.

Under Hārūn ar-Rashīd the term is encountered with greater frequency. By his time there was a large number of abnā’-al-khurāṣāni in Madinat Abī ‘l-‘Abbās near al-‘Abbās. In 189/804 the Khurāṣāni asked Hārūn to replace ‘Abī b. ‘Iṣa with anyone from kufiyātī wa-anāfīnī wād-dawla/da’saw wa-quwawātānī; in 192/807 a number of abnā’-al-dawla with Rāfī b. Layth abandoned the latter in Khurāṣān. In 193/810 Hārūn b. Harthama recruited 1,000 abnā’ (in Baghdād) for service in Egypt; and according to Ibn al-Nadīm, the jurist al-Shaybānī (d. 180/893) was harassed by a certain al-Rawwānī, who used to gather the nāwawātī abnā’-al-dawla in the mosque in which al-Shaybānī taught: al-Rawwānī would read his kūfī al-dawla to his followers and they would yell at al-Shaybānī’s pupils when the latter tried to recite their master’s works. There are also a couple of other passages referring to Hārūn’s reign.

But as Ayān observes, it is above all in connection with the fourth civil war (811–13) and its aftermath that the Abnā’ are mentioned. They formed the backbone of al-Amin’s army and went into battle against Tāhir under ‘Abī b. ‘Iṣa, ‘Abdāllāh b. Humayd, Qabība and ‘Abd al-Rahmān b. Jabala al-Ashraf; they famously came to blows with the Syrian soldiers, known as Zawaqī, that al-Amin tried to recruit for his cause in 196/811; and they (as well as the mubāt) were the defenders of Baghdād when Tāhir laid siege to it; al-Amin died with a cry for a vantage from their ranks. They remained prominent after his death and resumed the struggle against al-Ma’mūn when the latter stayed in Khurāṣān, and above all in 201/817 when he designated ‘Abī al-Kāsī as his heir apparent. They also appear in two military mujāḥidātīn (by al-Jāḥiẓ and Ibn Tayfūr) set at al-Ma’mūn’s court.

Thereafter the references begin to peter out again. It was friction between the Turks and the Abnā’, the Harbiyya troops and/or the Baghdādī masses that caused al-Ma’mūn to move to Sāṣāniyān, where such Abnā’ as went with him appear to have been registered in

22 Tab. iii, p. 531, reading the first ayya (twice) and Ayya for abnā’. 23 Following MS C and the edition of MS A, ‘A. F. Ibrāhīm (Cairo, 1946–9), viii, p. 175 (where the retention of the second ayya must be a misprint). Compare al-Amin’s characterization of the Abnā’ as abnā’-al-dawla b l-buldī (Tab. iii, p. 531-7).


25 Tab. iii, p. 703-15.


27 Ibn al-Nadīm, Kūfī al-fāsiq, ed. R. Tayfūr (Cairo, 1979), p. 271-73, ch. 120. Ayān mysteriously infers that al-Rawwānī’s followers were called abnā’-al-dawla after their leader’s book (‘Reformāt’, p. 53).


30 Above, notes 12, 23.

31 Tab. iii, p. 1739 (Harbiyya), 1190f (Abnā’); al-Ma’sullī, Kūfī wa-knī al-dawla, ed. A. C. Barbier de Meynard the ḍiwān al-fund ward dar-šakīrīyā. Most of them probably remained in Baghdād, where they appear in 249/863, churning for pay along with the Ṣakīrīyās, in whose company they are mentioned again in 251/865. In Sāṣāniyān they are mentioned in the second half of the Mu’takallimīn’s murder in 247/861, in the following year when they fought the Turks over the accession of al-Mustā’sīn, and finally under al-Muhtadī (235/857–869), who unsuccessfully tried to play them against the Turks. There do not seem to be any references to their presence in the army thereafter.

The chronologisal spread of the evidence is thus a good deal more consistent with Ayān’s understanding of the word than with Zakarīya’s; for had the Abnā’ owed their title to their descent from Iranian gentry, one would have expected the term to appear with particular frequency in accounts of the revolution itself and the reigns of the first ‘Abbāsid caliphs, where memories of their ethnic and social origin would have been vivid; but with one exception, the attestations only begin in the generation after the revolution, when the memories would have begun to recede.

Etnic origin

If the Abnā’ were descendants of the abnā’-al-dawla, as proposed by Ayān, they were of mixed Arab and non-Arab origin. If they were descendants of the ‘arba’, as proposed by Zakarīya, they were of Iranian origin by definition. The leaders of the ‘Abbāsid revolution included several men of Arab origin whose descendants remained prominent down to the reign of al-Ma’mūn, such as Qāṭīb b. Shabbī al-Tā’ī, Khāzin b. Khuraymīn al-Tamīnī, Munayyār b. Zayyār al-Dabbī or Makk b. Hayyām al-Khurāsānī, and Zakarīya’s thesis highlights one striking fact: with one exception, no descendant of these men is explicitly identified as a Banawī or called an Abnā’ī in the sources. They are often described as Abnā’ī in the secondary literature, but this merely goes to show that modern scholars routinely extend the Banawī label to all offspring of the participants in the revolution. The sources do not in fact, in al-Jāḥiẓ positively withholding the label from one of them in his Manṣūḥ al-turk.

In this work al-Jāḥiẓ famously describes the caliphal army as its own time as consisting of Arabs, Banawī, Khurāṣāni, Abnā’ and Turks and stages a boasting competition between


33 For this dānī, see YB, p. 267f, ed. al. p. 262f. The expression al-fund ward dar-šakīrīyā seems to have been interchangeable with al-fund ward dar-šakīrīyā (Tab. iii, p. 1528b. 1).

34 Tab. iii, p. 1530a. 12.

35 Tab. iii, p. 1579f, 1582g.

36 Tab. iii, p. 1453a.

37 YB, p. 60f.

38 YB, p. 618f.

39 A fact of which he is aware. He responds that it “explicitly states numerous references to the military contingents of abnā’i under the Banawīs and particularly during the early stages of the ‘Abbāsid revolution in Khurāsān” (Zakarīya, p. 274). But no such contingents are mentioned in the sources.

40 The two terms are not interchangeable. The former is the singular of al-abnā’ (or at least in Jāḥiẓ) while the latter is part of a name.

41 I did so myself in Slaves on Horses (Cambridge,1986). Elad even supplies the man with the nihā al-Abnā’ ("Translation", p. 105, 122).
these groups, set in the time of al-Ma'mūn.47 The five groups are not bound by units such as regiments, but rather overlapping categories, for the purpose of the treatise is to show that anyone can be classified as anything and that reality based on labels of this kind is therefore mistaken.48 With the exception of the Turks, all the groups boast parity of their contribution to the revolution (i.e. as Khurṣān) and parity of features unique to themselves (i.e. as Arabs, manāfī, Khurṣānīs and Abnāʾ, of whom only the last two are envisaged as soldiers).49 One would thus expect a descendant of an Arab participant in the revolution to appear as an Arab, a Khurṣānī and a Banawī alike; but Humayd b. 'Abd al-Hamīd al-Tūsī, whose father had been a prominent participant in the revolution, is explicitly identified as Arab and a Khurṣānī, not as a Banawī.50 (So too is Sa'd b. 'Uqba b. Salm al-Hanbālī),51 which may or may not be significant since we do not know whether his father participated in the Khurṣānī phase of the revolution.52 Al-Jāḥiṣī's failure to identify Humayd as a Banawī is not inadvertent, for he presents him as an actual enemy of the Abnāʾ in another epistle, saying that he was biased against them (la ʾājūdā bi ʾāl abnāʾ al-ḥākīmāt),53 When al-Yaḥyā'ī describes the Abnāʾ as attacking Zuhayr b. al-Munṣufiy b. al-Ḍabībī, he similarly excludes from their ranks a man who was a Banawī in Ayākūn's sense of a descendant of a participant in the revolution.54 Were Humayd and Zuhayr excluded from Banawī status because they were Arabs? It does not seem likely. Al-Jāḥiṣī presents the Khurṣānīs as ethnically mixed and identifies the Abnāʾ as Khurṣānīs by origin,55 so he hardly shared Zakerī's view that they were Iranians by definition. He lets the Banawī contrast his own title to mine with that of the manāfī and the Arab in one passage, and with that of the Arab and the Khurṣānī in another, and Zakerī takes this to mean that the Banawī was something other than an Arab, manāfī and Khurṣānī (meaning that he was a member of a pan-Iranian gentility); but he would in that case have been a non-Muslim, and what the Banawī means is not that he is something other than an Arab, client or Khurṣānī, but rather that he is something in addition: his group has virtues which the others do not share.

Other sources make it clear that one could be an Arab and a Banawī alike. Ahmad b.

47 Cf. above, note 12; J. Lazen, The Singing of 'Abbāsid Rule (Princeton, 1966), ch. 5. The praise of the Turks was allegedly relayed to Tāhir, who died in 307/923 ("Turk", C. 56, l. 35 ṭ. 67).
48 "I will have described things correctly, the Banawī is a Khurṣānī, and if the Khurṣānī is a manāfī, and the manāfī is an Arab, then the Khurṣānī, Banawī, manāfī and Arab all come to a single class... the Turks are Khurṣānīs and manāfī of the caliph... and the merit of the Turk redounds to the whole community... If all the troops knew this, they would become sorcerers, ill-feeling would vanish and honour would die down" ("Turk", C. 34 (trans. ʿašr al-muḥāšrāt}); he also notes that the purpose is disciplinary is also argued by Lazen, Singing, p. 136, who does however envisage the five groups as (semi-)imaginary.)
49 The Arabs vaunt pre-Islamic characteristics of their men as illustrious memoritance of poetry and fondness for boating competitions adjudicated by king; the manāfī boast of their loyalty to their parents (C; 216, 226 L., 1, 13, t. 67, 647, 648), i.e. either claims military merit as a group distinct from the Khurṣānīs.
50 "Turk", C. 56, l. 31 n. 67; cf. Cione, Slaves, appendix V, no. 4.
51 "Turk", C. 56, l. 31 n. 67; cf. Cione, Slaves, appendix V, no. 4.
52 Cione, Slaves, appendix V, no. 17.
53 The Arabs claim "most of the nāfīs", the manāfī claim "the chief nāfīs", and the Khurṣānīs claim all twelve of them ("Turk", C. 14–22, 25, 12 L. 8, 1, 13, t. 14 n. 642, 647, 659). Ayākūn wrongly has the Arabs claim all of them ("Reforms", p. 2); and Zakerī wrongly assigns the Abnāʾ do so (pp. 273).
54 Cione, Slaves, appendix V, no. 26; cf. also Cione, Slaves, appendix V, no. 31–32. 11, 19, 7, 656 (lāb-nāfīs bāhram Abnāʾ min bāhram al-Ṭabātābāī)
55 "Turk", C. 26, l. 131, 14, 110, 18 n. 61; Zakerī, p. 277.

Patricia Cione
The "Abūdārān" and Sāmānī cavalrmen

We have then a peculiar problem. The sources identify the Abdārān as the physical descendants of the participants in such revolutions; and all the individuals described as Abdārān actually did or could descend from such participants; they include some Arabs. Yet with the exception of Qāṭaba's grandson, the descendants of the most prominent Arab participants are never characterized as Abdārān, and one is explicitly excluded from their ranks. How is this to be explained?

The answer must lie in the fourth civil war. Most participants in the 'Abbāsid revolution settled in Baghdād where their descendants supported al-'Abbāsī and continued to oppose al-Ma'mūn thereafter, with the result that the term Abdārān came to be synonymous with al-'Abbāsī's Baghdād adherents; sons of the revolutionaries who supported al-Ma'mūn ceased to count as Banūaws. The descendants of the best known abd al-dawla mosdyly did support al-Ma'mūn, whether they were Arabs by descent (the majority) or non-Arabs (such as Yabhā b. Ma'dīb b. Muslim); and so the only offspring of a famed participant in the revolution to be explicitly linked with the Abdārān is Abdāllāh b. Husayd b. Qātaba, who stayed in Baghdād to lead a role in the war on al-'Abbāsī's side.

This explanation makes effortless sense of al-Jāhiz. He lets the Abdārān define themselves as Baghdādīs of Khurāsān origin[24] and has them boast of the close relations with the caliphs that their domains entail,[25] though it was not in fact in Baghdād alone that they were found: other sources mention them in Khurāsān,[26] Tarāz,[27] the Jazīra,[28] al-Anbār,[29] Khurāsān[30] and North Africa.[31] It is their presence in the capital and implied political activities there that distinguish them from the Khurāsānīs in al-Jāhiz's scheme. He sees the Khurāsānīs as supporters of the first 'Abbāsid revolution and al-Ma'mūn's second dawla[32] alike,[33] and this is why he describes Husayd b. Abd āl-Ḥamid and Sa'd b. 'Uqba as Arabs and Khurāsānīs, but not Banūaws, though the former certainly and the latter possibly descended from abd al-dawla: both were supporters of al-Ma'mūn; it is in the context of their appearance at al-Ma'mūn's court that the description is given (by al-Ma'mūn himself in the case of Husayd). This is also why he could present Husayd as a positive enemy of the Abdārān: Husayd was biased against them, he explains, because they had opposed him in the days of Ḥasan b. Sahl, al-Ma'mūn's governor of Iraq, under the leadership of[34]...
them as sons of dhîqân, showing that they liked to see themselves as Iranian aristocrats; but even elevated non-Arab ancestry failed to carry the same prestige as descent from an Arab tribe, for the tribes had defended the kings and dhîqân to found the society in which the latter’s descendants were now trying to establish themselves. Hence the non-Arab members of the Abâbid army would stress their identity as Abâ’ and even call themselves Abânis, thus coining a prestigious title for themselves that Tâ’ils, Khūzâ’ils, Tamūnins or Dabûbs did not need.

In sum, the ethnic origin of the Abâ’ in the technical sense of sons of the abîl al-adwâ’a must have been as mixed as that of the abîl al-adwâ’a themselves. But the non-Arabs among them were particularly given to harping on their Banawi identity, and when the fourth civil war removed the largely Arab leadership of the Abâ’, they turned out to consist largely of non-Arabs underneath.

An Arab revolution?

There must then have been a sizeable number of non-Arabs among the abîl al-adwâ’a. This is a proposition that the secondary literature has long done its best to deny, but Zakeri is right that the tendency to belittle the role of Iranians in the revolution has gone too far. It is also a source of inconsistency, for the literature generally continues to maintain that the aim of the revolution was equality between Arabs and mansâbî even though it is no longer wishes mansâbî to have played a significant role in it, conjuring up a curious picture of Arabs kindly staging a revolution to grant equality to non-Arab Muslims who were too few to matter much, or too uninterested in the issue to participate, or too despised to be admitted to the equality-granting army. One may wish to reverse this picture, for “equality” is hardly the best word with which to summarize the aim of the revolutionaries whereas Iranians must in fact have participated on a major scale. Zakeri’s book is not the only sign that the “revisionist” trend in the literature is coming to an end. In an unpublished thesis of 1993 Saleh Said Agha also argues that the participants were mostly Iranians, basing himself on prosopographical evidence. Out of a total of 340 individuals known to have supported the Hâšimiyya in Khurasân he finds a mere 65 to have been Arabs. Collating his material with my own, and giving the Arabs rather than the Iranians the benefit of the doubt, I arrive at about 400 individuals (405 as things stand), of whom a generous third were necessarily with reference to their Iranian ancestry according to Ayalon, al-Amin was in the habit of bestowing crowns and bracelets on soldiers who had distinguished themselves (“Reform”, p. 38, without reference).

44 Abî Khâlid is, Mâṣûr al-sîki, ed. G. van Vloten (Leiden, 1883), p. 110. The passage could be about the Yezidi Abâ’, but it is conventionally taken to refer to the Abâbid variety, presumably because it is given the name of Banawi, otherwise only attested in al-Jârî (cf. above, note 45).

45 Still, who are the scholars who supposedly adduce “duhûn material where abîl al-sîkî, abîl al-udmûn, abîl fâdhilas (or), etc., seem sometimes to denote the Arab forces stationed in these areas” (Zakeri, p. 250)? It is a well-known fact that Syrian troops were stationed in Khurasân, but even the most recent supporters of the Arab hypothesis stop short of claiming that the Abâbid revolution was conducted by Syrians.

46 Daniel took issue with it almost twenty years ago; in his view, “No one group, racial or otherwise, dominated the ’Abî” (E. L. Daniel, The Political and Social History of Khurasan under Abâbid Rule (Minneapolis and Chicago, 1976), p. 36. See also again his “The ’Abî”, pp. 31-33), to be the consistency of the Abâbid Revolution in the Mezv oasis”, Journal of Islamic Studies, VII (1996), with a helpful survey of the history of the “Arab”/”revisionists” thesis at p. 155n.

47 S. S. Agha, “The agents and forces that toppled the Umayyad Caliphate”, PhD, Toronto, 1993, p. 415. I am grateful to Aziz Al-Ameen, Matthew Gordon and Chase Robinson for drawing my attention to this work.
certainly or probably abnā’ al-‘arab usūl al-arāh, as al-Jāḥiz would have called them (144 in all, of whom 70 were certainly of Arab descent in so far as certainly is possible); another generous third were certainly or probably non-Arabs (148 in all, of whom 91 are certain), while the rest (i.e. 113) have names too fragmentary and appear too rarely to be identified. Even if we count the latter as Arabs, Iranians constituted a generous third of the named participants, the vast majority of whom were commanders; there would have been fewer men of Arab origin at the lower echelons. But Agba is undoubtedly right to count the unidentified men as non-Arabs, thus reducing the abnā’ al-‘arab to a third (by my reckoning) or a fifth (by his) of the total at the higher levels. After all, the revolutionary troops came from Marw, Marwarrād, Balkh, Kish, Nasaf, Ta‘āq, Ṣagḥānīyān, Taqkānīs, Khurātīn, Nāṣr, Ḥārāt, Bāshāns, Ablīwār, Sarakhs, Tūs and Nishapur according to al-Dīnawārī,108 the soldiers settled by al-Ma‘ṣūr in Baghdad came from Marw, Marwarrād, Balkh, Bokhārā, Sogdiana, Isfahān, Fārs, Kujār, Rā'ibāt, Khurātīn, Bāshāns, Farghān, Khuwarīzma, Jīlān, Dīlān, Ray, Kārmān and Kiyūb (with a few from outside Iraq as well) according to al-Ya‘qūbī;109 and one could hardly get an overwhelmingly Arab army together by recruiting in such places. The Arabs had never been more than a minority in Khurātīn, let alone in Iran at large, and since many of them fought against the revolutionaries, there would not have been enough of them to go around. Besides, the widespread fear among the Umayyads and their governors that the revolutionaries were recently converted or semi-conversional Zoroastrians bent on the extermination of the Arabs and Islam alike makes no sense unless the majority of revolutionaries were Iranians.110 It is true that the abnā’ al-‘arab among them were Iranianized, but Persian-speaking though they might be, even such as Sulaymān b. Kāhir al-Khuwāṣṭī’s or Qāṭāba b. Shābāb al-Ṭal’ī’s hardly lent themselves to presentation as enemies of the Arab and Islam with any degree of plausibility. Recruits such as Marzubān b. Fārsī,111 Turākhūdā, Abrūhzūkā, al-Īshākhānji, Shabbī b. Wāji, Zuwārāch b. Bokhārā, Māhān b. Zanjānī,112 Suntābā,113 or Ḥakīm b. Ḥakīm (better known as al-Muqānā)114 were a different matter.

To the Umayyads (as to nineteenth-century Islamicists), the revolution was too all too suggestive of an Iranian restorationist movement, and what is surprising is precisely that it was not. Its avowed aim was the restoration of the Prophet’s polity under a member of his family, not of the Sāsid empire.115 The inner core of the movement, including the twelve Ṿafīs, were people of Arab and Iranian descent whose membership of Muslim

108 I hope to publish this material elsewhere.


110 YB, pp. 249-50.

111 Cf. Na`īr b. Sayyār’s celebrated poems (Dīnawārī, p. 682; Ibn Aṭā‘ī’s, viii, pp. 367; Maṣʿūdī, Muqānā, vi, p. 62; ed. Féral, iv, p. 2286); Abū l-‘Umdād b. Yūsuf’s al-Sha‘rī’s (in his Rūzūd, ed. F. ‘Abū ‘AbdAllāh Muhammad ibn Qayyīm al-‘AbdAllāh, 1998, nos. 8, 10; the alleged order to kill all Arab-speakers of Arabic in Khurātīn (Tab., ii, pp. 1937, 1974; iii, p. 213; Dīnawārī, p. 356; Ashī, p. 1097), and the denial of charges of cat worship and the like in AA, p. 282.


113 YB, pp. 248-49, on the plot for himself and his troops in Baghdad. He was the father of Asad b. al-Marzūbān, who also participated in the revolution (AA, pp. 345, 370; Tab., ii, p. 16; BA, iii, p. 139).

114 Below, notes 140-141; YB, p. 242.

115 On whose revolt after Abū Mus‘īb’s death, see BA, iii, p. 2496.


117 Post-Zakeri, p. 280.
Arabic at all; the Abnā’ did include Arabs in this sense. But Arabs in the high cultural sense were members of an elite distinguished from all these diverse local groups by their use of the same classical Arabic language and their participation in the same uniform high culture regardless of where they hailed from originally; all the Abnā’ were “Arabs” in this sense. This meaning is not familiar to the sources, however. They always use the word to mean ethnic Arabs and duly distinguish the Abnā’ from them,116 so we had better do the same. Collectively, the Abnā’ were neither Arabs nor Iranians, but an elite creame off from both.

Elad is however right that their orientation was Arabocentric. Although they were not Arabs, their sympathies were with al-muwaṣṣaṭa wa’l-‘arab, as Sarkhshān observed.117 The latter, a participant in the Māzāṟū’s revolt in Tabaristān in 224/838, regarded “Abbāsid loyalty and philo-Arab sentiment as inseparable, and so they clearly were to the Abnā’ themselves. Supporting the regime meant siding with the Arabs because the religion in the same of which the Muslim empire had been created still could not survive without allegiance to its original carriers. As a conquer elite the original carriers had ceased to exist. Most of the Arabs with whom Sarkhshān expected the Abnā’ to side were probably Arabized mawāli.118 But the Arabs still supplied the caliphal dynasty, the high cultural language and an identity over and above that of the conquered peoples, and it was to these emblems of high-cultural unity that the Abnā’ professed their allegiance. Hence they equated Arabs with right guidance and looked askance at al-Ma’mūn’s freshly recruited Khurāṣāns, whom everyone perceived as ‘ājam, that is, assimilated, half converted or unconverted Iranians (and who were of course rivals for their status too).119 O Abnā’, O sons of kings and friends of swords, they are ‘ājam’, ‘Abd al-Rahmān b. Jabala al-Abnāwī exclaimed to his troops when they were confronted with Tāhir’s army.120 Tāhir’s ‘ājam were raw Iranians, people who had failed to transcend their local origins by participation in the high culture, and this was the key difference between them and a Banāwī of Iranian descent such as ‘Abd al-Rahmān b. Jabala himself. The Abnā’ regarded Tāhir’s caliphate as a bulwark against such people, who might otherwise absorb them and in whose ranks they no doubt included Sarkhshān and Māzāṟū. It is for this reason that al-Ma’mūn’s kindness for ‘ājam and transfer of the caliphate to an ‘Aid came across to them as a Zoroastrian plot. Muhammad b. Abī Khālid, the Banāwī shaykh ḥabīb al-ḥabībīn who expelled al-Ḥasan b. Sahl from Baghdad, told a grandson of al-Manṣūr’s that “We are the

116 Cf. the following note.

117 Tab. iii, p. 1273. 117, cf. pp. 1273. 116, 1274. 16, where the Abnā’ and Abnā’ are listed separately, and p. 1278. 3, where the Abnā’ are distinguished from the local population as ‘ājam al-munāfiqin. ‘

118 The same goes for the troops that Elad sees as “comprised exclusively of Arab tribes”, cf. the fact that his first reference is to all the 3000 Banāwī and mawāli (”Transition”, p. 107).

119 Cf. Tab. iii, p. 1302. 16, on the killers of Al-Arum (qamūn mawāli); Kirdi, Khurasan, p. 184. 4, on ‘Abd Allah b. Tāhir’s troops in Egypt (they were guarded and were called ‘ājam also al-khurāṣānī); Tab. iii, p. 114. 5; Ibn Tayfūr, ed. Kawthari, p. 144. 1 ed. Keller, p. 306 (a Syrian held al-Ma’mūn to favour the ‘ājam of Khurāṣa); Aqīl, Masqūl, p. 344. 11 (Nāy b. Shahbūt was of the same opinion). Al-Ma’mūn entered Baghdad with ‘ājam carrying bows and arrows (Ibn Tayfūr, ed. Kawthari, p. 16. 5 ed. Keller, p. 115). When al-Ma’mūn praised the ‘ājam of Khurāṣa, a commander in his presence responded this was nothing more than ‘ājam b. Kheyrābīn al-munāfiqin, i.e. the homeborn Khurāṣānīs (cf. above, note 114). A’ayyār b. ‘Abd al-Hamīd also distinguished the Abnā’ from the ‘ājam (here possibly non-Mu’tazilis) of Khurāṣa, cf. below, note 147.


120 Tab. iii, p. 129. 3, elad, “Transition”, p. 104, note 68; Hoffmann, “Podols”, p. 3, on the two mace of the Abnā’ saw themselves as Arabs. Note also that Ibn Tayfūr wrote a booke on saqf al-‘arab alli l-‘arab ( Ibn al-Nadīm, Fihāk, pp. 165 f., above, note 74).
of Arab and non-Arab descent, though Arab prejudice against maśūli had by no means disappeared. How the Arab Khurāsānīs maintained their Janābīs face as fellow-tribemen for one purpose and a supra-ethnic elite for another is not easy to say, but it testifies to the importance of the dawla in their identity. Had they seen themselves as ethnic Arabs, they would have feuded as much as their Umayyad predecessors.

Social origin

Did the Iranian Abnā’ descend from Sāsānid cavalrymen? To a large extent the answer has to be negative. The fact that they liked to see themselves as sons of kings and dhūqān evidently does not mean that this is what they actually were.129 Some were certainly not.130 The term Abnā’ is not in itself a clue to social origins, and when al-Jāḥiz lets the Abnā’ boast that “We are foster-brothers of the caliphs and neighbours of vissers; we have been born in the courts of our kings and under the wings of our caliphs,” they are not boasting of the past relationship with the Sāsānid emperors, but of their current relationship with the ‘Abbāsīd caliphs: kings is simply a synonym for caliphs here.131

Nonetheless, Sāqāfi has a point, provided that one does not take the word “Sāsānid” too seriously. The Sāsānid ḥābišān ṣāḥibīn that Zakariya has in mind were dhūqān and recruits of non-arabian origin who had received allotments of land and/or cash payments in return for military service from Khurāsān I (d. 579) onwards;132 but he does not explain how they survived a century of unemployment. He is right that some dhūqān are often mentioned in Umayyad Khurāsān, and some of the Ṣawira who had deserted to the Arabs during the conquests also appear in that province.133 But it will go all above all the non-Muslim rulers who had ḥanāfī ‘aqlaṣṭa wa ’l-‛aṣṣā¢a at their disposal,134 and few of their horsesmen will have been Sāsānid in the sense of originating in Khurāsān’s reforms. In the context of the ‘Abbāsīd revolution this is not important, however. The Ḥābitānīyana could no doubt have found Iranian cavalrymen in the retinues of local landlords and rulers who converted to Islam after the fashion of the Buhārīs and Sāmānkhānīs,135 and they do seem to have done so on a larger scale than normally envisaged. Turākhānī, one of the Khurāsānīs who rebelled with ‘Abdallāh b. Ali in Syria in 157/7554, was mašībīd la’ājīn kimāsanī, presumably from Turākh in Isfahān.136 The Abzāzīhānī who appears in a Khurāsānī army sent against a Khānijī in the Jazīra in 137/7545 will have been the squire of Abnā’ā, a village near Shīkhūf.137 A descendant of Ṣalāḥ, Ṣalāḥ al-muṣalāt, claimed aristocratic descent for his ancestor, who was, he said, a recruit of Abnā’ūs Muslims, from Bālaṣūn Ṡinā‘ al-muṣalāt khurāsānī and who was associated with other muṣalāt ṣalāḥ khurāsānī in Bagdād, including a certain Khārṣa and Shābī b. Wajj,138 a well-known participant in the revolution elsewhere identified as a Marwārī.139 Al-Iṣḥākīhānī, the father of Ḥābit b. al-Iṣḥākīhānī, was presumably the ruler of Isfahān, the area north-west of Samarqand elsewhere known as Isfahān.140 In any case, he and Zuwārā b. Buhārī b. al-Kirrānī, who both supported the revolt of Jāhār b. (al-)Muṣṭaṣr al-‘Ijīrī (another member of the abnā’ al-dawla), in western Iran in 138/7556, are described as wukhābí ṣuṣrīn al-ajamīn,141 No doubt there were more of their kind.

Later military role

Though the Ḥābitānīyana recruited Iranian cavalrymen, the descendants of the abnā’ al-dawla familiar to al-Jāḥiz were not noted for their cavalry skills. Al-Jāḥiz describes the Abnā’ as infantry par excellence, in contrast to the Khurāsānīs (i.e. al-Ma‘mūn’s troops) and the Turks. His Abnā’ boasts of the long lances they use as infantry and vaunt their ability to fight at the entrances to trenches, the heads of bridges, in streets and prairies, and to kill people in markets and alleys.142 Ḥumayd b. Abū al-Hasan alludes to the Abnā’ use long lances comparable to those of the ‘ajam at the entrances to trenches and defiles and notes that their ability to fight in such places, as well as in streets and prairies, is unrivalled. But Ḥumayd’s compliment is barbed, for he adds that actually armies depend on cavalry: infantry is always inferior, especially as horsemen who dismount are better at fighting on foot than are infantrymen fighting on horseback.143 Al-Jāḥiz does not deny that the Abnā’ are horsemen too: he lets them boast of the short spears they use as cavalrymen,144 and one passage incidentally refers to favāris min al-ḥāṣarīn wa’t-abnā’ wa-ṣawīzīn. But as he sees it, their merit lies in their versatility rather than in cavalry skills. They could fight on foot and on horseback, on land and by sea, by day and by night, in villages and in urban quarters.145 They were equally good with the sword, lance and arrows, as Nasr b. Shabāb

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130 Tab. iii, p. 365. See also ibid., vol. 1, p. 125.
132 Everyone who could not pass for an Arab would present himself as a non-Arab of the most exalted kind, cf. the royal descent claimed by Ḥābit b. Band (Aḥfūn, iii, p. 123; cf. Zakariya, pp. 365) and by local rulers in Iran (C. E. Bosworth, “The heritage of rulehip in early Islamic Iran and the search for dynastic connections with the past,” Iran, XI, 1973). Differently Sāqāfi, p. 289.
133 Cf. the cattle-driven ‘Abdulwālah (above, note 68) or Shāhī b. Bumak, who owed his presence in Muslim society to enslavement and whose previous status was in any case not that of an Arab, often identify the leader of a Buddhist monastery (c. E. Bosworth, “Abū Ḥāfīz al-Khurāsānī and the rise of the Barmakids,” Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, LVII (1994), ed.), pp. 250, 275-276).
134 “Turk.” C, 28 (with additions for tab.: l. 1/16 = 6537. Zakariya, 275. Zakariya also claims that the Abnā’is honoured their troops with the title al-‘abnā’, but his examples refer to tenth-century soldiers who were described as al-dawla in the literal sense of ‘as opposed to ghanīm’ (p. 276 and note 88).”
135 Tab. iii, p. 365.
136 Tab. iii, p. 365. See also ibid., vol. 1, p. 126. See also ibid., vol. 1, p. 127.
137 Tab. iii, p. 365. See also ibid., vol. 1, p. 126. See also ibid., vol. 1, p. 127.
138 Tab. iii, p. 365. See also ibid., vol. 1, p. 126. See also ibid., vol. 1, p. 127.
139 Tab. iii, p. 365. See also ibid., vol. 1, p. 126. See also ibid., vol. 1, p. 127.
140 Tab. iii, p. 365. See also ibid., vol. 1, p. 126. See also ibid., vol. 1, p. 127.
141 Tab. iii, p. 365. See also ibid., vol. 1, p. 126. See also ibid., vol. 1, p. 127.
142 Tab. iii, p. 365. See also ibid., vol. 1, p. 126. See also ibid., vol. 1, p. 127.
143 Tab. iii, p. 365. See also ibid., vol. 1, p. 126. See also ibid., vol. 1, p. 127.
144 Tab. iii, p. 365. See also ibid., vol. 1, p. 126. See also ibid., vol. 1, p. 127.
145 Tab. iii, p. 365. See also ibid., vol. 1, p. 126. See also ibid., vol. 1, p. 127.
al-Uqaylī declares in the boasting competition in Ibn Tayfūr.151 Nasr b. Shabath and al-Jāḥiṣ also agree that the Abnāʾ had a great capacity for endurance.152 But it is the Khurāsānī and the Turks who are the great horsemen in al-Jāḥiṣ’s tract, and it is the Khurāsānīs who are made to boast of their šahruḵyā steeds, elegant posture in the saddle and manufacture of stirrups, not the Abnāʾ as Zakeri would have it.153

Ayyālones al-Jāḥiṣ to say that “there was amongst the Abnāʾ a sizeable body of excellent infantrymen”,154 but al-Jāḥiṣ describes all the Abnāʾ as infantrymen prior to siege, not just a section of them. Lasser assumes al-Jāḥiṣ’s account to reflect the Abnāʾ’s performance in the siege of Baghdad,155 and Zakeri takes this idea to extremes. According to him, al-Jāḥiṣ describes the Abnāʾ as impoverished soldiers reduced to infantry, which “corresponds to their status in the time of Abūl, when the majority of them were footsoldiers and went to battle without horses.”156 By this he means, apparently, that the Abnāʾ had merged with the Baghdadīs plebs (ʿstreet vendors, naked ones, people from the prisons, riffraff, rabble, cutpurses and people of the market’),157 who fought with unexpected fierceness in the siege of Baghdad and who were also Iranians in Zakeri’s opinion: “It is rather amazing how closely al-Jāḥiṣ’s description of the khurāsān correspondence with the activity of the ayānūn under the siege of Baghdad”, he observes.158 But this construction is impossible. The Abnāʾ did not go into battle without horses in the time of Abūl, who would have been extremely short of horses had that been the case, and they obviously were not identical with the Baghdadīs rabble.159 They supplied 50,000 (or 40,000) horsemen and infantrymen to fight under Abūl b. Gīyāl in 195/8101 and 20,000 (or 30,000) men, including farrāb al-abnāʾ, to fight under Abūl b. Qaṭādāb b. Jadāl b. Abnāʾ in the same year. When the latter fell, they elected him as a ṣāhib.160 They likewise described Muḥammad b. Abī Khālid as their šaykh, kātir and farrāb,161 and in 201/816 the troops of Ḥāl b. Muhammad b. Abī Khālid al-Abnāʾī added up to 125,000 cavalrymen and footsoldiers.162 Conversely, there were of course both cavalrymen and footsoldiers in Tāhir’s army.163

One could not fight a serious battle without both.

Al-Jāḥiṣ’s account of the Abnāʾ’s military skills probably does not reflect their performance in the siege, but rather their military role in al-Jāḥiṣ’s own day. For their superiority in combat at the entrances of trenches and defiles (al-khanādīq wa-l-mudāiyāq)

154 “Reform,” p. 32.
155 Shaping, p. 135; accepted by Hoffmann, “Pöbel,” p. 36.
156 Zakeri, pp. 288.
157 Tab. iii, p. 373 (Fishebnī’s translation).
158 Zakeri, p. 287; cf. also pp. 284f., where the ayānūn’s costume, or rather lack thereof, is adduced in favour of their Iranian descent. (Generally speaking, every non-Arab is an Iranian asbū in this book.)
159 Cf. Hoffmann, “Pöbel,” pp. 31f.
160 Tab. iii, p. 817, where the troops number 30,000 and are described as all Baghdadī, cf. p. 824, 15, where “Abūl b. Gīyāl addressed them as maʾlūk al-ʿamalī”. He had 40,000 men according to YT, ii, p. 320; Abūl, Manṣūrī, p. 323, 7, and 40,000 horsemen according to Ibn Kāthir, al-Bahā’i wa-l-Mudāiyāq (Cairo, 1313–14), x, p. 226, 13; CE, above, note 65, for the family.
161 Tab. iii, p. 827, 4; al-Mudāiyāq (Cairo, 1313–14), x, p. 394 (for the figure 30,000). Cf. above, note 68, for the family.
162 Tab. iii, p. 843, 14; cf. p. 1007, 16.
163 Tab. iii, p. 1007f. Cf. below, note 67, for the family.
164 Tab. iii, p. 831, 11–14.
165 It was opposed to the Šāfiʿīya and it is first mentioned in 355/966, in connection with the pre-history of the Zanj revolt (Tab. iii, pp. 1745, 1747 and passim.).
166 Practically the same phrase recurs in the story of Khālid b. Yaʿṣūr in the manhūtī of the Muḥallīḥiyya, in al-Jāḥiṣ, al-Dāhiliyya, ed. T. al-Ḥājjī (Cairo, 1398), p. 92. “Ask the Khālīfah, Khāliyya, Khurāsānī, Bibiyya... about me”. But it is no more informative. For the name Khāliyya, see E. Bosworth, The Medieval Islamic Underworld (Leiden, 1979), i, p. 236, 43 (drawn to my attention by A. Elia).
167 Cf. his reference to the Bibiyya, who may not have existed in al-Maʾṣūmi’s time, but who certainly did in al-Jāḥiṣ’s days (above, notes 167–8).
169 Tab. iii, pp. 20, 12 (where the shield wall is stationary); Abūl, Manṣūrī, pp. 1028, 12 (where it advances towards the enemy). Compare C. Warren Halliwell, Asia’s wars of the East (1965), pp. 132f.