The ‘Abbasid Abna’ and Sāsānid Cavalrymen

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In a recent publication of great interest M. Zakeri has reopened the question of the identity of the Abna’ who appear in the early ‘Abbasid army. 1 Once assumed to be the physical descendants of the ‘Abbasid caliphs, 2 or the ‘Abbasids and their adoptive members and clients, 3 the abna’ al-daula/al-da’wa’al-shi’ti were shown by Ayaloo in 1966 to be “in all probability, the descendants of the Khurṣānīs who brought the ‘Abbasid to the throne”. 4 This has been generally accepted. In Zakeri’s opinion, however, the Abna’ were not “sons of the Revolution”, but rather sons of Sāsānid horsemen (ashāb); their ancestors had been members of the lower nobility that furnished the cavalry of the Sāsānid empire after Khurṣān I’s reforms. In Zakeri’s opinion, the revolutionary troops consisted primarily of such recruits, and so the conventional view is one sense quite correct: the Abna’ did indeed end up 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 aligning themselves with Sāsānid ashāb that the ‘Abbasid came to power.

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

1 2

The term Abna’

Zakeri’s identification of the Abna’ as descendants of the lower nobility of the Sāsānids rests first and foremost on the term Abna’ itself. Members of the Sāsānid gentry were known in Persian as ad-dānim, “free (men)”, and so their descendants were called abna’ al-ābrār, “sons of I should like to thank Amira Eltahawy, Chase Robinson and Luke Treadwell for most helpful criticism of earlier drafts of this article. The following abbreviations have been used: AA: see note 61; Aḥmad: see note 60. B: see note 60. B: see note 61. El: Deyyalau, second edition. Tab: see note 2. Tab. see note 8. “Tūk,” C and L: see note 12. YB: see note 37. YB: see note 25.


3 B. Lewis in Elu, s.v. “abna’”.


JEAS, No 3, 1(1) 1998, pp. 3–10
the free" in Arabic.5 The soldiers despatched by Khurraz I to conquer Yemen were Persians, and so their descendants in Yemen were called abna’ al-fars/al-farin, "sons of Persian/Persia", or ab-na’ah for short.6 The troops that raised the "Abbasids to the throne were known as ablu al-da’ula, "sons of the revolution/new era/dynasty", or al-Abna’ for short. Zaki notes that in each case it is the term abna’ that carries the ethnic and social connotations, not the word with which it is in construct, and so the very term Abna’ comes to mean Persian gentry: "Whether in Yemen, Khurrazan, or Baghdad, they were similar in origin, social background, and attachment to the cavalry traditions of the Sasanids. The titles banah, abanah, abna’, etc. were used only when the Persian nobles and landlords were involved."7

But the tacit assumption is wrong, of course, as Zaki 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.8 But if it is discarded, there is no reason why abna’ al-abnari, abna’ al-farin and abna’ al-da’ula 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. Abna’ simply means "descendants".

The descendants of the Sasanid gentry were usually known in Arabic as abna’ al-abnari, rather than simply abna’, because the policy in which they had been abna’ no longer existed: they were not gentry, but gentry of descent.9 The Yemeni abna’ al-farin 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 Persian expedition to India in the reign of al-Mahdi is characterized as min abna’ al-nilah; he was a Batin of Syrian origin.10 When al-Mutawakkil is described as sitting with abna’ al-arab in 232/847, the reference is to soldiers of Turkish parentage born in Iraq.11 Al-Jazari observes that the Khurrazan abna’ al-abnari u1-al-nilah whose fathers settled in Farghana look the same as the natives of Farghana, that there is no difference between abna’ al-nilah and abna’ al-nilahibat (takhibat)12 and that people automatically assume the abna’ al-nilah u1-al-nilahibyat to be u1-al-nilah;13 here the reference

5 Zaki, pp. 190ff, 256ff.
6 Elia, "Abna’", cf. also the references in Zaki, pp. 138ff.
7 Zaki, p. 189. Note also his conviction that the subgroup of 'Tasman known as the Abna’ must have been Iranian by origin (pp. 240ff).
8 Unspoken nature does generate tensions at times, e.g. p. 275, where he says that the term abna’ al-abnari means "sons of the revolution". In the latter, if there were more in common with abna’ al-abnari than with any, say, abna’ al-nilahibat or abna’ al-nilahibat: On assumes he would invoke word-play (the Abna’ in the Persian sense were legitimized as Abna’ in the revolutionary sense), but he never confronts the question.
9 Zaki, p. 267, explains abna’ al-nilah in an Arianic meaning the same as abna’ al-nilah in reference to Th. Noldeke, Geschichte der Persen und Andern zur Zeit der Sassaniden (Leiden, 1979), p. 231ff. But Noldeke’s Aramization is based on ‘ābān, and the frequency with which the gentry are called abna’ is pre-Islamic contexts (e.g. Zaki, pp. 209, 267ff), "abna’ al-nilahibat, suggests that the later extension is idiomatic Arabic.
10 Tab. iii, abna’ (year 159).
11 Tab. iii, 1568-78.

The spread of the evidence

There cannot, in fact, have been Abna’ in this sense before about 780, a generation after the revolution, nor do references to them become common until the reign of al-Rashid (786-809). From the more common term for the "Abbasid troops, whatever their generation, is abh khurrazan.24

The Abnā’ are first mentioned in al-Ya’qub’s statement that ‘Iṣa b. ‘Ali wa-man hadara min al-abna’ were reluctant to inform ‘Abdallah b. ‘Ali of the Mamluk’s accession (in 136/754). If the conventional exposition of the term is correct, its appearance here must be anachronistic.25 It is certainly isolated. The next reference comes in 161/776, when al-Mahdi summoned the kuttāb abna’ al-da‘wa and told Yahyā b. Khālid b. Barmak that he had examined "the lists of the sons of my party (abna’ shafii) and the people of my revolution/dynasty (abna’ da‘ulla)"; Yahyā b. Khālid, whom he picked from these lists, was in fact a son of a participant in the revolution.26 Al-Mahdi also equated the abh khurrazan of his time with

14 Rabi’, "Turk”, C, 8:3, L, 41 = 616.
15 Rabi’, "Turk”, C, 26:1, L, 15 = 615.
16 Below, below page 53. This and the following expression may of course also refer to people of civilis Khusrau Hatim. Not all the arab scholars described as abna’ dhikhan before transferred from members of the Khurrazan army (e.g. Ibn Sa’d, al-Tafaqqh al-Buruni (Beirut, 1957-60), vii, pp. 134, 342 u1-al-nilah, 349, 345-1 (third), 349, 400; but some clearly did (148, 190).
18 Below, note 72.
19 Below, notes 27, 29, 32, 34, Tab. iii, 11599.
21 Below, notes 26, 29, 68; ‘Idlib, "Turk", C, 26:1, L, 15 = 615.
22 ‘Idlib, "Turk", p. 275, who sets up a contrast between morphological "sons of the revolution" and literal "sons of the revolutionaries".
26 Tab. iii, p. 408; Elia, "Abna’", p. 139."
Abna' al-dawla/dawla in his famous account of why he preferred freedmen to them (told sub anno 164/785); informed that the ala khwarazim were likely to be alienated by this preference, he responded that freedmen did not wax proud and could be asked to do anything where another (i.e. a Khurâsânî) would invoke his status as "the son of your dawla and veteran in your da'wa and the son of a man who learned to your cause (man sabhaq ila da'wa'atikâ)."

Under Hârûn al-Rashid the theme is encountered with greater frequency. By his time there was a large number of abna' al-ala khwarazm in Madînat Abî 'Amr 'AbdAllâh mawla al-Rashid. In 189/804 the Khurâsânîs asked Hârûn to replace 'Abî b. 'Isâ with someone from kufî Khârijî wa-anjûnhu wa-abnâ' al-dawla wa-qâwûdhî,29 in 192/807 a number of abna' al-ala'î with Râfi' b. Lâykh abandoned the latter in Khurâsân;30 in 193/808 Hârîm b. Harâmah recruited 1,000 Abnâ' (in Baghdâd) for service in Egypt;31 and according to Ibn al-Nadîm, the jurist al-Sayyâbînî (d. 198/814) was harassed by a certain al-Rawandî, who used to gather the muwâhidînh abna' al-dawla in the mosque in which al-Sayyâbînî taught; al-Rawandî would read his kitâb al-dawla to his followers and they would yell at al-Sayyâbînî's pupils when the latter tried to recite their master's works.32 There are also a couple of other passages referring to Hârûn's reign.33

But as Ayâlôn observes, it is above all in connection with the fourth civil war (841-13) and its aftermath that the Abnâ' are mentioned. They formed the backbone of al-Abnî's army and went into battle against Thâhir under 'Alî b. 'Isâ, 'AbdAllâh b. Humayd b. Qâbbata and 'Abd al-Râjîmân b. Jabal al-Abnî; they famously came to blows with the Syrian soldiers, known as Zawâlîn, that al-Abnî had recruiited for his crusade in 196/811; and they (as well as the mob) were the defenders of Baghdâd when Thâhir laid siege to it; al-Abnî died with a cry for a saviour from their ranks.34 They remained prominent after his death and resumed the struggle against al-Ma'tân when the latter stayed in Khurâsân, and above all in 201/817 when he designated 'Abî al-Rîdâlî as his heir apparent.35 They also appear in two military muwâhidînh (by al-Jâhiz and Ibn Taymîyya) set at al-Ma'tân's coun.36

Thereafter the references begin to peter out again. It was friction between the Turks and the Abnâ', the Hârîbiyya troops and/or the Baghdâdî masses that caused al-Ma'tân to move to Sâmarqand,37 where such Abnâ' as went with him appear to have been registered in the dwâm al-jând wa'l-shâkhîyât.38 Most of them probably remained in Baghdâd, where they appear in 249/863, clamorous for pay along with the Shâkhîyât,39 in whose company they are mentioned again in 251/865. Sâmarqand they are mentioned in the aftermath of al-Mutawakkîl's murder in 474/885,40 again in the following year when they fought the Turks over the accession of al-Mu'tamîn,41 and finally under al-Muhtadî (555/1162-70), who unsuccessfully tried to play them against the Turks.42 There do not seem to be any references to their presence in the army thereafter.

The chronological spread of the evidence is thus a good deal more consistent with Ayâlôn's understanding of the word than with Zakeri's,43 for had the Abnâ' owed their name to their descent from Iranian gentility, one would have expected the term to appear with particular frequency in accounts of the revolution itself and the reigns of the first 'Abbâsid caliphs, when 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 had time to recede.

Ethnic origin

If the Abnâ' were descendants of the awk al-dawla, as proposed by Ayâlôn, they were of mixed Arab and non-Arab origin. If they were descendants of the abnâ', as proposed by Zakeri, they were of Iranian origin by definition. The leader of the 'Abbâsid revolution included several men of Arab origin whose descendants remained prominent down to the reign of al-Ma'tân, such as Qâbbata b. Shâhîb al-'Isâ, Khâznân b. Khawzâm al-Tâmînî, Mu'sâyyb b. Zuhayr al-Dâbbî or Mîlîk b. al-Haythâm al-Khuzâ'î, and Zakeri's thesis highlights one striking fact: with one exception, no descendant of these men is explicitly identified as a Banâwî or called an Abnâ'î in the sources. They are often described as Abnâ'î in the secondary literature, but this merely goes to show that modern scholars routinely extend the Banâwî label to all offspring of the participants in the revolution. The sources do not. In fact, al-Jâhiz positively withholds the label from one of them in his Munâfiq al-târîkh.

In this work al-Jâhiz famously describes the caliphal army of his own time as consisting of Arabs, mawwâlî, Khurâsânîs, Abnâ'î and Turks and stages a boasting competition between...
these groups, set in the time of al-Ma'mun. The five groups are not bounded units such as regiments, but rather overlapping categories, for the purpo-se of the treatise is to show that anyone can be classified as anything and that rivalry based on labels of this kind is therefore mistaken. With the exception of the Turks, all the groups boast partly of their contribution to the revolution (i.e. as Khorāshāni) and partly of features unique to themselves (i.e. as Arabs, mawdūd, Khurāshān and Abnā, of whom only the last two are envisaged as soldiers). One would thus expect a descendant of an Arab participant in the revolution to appear as an Arab, a Khurāshān 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 Khurāshān, but not as a Banawī. So too is Sa‘d b. ‘Uqba b. Sā‘īn al-Hunayn, which may or may not be significant since we do not know whether his father participated in the Khurāshān phase of the revolution. Al-Jāhī’s failure to identify Humayd as a Banawī is not inadvertent, for he presents him as an actual enemy of the Abnā in another episode, saying that he was biased against them (‘alī asqa‘a ‘ālī abnā ‘ālī khurāshān). When Ya‘qūbī describes the Abnā as attacking Zuhayr b. al-Musayyab al-Dabbi, he similarly excludes from their ranks a man who was a Banawī in Ayyān’s sense of descendant of a participant in the revolution.

Were Humayd and Zuhayr excluded from Banawī status because they were Arabs? It does not seem likely. Al-Jāhī presents the Khurāshān as ethnically mixed and identifies the Abnā as Khurāshān by origin, so he hardly shares Zuhayr’s view that they were Iranians by definition. He lets the Banawī contrast his own title with that of the mawdūd and the Arab in one passage, and with that of the Arab and the Khurāshān in another, and Zakeri takes this to mean that the Banawī was something other than an Arab, mawdūd and Khurāshān (meaning that he was a member of a pan-Iranian gentry), but in that case have been a non-Muslim, and what the Banawī means is not that he is something other than an Arab, client of Khurāshān, 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.
have then a peculiar problem. The sources identify the Abnā' as the physical descendants of the participants in the revolution, and all the individuals described as Abnā' actually did or could descend from such participants; they include some Arabs. Yet with the exception of Qāhsba’s grandson, the descendants of the most prominent Arab participants are never characterized as Abnā’, and one is explicitly excluded from these ranks. How is this to be explained?

The answer must lie in the fourth civil war. Most participants in the ‘Abbasid revolution settled in Baghdaḍ where their descendants supported al-Ma‘ṣūm in the conflict and continued to oppose al-Ma‘ṣūm thereafter, with the result that the term Abnā’ came to be synonymous with al-Ma‘ṣūm’s Baghdādi adherents; sons of the revolutionaries who supported al-Ma‘ṣūm ceased to count as Banwais. The descendants of the best known al-dhul-al-daula modestly did support al-Ma‘ṣūm, whether they were Arabs by descent (the majority) or non-Arabs (such as Yahyā b. Muṣṭafā b. Mu‘āttārum;[94]) and so the only offspring of a famed participant in the revolution to be explicitly linked with the Abnā’ is ‘Abdāl-lāh b. Ḥumayyāb, who stayed in Baghdaḍ to take a leading role in the war on al-Ma‘ṣūm’s side. This explanation makes sense of al-Jāḥiẓ’s report that the Abnā’ define themselves as Banwais of Khurāṣan origin[95] and have thus been abandoned by the caliph that their domicile entails,[96] though it was not in fact in Baghdaḍ alone that they were found: other sources mention them in Khurāṣan.[97] Taṣrīḥ, the Jazīra,[98] al-Anbār, Tabaristan[99] and North Africa.[100] It is their residence in the capital and implied political activities that distinguish them from the Khurāṣani in al-Jāḥiẓ’s scheme. He sees the Khurāṣanis as supporters of the first ‘Abbasid revolution and al-Ma‘ṣūm’s second da‘wa alike,[101] and this is why he describes Ḥumayyāb b. ‘Abd-al-Hādī and Sa‘īd b. ‘Uqba as Arabs and Khurāṣanis, but not Banwais, though the former certainly and the latter possibly descended from al-dhul-al-daula: both were supporters of al-Ma‘ṣūm; it is in the context of their appearance at al-Ma‘ṣūm’s court that the description is given (by al-Ma‘ṣūm himself in the case of Ḥumayyāb). This is also why he could present Ḥumayyāb as a positive enemy of the Abnā’. Ḥumayyāb was biased against them, he explains, because they had opposed him in the days of al-Ḥasan b. Sahl, al-Ma‘ṣūm’s governor of Iraq, under the leadership of[97]: Sīlah b. Ḵāṭirah: another poet whom abnā’ al-dawla (Abnā‘, xx, p. 173; Kāḥith b. Qifrī and Abnā’ PI, who appear along with Dīwādz b. Muṣṭafā b. ‘Abd-al-Khāriḍ b. Jundun (Talib, p. 843, 845; Shu’ayb b. Ḥādhā b. Dānūdī), a scholar who was not abnā’ khurāṣānī, or not abnā’ al-dawla, his mother being not al-dawla (Talib, p. 239, drawn to my attention by C. Robinson); and Abnā’ b. Ṭāhir b. Taḥfīz, the author of ʿUḫr al-Baghdādi, whose abnā’ distrust al-dawla: whose ancestor came from Marwārd (Ḵān b. ʿAbd al-Malik, p. 163, 164; p. 211). See also: Abnā’ al-qalbu, Ḥumayyāb, b. ‘Uqba. Abnā’ an-dawla: ‘Uḫr an-dawla (Talib, p. 235-6; I. 3, 235; 8, 10: 235: 651, 653); cf. also Lamen, “The art of al-dawla”, 1-2 (G., 8. 1: 1-1: 659).

Above, note 30.

Talib, pp. 336, 337.


Above, note 135.


Above, note 30.

Talib, pp. 336, 337.


Muhammad b. Abi Khalid and others. Ibn Tayfur also thinks of the Abna' as the soldiers who opposed al-Ma'mun (adding that they obeyed him in the end),84 and al-Yaqiqi tacitly adopt the same identification in the passage on how the Abna' killed Zuhayr b. al-Mu'ayyah al-Dabbâbī, for he says that they killed him in a clash after al-Ma'mun’s proclamation of an A'ārid as her heir, to which they were violently oppsed.85 Like Humayd, Zuhayr is distinguished from the Abna' by his refusal to embrace the cause which had become emblematic of Banawi status.

Ayslon, in fact, took it for granted that the term Abna' was largely synonymous with the Baghdādī supporters of al-Amin; but he did so on the assumption that the descendants of the abī al-dawla were largely confined to Baghdād, that for practical purposes the term Abna' only appeared in the fourth civil war and that almost all descendants of the revolutionaries were to be found on al-Amin’s side.86 Things were not so simple. But for all that, Ayslon’s explanation holds up extremely well. The Abna' were indeed the sons of the abī al-dawla; it merely so happens that the fourth civil war caused the term to shrink, at least in some circles. The term came to be largely synonymous with members of the Harbiyya,87 i.e. the quarter of Harb b. 'Abdullāh al-Balkhi al-Rawandi,88 whose inmates were numerous 'Abbasid loyalists. They were the people who preferred the (lost) Khālid al-dawla e al-Rawandi to al-Shaybāni’s legal teaching and who were variously classified by the historians. As Rawandiyya, Rastāmiyya and Husaynīyya (after a certain Abī Hurayra al-Rawandi), all associated with extreme pro-'Abbasid belief.89 It is not surprising that they were outraged by al-Ma'mun’s designation of an A'ārid as his successor.

The Harbiyya was the largest nābad of Baghdad and its inhabitants came from Marw, Balkh, Bukhārā, Khurtal, Isfāhil, Ishtāqān, Kābul and Khwāzaim.90 Most of them must have been ethnic Iranians. Because these people predominated in al-Amin’s army and the subsequent opposition to al-Ma'mūn, they so-to-speak hijacked the term abī al-dawla, and so a Banawi in the sources is almost always a non-Arab.

It must be added, though, that non-Arab Abna' seem to have been more given to stressing their status as abī al-dawla than their Arab counterparts. Descendants of abī al-dawla had a prestigious identity apart from that bestowed on them by participation in the revolution; the poets would routinely laud them as chiefs of the Arabs and the like.92 But men such as Abū Khālid or Jabala were nobodies in Muslim society apart from their relationship with the 'Abbasid house. It is true that 'Abd al-Rahmān b. Jabala al-Banawī flattered the Abna' as sons of kings,93 and that al-Khwārizmī went so far as to define all of them as sons of dhīqām,94 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 defeated the kings and dhīqām to found the society in which the latter’s descendants were now trying to establish themselves. Hence the non-Arab members of the 'Abbasid army would stress their identity as Abna' and even call themselves Abnawīs, thus coining a prestigious nīsha for themselves that ‘Jātīs, Khūzātīs, Tanāmīs or Dabbīs did not need.

In sum, the ethnic origin of the Abna' in the technical sense of sons of the abī al-dawla must have been as mixed as that of the abī al-dawla themselves. But the non-Arabs among them were particularly given to harking on their Banawi identity, and when the fourth civil war removed the last Arab leadership of the Abna', 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 abī al-dawla. This is a proposition that the secondary literature has long done its best to deny, but Zakari is right that the tendency to belittle the role of Iranians in the revolution has gone too far.95 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 mawāt even though it no longer wishes mawāt 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 Muslims must in fact have participated on a major scale. Zakari’s book is not the only sign that the “revisionist” trend in the literature is coming to an end.96 In an unpublished thesis of 1993 Salah 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 Ḥāshimīyya in Khurāsān he finds a mere 68 to have been Arabs.97 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 Ayslon, al-Amin was in the habit of bestowing crowns and bracelets on soldiers who had distinguished themselves (“Reforms,” p. 86, without reference).

84 al-Khwārizmī, Maqtīl al-dawla, ed. G. van Vloten (Leiden, 1893), p. 119. The passage could be about the Yemeni Abna', but is conventionally taken to refer to the 'Abbasid vassary, presumably because it gives the nīsha as Banawī, otherwise only attested in al-Ja‘fī (cf. above, note 45).
85 Still, who are the scholars who supposedly adhere “dubious material wherein al-shī‘ī, al-dhul, Hāfīzūn, al-‘ulamā‘, etc., seem sometimes to denote the Arab forces stationed in those areas” (Zakari, p. 279)? It is a well-known fact that Syrian troops were stationed in Khurāsān, but were the most ardent supporters of the Arab hypothesis stop short of claiming that the ‘Abbasid revolution was conducted by Syriants?
87 S. S. Agha, “The agents and forces that toppled the Umayyad Caliphate”, PhD, Toronto, 1991, p. 417. I am grateful to Aziz Al-Azmeh, Matthew Golen and Chase Robinson for drawing my attention to this work.

90 See the references in Eiad, “Transition”, p. 102, note 39.
91 Ibn Khaldūn, Kitāb al-‘Uqlī, i, p. 324, see “Harbiyya.”
92 See the references in Eiad, “Transition”, p. 102, note 39.
93 Tab. ii, p. 824-c: They were also praised as “wreators of branches and crowns” (Tab. iii, p. 824-c), but not
certainly or probably abnāʾ al-'arb wa'l-qā'ib, as al-Jihāj 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.86 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 will have been fewer men of Arab origin at the lower echelons. But Agha is undoubtedly right to count the unidentifiable men as non-Arabs, thus reducing the abnāʾ al-'arb 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, Marwarrūd, Balkh, Kish, Naṣīr, Tālāqān, Ṣaghānīyān, Tākhkhrīsīn, Khuttalān, Naṣār, Ḫurūt, Būhejān, Abiward, Surākhsī, Tās and Nishapur according to al-Dinawārī;87 the soldiers settled by al-Manṣūr in Baghdād came from Marw, Marwarrūd, Balkh, Buhārā, Ṣogd, Isfāyāb, Fārāb, Istakhrān, Khuttal, Badghis, Farahān, Khwārzīm, Jurfān, Jīlān, Daylam, Rayy, Kirmān and Kūbul (with a few from outside Iran as well) according to al-Ya‘qūbī,88 and one could hardly get an overwhelming Arab army together by recruiting in such places. The Arabs had never been more than a minority in Khurāsān, 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-converted Zoroastrians bent on the extermination of the Arabs and Islam alike makes no sense unless the majority of revolutionaries were Iranians.89 It is true that the abnāʾ al-'arb among them were Iranianized; but Persian-speaking though they might be, men such as Sulaymān b. Khaṭīb al-Khūzī or Qāṭaḥa b. Shabbāb al-Tal’ī hardly lent themselves to presentation as enemies of the Arabs and Islam with any degree of plausibility.90 Recruits such as Marwarrūd b. Fārāb,91 Turākhudūn, Abruẓkudūn, al-Iṣṭakhkhand, Shabbīb b. Wāj, Zuwāreh al-Bukhartī, Mīhān al-Ṣamghānī,92 Sunbādī93 or Ḥāshim b. Ḥakṭīn (better known as al-Muṣannā)94 were a different matter.

To the Umayyads (as to nineteenth-century Islamicists), the revolution was 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 Sāsānīd empire.95 The inner core of the movement, including the twelve nāqibān, were people of Arab and Iranian descent whose membership of Muslim

86 I hope to publish this material elsewhere.
87 Dinawarī, pp. 359f.
88 YB, pp. 420f.
91 YB, p. 240, 3, on the plot for himself and his troops in Baghdād. He was the father of Asad b. al-Marzūbīn, who also participated in the revolution (AA, pp. 325, 370; Tab., iii, p. 16; BA, iii, p. 119.
92 Below, notes 144–5; YB, p. 240, 2.
93 On whose revolt after Abd ʿAbbās’s death, see BA, iii, pp. 240f.
95 YB, p. 45v.
Arabic at all, the Aabid' 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 Aabid' were "Arabs" in this sense. This meeting is not familiar to the sources, however. They always use the word to mean "ethnic Arabs" and make all the Aabid' another Aabid' from them. 118 So we have better do the same. Collectively, the Aabid' were neither Aabid' nor Iranians, but an elite creamed off from both.

Elad is however right that their orientation was Arabocentric. Although they were not Arabs, their sympathies were with al-musawwa wa'l-Arab, as Sarkhshatin observed. 117 The latter, a participant in al-Mazyar's revolt in Tabasarin in 234/850, regarded `Abbasid loyalty and philo-Arab sentiment as inseparable, and so they clearly were to the Aabid' themselves. Supporting the regime meant siding with the Arabs because the religion in the name of which the Muslim empire had been created still could not survive without allegiance to its original carriers. As a conquest elite the original carriers had ceased to exist. Most of the Arabs with whom Sarkhshatin expected the Aabid' to side were probably Arabized mawali. 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 Aabid' professed their allegiance. Hence they equated Arabs with right guidance and looked askance at al-Ma'mun's freely recruited Khurarsin, whom everyone perceived as 'ajam, that is, assimilated, half converted or unconverted Iranians and who were of course rivals for their status too. 119 O Aabid', O sons of kings and friends of swords, they are 'ajam! "Abd al-Rahman b. Jabala the Aabid' exclaimed to his troops when they were confronted with Tasheen's army. 120 Their 'ajam' 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 Banaw of Iranian descent such as `Abd al-Rahman b. Jabala himself. The Aabid' regarded the 'Abbasid caliphate as a bulwark against such people, who might otherwise absorb them and in whose ranks they no doubt included Sarkhshatin and al-Mazyar. It is for this reason that al-Ma'mun's fondness for 'ajam and transfer of the caliphate to an 'Alid came across to them as a Zoroastrian plot. Muhammad b. Abi Khaliid, the Banaw shaykh quwwat al-harbiyya who expelled al-Hasan b. Sahil from Baghdahd, told a grandson of al-Manfuri that "We are the supporters of your dynasty (mawar darawatiin) and fear that this dynasty will pass away thanks to the Zoroastrian administration (tuddar al-majali) that goes on in it." 121 It was also a Banaw who greeted al-Ma'mun as "Commander of the Zoroastrians" or "Commander of the infidels." 122 Collectively, then, the Aabid' were characterized by an Arabocentric attitude. But they had not forgotten their individual origins, and Elad is right that the aabid' al-'arb among them were positively biased in favor of the tribes from which they hailed, as their fathers had been as well. When Khuzam b. Khurayma al-Tamimi, a member of the altal-dawla, was appointed to an expedition against Oman in 134/751, he supplemented the 700 troops that he had received from Abi 'il al-'Abbas with relatives, fellow-tribesmen, clients and people he trusted from his native Marwarriidh, as well as Taraatis recruited in Basra. 123 When Ma'ad b. Kh. al-Tamimi, another member of the altal-dawla, was sent to India in the same year, he recruited 4,000 Arabs and mawali in Basra, plus 1,000 Tamimis there. 124 In 145/762 al-Musayyab b. Zahayr al-Dabbi, yet another member of the altal-dawla, gave amal to his fellow-tribesman al-Mu'addal al-Dabbi, the famous transmitter who had participated in Ibrahim b. 'Abdallahi's revolt. 125 When a Khurrihli/Yemeni rebel was captured in Mosul in 180/796, he successfully appealed to the 'Yaminiyya' in Harih's troops, including al-Hasan b. Qubata al-Tau'li/Yemen and 'Abdallahi and Hamza, sons of the naji Malik b. Haytham al-Khuirli/Yemen; and the latter is known to have sent money to the Khuirli/Yemen. 126 Non-Khuirli/Yemenis who rose to membership of the 'Abbasid elite who were as partial as their Khuirli/Yemeni counterparts. 127 Whether the Iranian members of the Aabid' displayed a comparable partiality for their native kin or tribes by wa'llah is less easy to say, though they too had networks (as is clear from Harun's use of al-Fadl b. 'Aliyti b. Barakni in eastern Iraq). 128 In view of the fact that 'asbahyya between Nizari and Yemen was extremely common outside the caliphal elite, 129 it is in any case amazing that the elite itself be engaged by it; but as Elad notes, tribal rifts within the Khuirli/Yemeni army were avoided, 130 some tensions notwithstanding. 131 So too were rifts between Khuirli/Yemeni soldiers.

116 See the following note.

117 Tab. iii. p. 179.8-17, cf. pp. 172.15, 174-16, where the Arabs and the Aabid' are listed separately, and p. 178.4, where the Aabid' are distinguished from the local population as aah'id al-aswanid.

118 The same goes for the troops that Elad sees as "compromised exclusively of Arab tribes", cf. the fact that his first reference to an army of 3,000 Baraani Arab and mawali ("Taimid," p. 127).

119 Cf. Tab. iii. p. 222.18, on the killers of al-Amiri (qānih min al-'ajam). Kindli, Gureem, p. 184.1, on 'Abdallah b. Thib's troops in Egypt (they were quwwat al-'ajam min al-kharashi). Tab. iii. p. 114.2; Ibn Tayfur, ed. Kawthar, p. 144; ed. Keller, ed. Kawthar, p. 151; cf. above, note 114.1. Among the most important tribes was that of 'Abd al-Hamid also distinguished the Aabid' from the 'ajam (here possibly non-Muslims) of Khurarsin, cf. below, note 147.


121 YT, ii. pp. 355f, 357.


126 The non-Khuirli/Yemeni 'Yaminiyya' in al-Ma'ani's qubata successfully intervened on behalf of a Syrian Khuirli/Yemeni who had rebelled with 'Abdallahi b. 'Al. (Ard, Mu'tif, pp. 178, 232). 'Ubayb b. Salm al-Husayni/Arki/ Zaidi/Abi al-Shaybani/Nabata's had been killed as governor of Yemen (YT, ii. p. 456; cf. above, note 52). When Harih came to Mosul, the Moors made sure to include Aabid' scholars in their delegation to him, for Abi Yousaf was with him and he was an Aabid' representative to fellow-tribesmen (Ard, Mu'tif, pp. 234f).


128 Cf. Croome, Slaves, p. 249, note 132; Elad, "Transition," p. 508 and note 90 thereon. There was plenty of it in Mosul too, and the Aabid/Yemeni author of Ta'liq al-Ma'mun credits al-Manfuri himself with a declaration of pro-Yemeni sentiments of violent that he could hardly have retained non-Yemeni in his service if he had actually made it (Peels, Mu'tif, pp. 250f).


130 The examples relate to altal-dawla rather than Aabid'. Al-Husayn b. Qubata al-Tau'li/Yemen told the future al-Ma'mun that he could not kill Ibn Khazana al-Fadl/Mu'addar without tearing up tribal unity that would engulf al-Ma'mun's own 'ojj, hence Khazana b. Khurayma al-Tamimi/Tau'li/Mu'addar was sent to do the job (YT, ii. p. 424). Khazana b. Khurayma al-Tamimi's killing of Harih/Yemeni in 134 did have repercussions in the army (Tab. iii. p. 769; cf. Elad, "Transition," p. 101, note 37). Abi Dīwān was seconded of 'asbahyya, explained as a preference for
of Arab and non-Arab descent, though Arab prejudice against mudālit had by no means disappeared.132 How the Arab Khurāsānīs maintained their Jāmūr-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 dawād 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 Ābnī 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 dāghums evidently does not mean that this is what they actually were.133 Some were patently not.134 The term Ābnī is not in itself a clue to social origins; and when al-Jāhiz lists the Ābnī boast that ‘We are foster-brothers of the caliphs and neighbours of viziers; 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 Sāsānids emperors, but of their current relationship with the ‘Abbasid caliph: kings is simply a synonym for caliphs here.135 Nonetheless, Zakariya has a point, provided that one does not take the word ‘Sāsānī’ too seriously. The Sāsānids abīhun/‘asārih that Zakariya has in mind were dāghums and recruits of non-noble origin who had received allotments of land and/or cash payments in return for military service from Khurāsān I (d. 579) onwards;136 but he does not explain how they survived a century of unemployment. He is right that some did: dāghums are often mentioned in Umayyad Khurāsān, and some of the ‘asārīh who had deserted to the Arabs during the conquests also appear in that province.137 But it will always have been the non-Muslim rulers who had ābnī al-marqeziha wa-l-‘āsrātih at their disposal,138 and few of their hommen will have been Sāsānids in the sense of originating in Khurāsān’s reforms. In the context of the ‘Abbasid revolution this is not important, however. The Hāshimiyas could no doubt have found Iranian cavalrymen in the retinues of landlords and rulers who converted to Islam after the fashion of the Bukhārīzād and Sāmīnakhūdi,139 and they do seem to have done so on a larger scale than normally envisaged. Turākhardhi, one of the Khurāsānīs who rebelled with Abu-l-Ballāh b. ‘Ali in Syria in 137/754-5, was min ābnī al-

Arabs (in general) and his own people (in particular) over other abī al-abdū in, in Khurāsān is 135 (Tab. iii, p. 83). But in the story of how Qubāban b. ‘Abd-Allah stirred up tribal strife in al-Ma‘ārib’s army, the Khurāsānīs remain distinct from Muḥādr b. Rabih’s and Yemen (Tab. ii, p. 266; Bl: ‘Translation’, p. 100, note 57).

133 Everyone who could not pass for an Arab would present himself as a non-Arab of the most elevated kind, e.g. the royal descent claimed by Buḍbūr b. Burd (Abūlptah, iii, p. 135; cf. Zakariya, p. 301ff) and the local rulers in Iran (C. E. Bosworth, ‘The heritage of rulership in early Islamic Iran and the search for dynastic connections with the past’, Iran, XI, 1973). Differently Zakariya, p. 289.
135 ‘Turk’, C. 28 (with emphasis on hadż), L. 16 = 55; ‘Zakariya, 279. Zakariya also claims that the ‘Abbasid horned their steeds with the tides of abīh, but his examples refer to tenth-century soldiers who were described as abīh in the literal sense of close as opposed to ghulām (pp. 276 and note 88).
136 ‘Zakariya, pp. 53ff.
137 ‘Tab. ii, p. 130ff; 1606,6; years 112 and 113; cf. Encyclopedia Iranica, s.v. ‘Asārīh’; Zakariya, pp. 272ff.
138 ‘Zakariya, pp. 174ff, on the Sogdians in 93.
al-‘Uqaylī declares in the boasting competition in Ibn Ṭayfūr. Naṣr b. Shabath and al-Jazīrī also agree that the Abnā‘ had a great capacity for endurance. But it is the Khuṭrānsānī and the Turks who are the great horsemen in al-Jazīrī’s tract, and it is the Khūtrakīns who are made to boast of their shabrīyya steeds, elegant posture in the saddle and manufacture of stirrups, not the Abnā‘ as Zakeri would have it.153

Ayalon takes al-Jazīrī to say that “there was amongst the Abnā‘ a sizeable body of excellent infantrymen,”154 but al-Jazīrī describes all the Abnā‘ as infantrymen par excellence, not just a section of them. Lasner assumes al-Jazīrī’s account to reflect the Abnā‘ performance in the siege of Baghdad,155 and Zakeri takes this idea to extremes. According to him, al-Jazīrī describes the Abnā‘ as impoverished soldiers reduced to infantry, which “corresponds to their status in the time of al-‘Abbās when the majority of them were footsoldiers and went to battle without horses”;156 by this he means, apparently, that the Abnā‘ had merged with the Baghdādī plebs (“street vendors, naked ones, people from the prisons, riffraff, rabbles, cutpurses and people of the market”),157 who fought with unexpected fierceness in the siege of Baghadhd and who were also Iranians in Zakeri’s opinion: “It is rather amazing how closely al-Jazīrī’s description of the tuṣūwi corresponds with the activity of the ‘ayyūnu under the siege of Baghdād”, he observes.158 But this construction is impossible. The Abnā‘ did not go into battle without horses in the time of al-‘Abbās, who would have been extremely short of horsemen had that been the case, and they obviously were not identical with the Baghdādī rabbles.159 They supplied 50,000 (or 40,000) horsemen and infantrymen to fight under ‘Abbās b. Iṣā in 195/810 of160 and 20,000 (or 30,000) men, including ḥanīfī al-‘abnā‘, to fight under ‘Abbās’ Abūl-Rahma b. Jahlāl al-Abnā‘wī in the same year. When the latter fell, they elegized him as a ḥārit.161 They likewise described Muhammad b. Abī Khālid as their shaykh, kahīr and ḥārit,162 and in 201/816 the troops of Ḥāfiẓ b. Muhammad b. Abī Khālid al-Abnā‘wī added up to 125,000 cavalrymen and footsoldiers.163 Conversely, there were of course both cavalrymen and footsoldiers in Tahirī’s army.164 One could not fight a serious battle without both.

Al-Jazīrī’s account of the Abnā‘ military skills probably does not reflect their performance in the siege, rather their military role in al-Jazīrī’s own day. For their superiority in combat at the entrances of trenches and defiles (al-khlāṣy wa‘l-madābyiq)

156 “Reformis”, p. 12.
157 Shaping, p. 135; accepted by Hoffmann, “Pobèl”, p. 36.
158 Zakeri, p. 288.
159 Tab. iii, p. 872 (Fishehni’s translation).
160 Zakeri, p. 287; cf. also pp. 283f, where the ‘ayyūnu’s centurion, or rather lack thereof, is added in favour of their Iranian descent. (Generally speaking, every non-Arab is an Iranian in this book.)
162 Tab. iii, p. 817, where the troops number 30,000 and are described as abī ḥabīd; cf. p. 284, 15, where “Al b. Iṣā addresses them as muḥtar al-ḥabāt”. He had 40,000 men according to Yt, ii, p. 530; Ardi, Ṭaṣuq, p. 133-7, and 40,000 horsemen according to Ibn Khāṭīr, al-Nīyār aw l-Sulaiytha (Cairo, 1931-8), X, p. 226-15. Cf. above, note 66, for the family.
163 Tab. ii, pp. 129-132; Dīnawart, p. 194 (for the figure 30,000). Cf. above, note 68, for the family.
164 Tab. ii, pp. 1097-16, 1117ff.
165 Tab. iii, pp. 1097, 1098f. Cf. below, note 67, on the family.
166 Tab. iii, p. 811-14.

cannot have displayed itself in the capital,165 and when they boast of their ability to fight in alleyways (al-arṣaqq) and in/against princes (ji‘al al-si‘ām), they add, “Ask the Khulaydīyya, Karīfīyya, Bīlāšīyya and Khurāshīyya about that”, obviously referring to their suppression of urban disturbances in Iraq, not to the siege of Baghdad.166 (The Bīlāšīyya was a faction in Basra,167 but the other groups are unidentifiable.)168 When they boast of how they can openly kill people in the markets and streets (al-ma‘aṣ wa‘l-tanāḥid), they are once more referring to their role as urban policemen, not to their performance as defenders of the capital against Tahir’s troops. Nor would one expect al-Jazīrī to make them invoke that performance: it is not customary to boast of battles one has lost.

Al-Jazīrī presumably concentrates on their infantry skills because he wants his protagonists to display their unique abilities, and there was nothing unique about the Abnā‘ as horsemen in his view: he knew them as an urban police-force,169 probably to be identified with the Baghdādī shāhara over which the Tahirids had hereditary command. He gives them as much credit as he can, but his sympathies are with Ḥumayd b. ‘Abbās al-Hāridī, the Khūtrakīns to whom all real soldiers were ḥanīfī. Ninth-century Muslims were every bit as infatuated with cavalry as were medieval Europeans,170 though it was more often than not by getting off their horses that the cavalry managed to win. It was by dismounting to form a shield wall that the fathers of the Abnā‘ had defeated Marwān II in the decisive battle of the Zāh in 750.171 But any horseman could dismount to fight on the ground whereas footsoldiers could not fight properly on horseback in Ḥumayd’s opinion, which cannot be wholly true. It is however true that the versatility of the Abnā‘ was incompatible with their superior skills as horse archers which so impressed Ḥumayd in the Turks. To him as to al-Jazīrī, then, the Abnā‘ had been overtaken by history: they were splendid policemen, but not the stuff of which real armies were made.

Zakeri is thus right that al-Jazīrī depicts the Abnā‘ in a state of decline. The picture is based on al-Jazīrī’s own time, however, not on the reign of al-‘Abbās, in which on the contrary they had reached their apogee. It was with their defeat in the fourth civil war that their reversal of fortune began. First they were reduced to a subsidiary role by al-Ma‘mūn’s new Khūtrakīns, and next they were demoted to mere policemen by al-Mu‘taṣim’s Turks, who destroyed what remained of their special relationship with the da‘ala by causing the caliph to leave Baghdād and who rapidly eclipsed the Khūtrakīns too. It was the inexorable rise of the Turks, resented by all the existing troops, that generated the tensions which al-Jazīrī set out to resolve with an epistle assuring everyone that there was nothing really to worry about.

165 The madābyiq could of course refer to cramped urban conditions, but the word means “defiles” in Awdi, Ma‘ṣūl, p. 386,2 (Azeriyan), and the khāṣla must be trenches dug around camps.
166 “Ṭurk”, C. 276, L. 16 = 652.
167 It was opposed to the S‘u‘ayyba and is first mentioned in 353/868f, in connection with the pre-history of the Zanj revolt (Tab. iii, pp. 1745, 1747 and passim.
168 Practically the same phrase recurs in the story of Khālid b. Yatāl, the ma‘ṣu of al-Ma‘ṣūlīdī, al-Jazīrī, al-Iṣ'im, ed. I. al-Iṣ'imī (Cairo, 1930), p. 50: “Ask the Karīfīyya, Khulaydīyya, Khurāshīyya, Bīlāšīyya . . . about me”. But it is no more informative. For the name Khulaydīyya, see C. H. Bawor, The Mamluk Islamic Underworld (Leiden, 1996), pp. 143, 454 (drawn to my attention by B. Elsworth).
169 Cf. his reference to the Bīlāšīyya, who may not have existed in al-Ma‘ṣūm’s time, but who certainly did in al-Jazīrī’s days (above, note 107-a).