CHAPTER NINE

THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE IN SAMARRA, THE CAUCASUS AND CENTRAL ASIA IN THE 8TH AND FIRST HALF OF THE 9TH CENTURY

If Sallam indeed travelled to Central Asia in search for Gog and Magog’s barrier, as we believe he did, an endeavour should be made to place his journey in the historical and geographical context of the day, focussing on the situation in the caliphal capital, in the Caucasus, in the steppes north of the Tianshan Mountains and in the Tarim Basin.

1. Samarra

Probably in 835 Caliph al-Mu’tasim transferred his court to Samarra situated on the Eastern bank of the middle Tigris at 125 km north of Baghdad. The most important reason for the move had been the serious conflicts which had arisen between the inhabitants of Baghdad and the caliph’s Turkish slave soldiers from Central Asia. By that time, the Turkish soldiery indeed had a firm grip on the capital.\(^1\) According to al-Ya’qubi, the Turk Wasif had a cantonment in the neighbourhood of the palace, while the Ushrusaniyya, a cantonment under the \(\text{afshin}\) Khaydhar b. Kawus al-Ushrusani, was settled in a village called al-Matira, at 4 km south of modern Samarra.\(^2\) The Turkish general Ashnas,\(^3\) whose advice was decisive in Sallam’s appointment for the journey, had a cantonment at 10 km north of the capital at Karkh Fayruz. There was also a cantonment of the \(\text{khaqan}\) ‘Urtuj. Upon his succession to the throne in 842, al-Mu’tasim’s

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\(^2\) EI 2 s.v. \(\text{Afshin}\) (Cl. Huart).

\(^3\) al-Ya’qubi, \textit{Kitāb al-buldān}, p. 235-268; Wiet, \textit{Les pays}, p. 51. al-Ya’qubi, \textit{Kitāb al-buldān}, p. 262 also reports that there was a street or quarter in Sāmarrā’ where the Khazars lived near the Turks and the natives of Farghānā.

son al-Wathiq chose to stay in Samarra. What formerly had been a military camp became now the new centre of power, dominated by Turkish officers. Men like Aytakh al-Turki, Barmash, Sima al-Dimashqi, Bugha al-Kabir and Bugha al-Saghir had their own fortified residences in or near the capital. That of Aytakh lay outside the south gate of the caliphal palace, called Bab al-Bustan, but it was also known, quite significantly, as Bab al-Aytakh.

Among the military units in Samarra were the so-called al-Shaki-riya, private militias of commanders who in al-Wathiq’s time were more often than not Turks. Other non-Arab units were formed by Egyptians, Khurasanians and Khazars. One such leading commander was Khaydhar b. Kawus from the province of Usrushana (Ushrusana), the mountainous district between Samarkand and Khudjand at the mouth of the Farghana valley, which Sallam was to pass through on his homeward journey. Kawus, the local prince who had accepted Islam in 821 after a second Arab expedition, bore the pre-Islamic title *afshin*. His son Khaydhar who became known as al-Afshin, led in 835 and 837 an uninterrupted campaign against Babak, the leader of the Khurrami rebels in the Arran region of Azerbaijan. Various Iranian anti-Arab sects, linked to the movement of Mazdak and influenced by extreme Shi’i doctrines, were known as Khurramiyya, who constituted a serious threat for the ‘Abbasid power. During the 8th century the Khurramiyya had been active in Nishapur, Rayy and Transoxania, places and regions Sallam was to pass through on his homeward journey. The *tarkhan* of the Khazars had been one of the rebel leaders. After insurrections in Rayy and Isfahan, the Khurramis of Gurgan in Northern Iran revolted in 796-98, followed in 808 by those of Azerbaijan and Hamadan. This rebellion was quickly suppressed, but in 816 Babak revived the rebellion in the mountainous region of Arran. It went on until 837, when al-Afshin defeated Babak. Captured by Smbat (Sahl-i Smbatean), the

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6 EI 2 s.v. Usṟš̱sẖana (J.H. Kramers).
7 On the Khazar king see below. According to al-Ṭabarī, al-Afš̱ẖîn himself also stood trial in S̱marrā. Caliph al-Mu’tasim sent his son (and later successor) Hārūn al-Wāṭ̱ẖiq with a tray of fruit to the prison where al-Afš̱ẖîn was taken after the trial of his former adjutant Bug̱ẖā al-Kabīr. But al-Afš̱ẖîn, fearing to be poisoned, refused to eat from the fruit. He died from starvation. His dead body was crucified and burned, cf. E.M. Wright, *Bābak of Bagdhd and al-Afš̱ẖîn during the years 810-841*, in: *The Muslim World* 38 (1948), p. 57, 128.