

Babak's revolt.

By Dr Patricia Crone

Babak is one out of several Iranian rebels in the century after the Abbasid revolution, roughly 750 to 850, who had adopted Islam, or sometimes even been born as Muslims, but who rejected Islam and reverted to their ancestral faith, as radical anti-Muslim. His name had much the same associations to medieval Muslims as Usama ibn Ladin's does to Americans today, that's to say he was remembered as a bloodthirsty man out to destroy us. He was defending his own world, a little corner of late antiquity in Azerbaijan, and he gives us a glimpse of one out of many Iranian responses to Islam.

Babak's background.

Of Babak we are told that his father was an Aramean from Iraq, that he was an itinerant peddler who sold ointment (*duhn*), and that his name was Amir b. Abdallah or the like, so he is envisaged as a Muslim. Babak's mother was an Azerbaijani village woman, called Mahru, apparently a non-Muslim. The story goes that she had an affair with the peddler which was discovered when some village women went for water and came upon the two of them sitting near spring, where he was singing to her. Amir fled and Mahru was dragged back to the village by her hair and publicly disgraced. Then they got married -- *after* Babak been conceived, that's the point of the story: so terrible a rebel just *had* to be the son of a whore. Later, the peddler was killed on the road. By then, he and Mahru had two children, the future Babak, whose given name was Hasan, and another son called Abdallah. The widow remarried and had a third son, called Mu'awiya. So all three sons were given names identifying them as Muslims.

Mahru eked out a living as a wetnurse; Hasan was sent to work as a cowherd. Later he entered the service of an Arab magnate in the region for whom he groomed horses and whose servants taught him to play the lute. Then he left for Tabriz and worked for two years for another Arab magnate, Muhammad b. al-Rawwad al-Azdi, but later, at the age of 18, went back to his village where he met a certain Javidan b. Shahrak, who happened to pass through. Or he took to selling water melons and other fruit, as well as entertaining with lute-playing and declamations of poetry, until he and his family came to

a village which belonged to Muhammad b. al-Rawwad al-Azdi, and there he got to know Javidan b. Shahrak. Either way, his encounter with Javidhan was the turning point in his career: Javidan took a liking to him and appointed him as manager of his property, which was substantial.

Unlike Babak's first employers, Javidan was neither an Arab nor a Muslim, but an Iranian and the head of a native religious organization in the mountains of Badhdh, some 145 km north-east of Ardabil. The Badhdh region was controlled by the Azdi Rawwad family, but inhabited by Khurramis, i.e. adherents of an Iranian religion that I shall say more about in a moment. There were two Khurrami organizations in the area, and the two leaders were rivals. They would fight during the summer months (in the winter there was too much snow). At some point after Babak had entered Javidan's service, Javidan was killed in one of these battles. By then Babak must have been a convert to Khurramism, for he was accepted as Javidan's successor and married his widow -- of whom, needless to say, we are told that she had been conducting an affair with Babak. Javidan's widow gathered her late husband's followers and told them that he had predicted his own death and foretold that his spirit would pass into Babak, and that Babak would "possess the earth, slay the tyrants, restore Mazdakism, make the humble among you mighty and the lowly high". It was probably when Babak took over the leadership of the Khurrami organisation that he adopted his Iranian name. His first political act was to mount a campaign against the local Muslims, who were Yemeni Arabs and their non-Arab clients, all of whom were massacred. This seems to have happened in 816-7.

So what kind of Muslims had Babak and his brothers been? As so often, the answer is that we don't know, but from the little we are told, one would guess that their parents had called them al-Hasan, Abdallah and Mu'awiya largely because these were names used by the people who controlled their village and who dominated local life, that is to say the Arab warlords that I shall more about in a moment. Being a Muslim was to make oneself visible to those who mattered in the area. Of course, there were also people who adopted Arab names without becoming Muslims, but they were mostly of the kind that needed to move in both camps, like the Armenian princes; and Babak's parents were not in that league. They were landless villagers, the future of their children lay with the Arab warlords, so it made sense to bring them up to think of themselves as Muslims,

whatever that may have entailed -- did they participate in the Friday prayer, fast in Ramadan? Who knows, I somehow doubt it. In any case, al-Hasan looked all set to make a modest life for himself in the lower echelons of the world for which his parents had destined him when he met Javidan and turned against it.

The Arab warlords.

So what kind of world was it that his parents had destined him for? That gets me to the warlords.

The Arabs had conquered Azerbaijan back in the 650s, but they didn't start colonising it until about a century later, when a lot of people went there from Basra, Kufa and Mosul, with government backing in the caliphate of Mansur. The immigrants were overwhelmingly Yemeni Arabs, and they started a general landgrab. As Baladhuri says, "Everyone took control of what he could; some of them bought land from the non-Arabs; (others?) received villages by commendation, whereby the villages were handed over to them for protection and their inhabitants became sharecroppers". That in a nutshell is how the magnates of Babak's time came into existence, and the Rawwad family that controlled the region in which Babak's lived his entire life is a good example [hand-out].

Their ancestor, al-Rawwad b. al-Muthanna, was transferred to Azerbaijan under al-Mansur; he settled "in Tabriz to Badhdh", as Ya'qubi puts it, presumably meaning that his family appropriated estates in that entire area. His sons fortified Tabriz. One of those sons was Muhammad b. al-Rawwad al-Azdi, the owner of Badhdh, where Javidan had his Khurrami organisation. This Muhammad emerged as one of the dominant men in Azerbaijan during the civil war between al-Amin and al-Ma'mun (811-13), when the province effectively ceased to be under caliphal rule. He had a brother called al-Wajna', of whom all we know is that he engaged in violent activities, and it was probably for Shibl b. al-Muthanna that Babak groomed horses for in his youth. The Rawwadids survived al-Ma'mun's reassertion of central control after the civil war and fought against Babak, as you'd expect -- it was on his land that Babak had started by massacring Yemeni Arabs -- and the Rawwadids were dominant in the region for centuries thereafter.

At least two other magnate families had similar histories, but there were also magnates of a rougher type who had started their careers as *sa'alik*, so let me say a little bit about them.

Sa'alik were men who lived off their physical prowess -- as mercenaries, bodyguards, assassins, and other strongarms when there was a demand for the services of that kind, or as brigands, when there was not. They congregated in mountains and other inaccessible places, and they would hire themselves out indiscriminately to rebels, local magnates, and representatives of the government. Upper Mesopotamia, in fact, the entire mountainous area of western Iran, was swarming with such men in the early Abbasid period, in part no doubt due to the disbanding of the imperial armies of the Umayyads. There were a lot of unemployed men around who were used to wielding arms. We encounter *sa'alik* as participants in the Civil War, in the revolt of the ex-soldier Abu 'l-Saraya, in the service of the Rawwadid magnates, in that of the local ruler Abu Dulaf in the Jibal, and in many other places, too.

We know that the depredations of the *sa'alik* were among the factors that induced the locals to hand over their estates to Arab magnates, but sometimes the beneficiaries of were *sa'alik* themselves. For example, we hear of an Arab tribesman called Halbas or Hulays who settled at Marand, perhaps as a soldier in Marwan II's army, or as an ex-soldier. His son al-Ba'ith worked as a *su'luk*, a strongman, for the magnate Ibn al-Rawwad al-Azdi, and he later emerged as a big man himself; and his son in turn, Muhammad b. al-Ba'ith was a contemporary of Babak. He built more castles at Marand and allied himself with Babak until a late stage in the revolt. He changed sides when a caliphal army threatened him and used the opportunity to complete his usurpation of Marand from the indigenous lord of the region, a man called Isma al-Kurdi. Muhammad b. al-Ba'ith had married a daughter of this Isma, who was also on Babak's side. One day Isma passed by Marand with a detachment in Babak's service, and Ibn al-Ba'ith serviced his troops in the customary manner, then he invited Isma to come up to his castle, where he got him and his companions drunk, killed the companions and handed Isma to the government. So now he was in favour with the government and Marand was his.¹

¹ There was also a famous robber baron by the name of Zuqayq, a *mawla* of Azd. Either he or his father was a *su'luk* who practised brigandage in Jibal, where he seized estates and made himself powerful, and

All in all, Azerbaijan comes across as an extremely violent, lawless frontier zone in which Arab and Arabised colonists were amassing land at the expense of indigenous landowners. Political control rested on the possession of castles, which seem typically to have been perched high above villages, whose inhabitants supplied the local lord with his labour, produce, and perhaps military following. Babak's followers included at least two local land-owners, the above-mentioned 'Isma al-Kurdi and a man who called himself Tarkhan, and we know that all the members of Babak's Khurrami organisation lived in villages, though we don't know their social status. Many of them seem to have been Kurds. Javidan' widow spoke of "the evil of the Arabs", Babak called himself an avenger, and set out to slay the tyrants. One takes it that the tyrants were the Arab colonists. The movement was both anti-Arab and anti-Islamic because Islam was the religion of these Arab and Arabised "tyrants": the locals didn't know Islam in any other form. All in all, it seems that we can classify Babak's revolt as what the sociologists call a nativist movement, a movement of people who feel under attack by a foreign colonising power that is undermining their religion and traditional way of life, above all by taking their land, and who react by trying to expel the foreigners in the name of some updated version of their native beliefs, in the hope of restoring what they imagine to be the good old days and/or some brilliant future, the millennium.

Khurramism.

So we have some idea of what made Azerbaijan flammable. But what set it alight? Well, ultimately the match that ignited it was the Abbasid revolution, as is generally agreed, and more particularly it was the murder of the architect of the revolution, Abu Muslim, which stirred Khurramis into action all over Iran, with shockwaves that eventually hit Azerbaijan. So first let me tell you about Khurramism.

Khurramism is often identified as a form of Mazdakism, which in its turn was a heresy founded in the third century AD by a Zoroastrian dissident --who was not called Mazdak. His name was Zardusht. He proposed to remove strife from this world by

then he (or the son) moved north and conquered Urmiyya, and divested the ruler of Arran of mines, pasture land and a district containing fifty estates. He also terrorized Mosul from time to time with a private army of some 30,000 men. He made it really big, he even rose to become governor of Azerbaijan.

eliminating desire/greed, not by training people to suppress it, but rather by enabling all to fulfil it in equal measure: the remedy was equal access to the main sources of conflict, namely women and property, coupled with abstention from harm to any living being; war was evil, animals were not to be killed for food. That was the utopia. In the sixth century AD, a Zoroastrian priest by the name of Mazdak tried to implement these ideas and stirred up a major revolt in Iraq. He had to modify the creed to justify violence. The revolt had been suppressed by 540s, and thereafter we hear nothing about such ideas until the eighth century, when they resurface in the Iranian countryside under the name of Khurramism or Khurramdinism.

On this basis people usually infer, quite reasonably, that the Khurramis were some kind of survivors of Mazdakism, or Neo-Mazdakites, as some call them. But actually, Khurramism is attested in far too many places in Iran to be simply a residue or revival of Mazdakism. Khurramis are densely attested from Azerbaijan in the north to Fars in the south, and from Azerbaijan eastwards through Rayy, Daylam, Jurjan, Khurasan, and Transoxania to far into Central Asia, well beyond the borders of the Sasanian empire. They must represent the substratum that Mazdakism was drawn from, a popular form of Zoroastrianism or a form of pre-Zoroastrian Iranian religion which predominated in the mountains, where the bulk of the food producers of Iran were found. Madelung calls Khurramism the Low Church of Iran, and that is close to how I think of it.

We know very little about their beliefs, but like Mazdak, they are widely held to have been pacifists who held it wrong to inflict harm on any other living, including animals -- some held that even the earth was sentient, so that it would feel pain if you hammered a peg into it. Many of them were vegetarians, though some would eat carrion. Both Mazdak and Babak are said to have introduced doctrinal changes to legitimate bloodshed at times of revolt; there's some slight evidence to suggest that they held it to be meritorious to rid the misguided of their bodies because it allowed their souls to be reincarnated in a better form than if they lived on to accumulate further sins. Most or all the Khurramis believed in the transmigration of souls. They also had some special customs that caused them to be branded as wife-sharers, plus some beliefs which are not attested for Mazdak, notably that God manifested himself in human form from time to

time. When Khurramis rebelled, their leaders were usually seen as divine. (I shall say a lot more about that in the seminar.)

The history of the Abbasid revolution was entwined with that of Khurramis from early on: one missionary of the revolutionary movement in Khurasan was denounced for having succumbed to Khurrami ideas on sharing women, suggesting that the missionaries were working among such people. We later meet Iranians with the Khurrami tendency to cast their leaders as divine incarnations in the Abbasid armies in Iraq, and Abu Muslim, too, seems to have many of them in his army. It was what you'd get if you recruited in the Iranian countryside. When Abu Muslim was killed, a great many of his recruits walked out, not just of Abbasid service, but of Muslim society altogether, and it was their revolts which started the conflagration. The first rebel was Sunbadh, who was actually a former Zoroastrian, not a Khurrami. When he heard that Abu Muslim had been assassinated, he repudiated Islam and calling for vengeance in the Rayy region: we are told that huge numbers of Khurramis from the Jibal and the Elburz mountains joined his revolt. In the 760s and 70s al-Muqanna' rebelled in Transoxania; between 778 and 798 you have revolts by the Red-clothed Khurramis in Jurjan; in 778 and 807-9, Khurrami rebelled in Fars and Jibal, and in 816 to 837 you have Babak's revolt in Azerbaijan.

Rebel Khurramis.

If you want an idea of what the Khurramis were like after the Abbasid revolution, there's a vivid portrait of the ones in Upper Mesopotamia/Armenia region by Dionysius of Tell Mahré, the 9th century Syriac churchman who quoted in later sources. He calls them Khurdanaya, which I assume to be derived from Khurdaye, Kurds, and tells us that they had long had an oracle predicting the coming of a king called Mahdi, of whom they said that he was God and that his kingdom would last in perpetuity. This king actually came, around 800 it seems. He was veiled, and he called himself Christ and the Holy Spirit. Huge crowds gathered around him for pillage and booty, for these Khurdanaye were brigands, and their Mahdi took up residence in the steep mountains of Beth Qardwaye. They treated anyone who did not acknowledge the divinity of their Mahdi as an enemy and terrorised northern Mesopotamia and Armenia, until their Mahdi was killed after

pillaging the monastery of Qaramin. This Mahdi was succeeded by one Harun, and Harun was succeeded by Babak.

Here they come across as a form of Christians rather than a form of Zoroastrians, but Dionysius' think they formed a distinct "race", as he puts it. In any case, they were brigands much like the *sa'alik*. Babak himself was an upstart whose violence propelled him to the status of local lord, much as it had Ibn al-Ba'ath and the Rawwadids. Smallscale violence or largescale violence: these seem to have been the only avenues to positions of influence available to the local males. The difference is that one side was Muslim, and Arab (by descent or clientage), and backed by the imperial might of the caliphs; the other side was Khurrami, at least partly Kurdish, and so set apart from both the Muslim incomers and their Christian and their Zoroastrian neighbours, without any empire or kingdom to represent or protect them.

The Khurramis come across as rebels without much political organisation or experience. The only organisation above village level that Babak had was the Khurrami cult society, and this does seem to have given him contacts well beyond Azerbaijan: he became the leader of the Khurdamaye of the Upper Mesopotamia/Armenia region, as we have seen, and he may have cooperated with the Khurramis in the Jibal. They rebelled at least once during his revolt, in (218) 833, when virtually the entire mountainous area of western Iran from Isfahan in the south to the Caucasus in the north rose up in revolt. But when some 10,000 Khurramis fled from the Jibal, it was to the Byzantine empire that they went; they didn't join up with Babak, so it is hard to say how far the cooperation went.

Babak certainly didn't ally himself in an effective manner with the big power-holders in the region who might have an interest in opposing the caliphate. The Muslims were terrified of the idea of alliances between him and local Iranian rulers, such as those of Daylam and Tabaristan, but there doesn't seem to have been any cooperation; and in so far as he had dealings with the Byzantines, it was at a very late stage in his revolt. He did participate in the power struggles of the Armenian princes, who had their own disagreements with the caliphs. He would ally himself with them, and there were Armenians in Babak's army. But he was better at terrorising the Armenians than at

cooperating with them: they hated him as much as the Muslims did. It was an Armenian prince who betrayed him when he tried to flee after his defeat.

The reason that Babak's revolt lasted a long time is not that he had a genuine political alternative to the Abbasids, but rather that he operated in steep mountains, in a frontier region, at a time when the caliphate kept going into disarray – it is actually disorder at the centre that comes across as the crucial factor. He may have tried to develop some degree of formal organisation, he does at least seem to have had a standing army. But his troops operated much like the Khurdanaye, by raiding and pillaging. They would waylay caravans, murder tax officials, massacre local opponents, and occasionally ambush whole armies too, and then immediately withdraw to their inaccessible fortresses and mountain lairs, without any systematic attempt to establish any form of government in the region that we know of. Babak is said to have attracted highwaymen, brigands, and other troublemakers, as well as *sa'alik*, and one can well believe it: he occupied the twilight zone between private and public warfare, between criminal and political activities, that's familiar from some guerilla warriors and terrorists today.

In fact, if you go by Tabari, what Babak really craved was status as a local king, like the Armenian princes who constituted the cream of non-Muslim society in the region. He is said to have lived like an Iranian aristocrat, hunting with falcons with these princes and accumulating women when he was not conducting war, and he is quoted as telling his son that "One day as king is better than forty years as an abject slave"; stressing that what mattered was that "wherever I am or wherever I am spoken of, it will be as king". In the same vein, when his brother Abdallah faced execution in Baghdad and expected the king of Tabaristan to be his executioner, he praised God that he would be killed by a nobleman, and told the king that "tomorrow morning you will know that I am a nobleman (*dihqan*), God willing", meaning that he would face death without flinching.

All this has been taken to mean that Babak and his brothers were really aristocrats. But if there is any truth to these accounts, a more plausible interpretation would be that the former cowherd and his brothers had embraced the worldview of the Iranian nobility, according to which one lived for power and heroic deeds, ostentatious consumption of wine, women and song, and immortality in the renown one left behind. The Arab warlords that Babak was trying to bring down and the Armenian princes who

were their Iranian counterpart represented the pinnacle of the social world in which he had grown up. They were all he knew. He wanted to be one of them, just bigger and better.

The nature of the revolt.

Modern Iranian authors invariably interpret Babak's revolt in a nationalist vein, as a would-be liberator of the Iranians from Arab rule. It should be obvious from what I have said that to me he comes across to me as practically the opposite: a defender of a very local world, with no ambitions that we know of outside it. The reason Babak can be read as a would-be liberator of Iranians is that it happened to be Arab warlords and brigands who were the main bearers of Islam in Azerbaijan, so that the struggle against the colonists pitched Iranians against Arabs. But this was only true as long as the conflict remained local. The moment the caliphs began to despatch armies against Babak from the centre, many or most of the enemies that Babak confronted were Iranians themselves, and it was an Iranian general, the Afshin, who finally defeated him. So what we see in this revolt is not really Iranians against Arabs, but rather local Iranians who clung to the world in which they had grown up against other Iranians who had opted for the new world represented by Islam. It shows us new Iran versus old Iran, or if you like, Islamic Iran versus the Iran of late antiquity.

Patricia Crone