

The Beginnings of Islam in Afghanistan

Conquest, Acculturation, and Islamization

Arezou Azad

The conquest of Balkh in 708–9 marked the beginning of the Umayyad caliphate's control over the lands that are today Afghanistan.¹ Some of the people of Afghanistan rebelled against the new Damascus-based overlords. Others joined the militias that in 749 enabled the rival 'Abbasid caliphs to take over from the Umayyads. By the ninth century, the city of Balkh was being canonized as the Dome of Islam and its Muslim intellectuals memorialized as saints with sanctuaries deeply intertwined with the Islamic identity of their city of burial. How could the Islamic caliphate become so firmly embedded in classical and late antique Afghanistan's thousand-year-old civilization within the relatively short time span of a hundred and sixty years? What strategies did the Muslim conquerors use to establish their authority in Afghanistan and maintain an economically viable and politically sustainable engagement? These questions guide this chapter's investigations, which serve to test the conversion models proposed by Nehemiah Levtzion, Richard Bulliet, and Richard M. Eaton for neighboring parts of the Islamic world.²

These three scholars have all emphasized that large-scale patterns of conversion cannot be explained by popular, unsubstantiated statements alluding to an immediate and violent conversion by the sword. Nor can softer methods, such as conversion through political or economic patronage (e.g., for tax reasons), provide the full answer. Rather, under the umbrella of Muslim rule, the coexistence of multiple religions in the early Islamic period initiated a centuries-long process of acculturation and adaptation of rituals and belief systems. As the following pages show, similar trends can be detected in early medieval Afghanistan.

This chapter is divided into four parts. After an overview of the geographic context and the sources for the study of early Islamic history in Afghanistan, there

follows a historical sketch of Afghanistan before the Muslim arrival and of the Islamic conquests and the transition to Muslim rule. The chapter then explores the cross-fertilization of the Muslim conquerors' religious ideas with preexisting local beliefs in Afghanistan. Although the time period of a hundred and sixty years is broad, the state of research is still limited. For this reason, the discussions and conclusions of this chapter are necessarily tentative and anecdotal.

CONTEXTS AND SOURCES

In the eighth and ninth centuries, two successive caliphal dynasties—first the Umayyads, then the 'Abbasids—ruled over parts of Afghanistan. The period covered in this chapter begins with the establishment of Umayyad rule in 709, when the Muslim armies conquered Balkh once and for all. It closes in 870 with the de-facto 'Abbasid retreat after the takeover of Balkh by the Saffarid dynasts of Sistan. So far, no detailed study of Afghanistan in this crucial period has been undertaken, partly because of scholarly neglect and partly because of the tense security situation in Afghanistan that has made access to primary sources difficult. The tradition of limiting the discipline of Afghan Studies to the history of the nation-state of Afghanistan created in the eighteenth and the nineteenth century has further restricted the study of early Islam in Afghanistan.

Yet writing the early Islamic history of the region that later became Afghanistan fills important gaps in its cultural history. Nor is it a teleological exercise, given that while the boundaries of the modern nation-state are relatively new, those of its four main regional components are not. The regions of Herat and the west; Qandahar and the south; Balkh (today's Mazar-i Sharif) and the north; and Kabul and the east have all existed since late antiquity.³ In order to reconstruct the early Islamic history of Afghanistan, these regions need to be brought into one historical narrative. If we do so, Afghanistan obtains an early Islamic history that is based on scholarly evidence and embedded within the diachronic study of Afghanistan's various versions of Islam that this volume provides.

It is pertinent to understand how medieval Islamic scholars described Afghanistan's regions. They placed them within the provinces that they knew as Khurasan and Sistan. Khurasan was the Sasanian Empire's eastern province (satrapy) and home to the cities of Balkh and Herat in what is today Afghanistan, as well as Nishapur in Iran and Merv in Turkmenistan.⁴ Each of these cities was an oasis town that was part of a larger district known by the same name. Our knowledge of Umayyad Khurasan is limited, largely because of the inadequate source base for Umayyad history in general.⁵ In *The Nativist Prophets of Iran*, Patricia Crone attempted to break the impasse in understanding Umayyad Khurasan by assessing the impact on the development of Islam of the rebellions and supposed heresies that burgeoned in the region during the Umayyad occupation. Through Elton Daniel's monograph on

early 'Abbasid Khurasan, things come into sharper focus after the 'Abbasid revolution.⁶ Daniel inventoried the opposition movements that ensued after the treacherous murder in 755 of Abu Muslim al-Khurasani, the 'Abbasid governor in Khurasan and previous leader of the covert subversion known as the *da'wa* on behalf of the 'Abbasids, at the hands of the second 'Abbasid caliph, al-Mansur (r. 754–75).

To understand the effects of Umayyad rule on Afghanistan, historians are now turning to recently discovered documents that have been translated into English from Bactrian and Arabic by Nicholas Sims-Williams and Geoffrey Khan.⁷ The corpus includes some 250 documents dating from the fourth to the eighth century. Most, if not all, are believed to originate in the family archive of the local rulers of Rob, in Tukharistan. The corpus is marked by its bilingual nature, with documents written in Bactrian or Arabic following different documentary protocols and templates, sometimes within the same year. The Bactrian documents bring exciting new material to the study of Umayyad and very early 'Abbasid Khurasan, providing a reality check on the standard sources for the study of early Islamic Afghanistan. The standard sources include the medieval Arabic political and geo-administrative accounts cited in this chapter by Ibn al-Faqih al-Hamadani (*fl.* 903), Ibn Khurradadbiḥ (d. 911?), Qudama ibn Ja'far (d. 922?), al-Tabari (d. 923), and Yaqut al-Rumi (d. 1229).⁸ Such purportedly universal chronicles and reports come with two main caveats, namely that they were written in the distant 'Abbasid center, Baghdad, and that they were produced at least a century after the events that they recount. In their accounts of Khurasan, this inevitably leads to exoticisms, occasional lapses, and political biases (such as seeking to depict the Umayyads in a negative light to justify the 'Abbasid takeover in 749).

Local histories provide another important check against these inaccuracies. The *Faza'il-i Balkh*, a local history of Balkh written by a certain Shaykh al-Islam al-Wa'iz in the late twelfth century, nuances the teleological 'Abbasid narratives of wholesale conversion.⁹ A recent discovery of a fragmentary twelfth-century history of Herat by 'Abd al-Rahman Fami is another local source that will recalibrate our knowledge of Umayyad and early 'Abbasid Afghanistan.¹⁰

After Khurasan, Sistan is the second medieval region to which a number of major Iranian and Afghan cities belonged. It included the Afghan cities and regions of Ghazna (modern-day Ghazni), Zarang, Bust, Qandahar, Kabul, Kabulistan, and Zabulistan (the lands between Ghazna and Kabul). Qandahar was better known in the medieval sources as al-Rukhkhaj and Zamindawar.¹¹ Zarang already became an Umayyad base in 652–53, and it was from there that the Arabs undertook their eastward campaigns. An anonymous local history used mainly for the study of the Saffarid dynasty, the *Tarikh-i Sistan* (completed in 1062), also provides interesting details on the early years of Islam in Sistan. C. E. Bosworth's monograph *Sistān under the Arabs*, even fifty years after its publication, has not been surpassed in its extensive coverage of the subject.¹²

Yet the local histories also come with their limitations, notably the obscurity of their authors and their poor manuscript-survival rates, which sometimes make it difficult to verify their accounts. For the historian in particular, another caveat is the authorial license established in the literary genres (*faza'il*, *tabaqat*, *tarikh*) from which the local histories grew, which allowed the authors of such texts to prioritize the ideal state of places in an Islamic imagination at the expense of factual accuracy.¹³ An example of these problems is the *Faza'il-i Balkh*, which was written in Arabic in 1214 (this original is now lost) and translated into Persian in 1278 (recensions of which survive): it has a spurious author and translator, and its surviving manuscripts date from three to seven centuries later. The main surviving local history of Badakhshan dates from as late as the eighteenth century.¹⁴ Local histories of Kabul date from even later, and there do not appear to be any surviving medieval local histories from the Qandahar region at all.¹⁵ Some of these gaps can be filled by using documentary and archaeological evidence, such as the Bactrian documents discussed earlier and the excavation reports of the Délégation Archéologique Française en Afghanistan (DAFA), the Italian archaeological mission in Ghazni, or the more recent discoveries at Mes Aynak.¹⁶

BEFORE THE MUSLIMS ARRIVED

In order to test the Islamization process in Afghanistan, we must necessarily begin with the prelude and context for the Muslim conquests in Bactria, a vast province centered on northern Afghanistan and subjected to Sasanian viceregal control. Prior to Muslim rule, three out of the four Afghan regions—Balkh, Herat, and Sistan—were integrated within the Sasanian orbit. Balkh and Herat belonged to Khurasan, which was one of four Sasanian provinces governed from Merv by an *ispahbadh*, or Sasanian general. Effectively, this meant that the Sasanian footprint on Balkh and Herat was light. Practically, this translated into an engagement focused on the exaction of taxes and the policing of the frontiers with the Hephthalite domains in Central Asia and eastern and southern Afghanistan, and with the domains of the Chinese T'ang Empire. In economic terms, Balkh and Herat also served as Sasanian mint towns.

This light Sasanian footprint can be demonstrated rather easily in the region of Bactra (which was Arabicized to *Balkh*). The conquest accounts often stand out for the limited presence of Sasanian administrative and military machinery. In 705, the Umayyad general commanding Balkh's final conquest, Qutayba ibn Muslim (d. 715 or 716), was met by the *ispahbadh* of Balkh and some local dignitaries. In 708–9, the *ispahbadh* was one of the local rulers to whom the Hephthalite rebel Nizak Tarkhan wrote when he was trying to unite against Qutayba the local aristocracy of Tukharistan (the subregion, north of the Hindu Kush, of which Balkh was the capital). The *barmak*, the leader of the Buddhist Naw Bahar



FIGURE 6. Site believed to be the Naw Bahar Temple of Balkh. (Photograph © Arezou Azad)

monastery, also appears to have been one of the architects of this revolt; his wife was taken prisoner.¹⁷

The lack of any reference in the sources to a princely leader in Balkh at the time of Qutayba's advances may be explained by the power of the *barmak*. The source of his power was the Naw Bahar, which was not only a Buddhist religious complex but also a hub for major landholding, agricultural, and revenue-generating enterprises that extended over two-thirds of the large Balkh oasis, an area of more than 72 square kilometers.¹⁸ The transmission of Sasanian origin myths in the sources on Balkh (notably the Zoroastrian legends that the prophet Zoroaster died there and that his patron, Gushtasp, had built the city), as well as the presence of Zoroastrian fire temples in the region, points to Sasanian cultural and religious influences.¹⁹ The archaeological remains at Chashma-yi Shafa', near Balkh, currently under investigation by the DAFA, may also support this argument.²⁰

Looking beyond Balkh, in Tukharistan's rural metropolises of Samangan and Rob, we find an even weaker Sasanian presence. While making frequent references to Sasanian taxes, the Bactrian documents from this era provide rather scant

notice of Zoroastrian or Buddhist deities. In this part of late Sasanian and early Islamic Tukharistan, the principal objects of worship were a set of local deities, such as Zhun, Wakhsh, and Kamird.²¹ Like that of pre-Islamic Balkh, the population of Tukharistan was diverse: people spoke and read many languages, including Bactrian, Turkic, Syriac, Pali, and Sanskrit.²² Since the Bactrian documents are discussed in more detail below, it is worth noting that Bactrian belonged to the Iranian language group and was written in Cyrillic script. It was a legacy of the conquests of Alexander the Great and the Seleucid Empire that emerged from them between the fourth and the first century B.C.E.

Once we reach the southern point of the region of Balkh, at Bamiyan, indications of a possible Sasanian presence diminish quickly. The Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Xuanzang traveled through the area in the 630s and described the two colossal Buddha statues at Bamiyan, which were probably built in the sixth or the seventh century.²³ Late antique Bamiyan appears to have been ruled by a dynasty that was perhaps of Hephthalite origin but was certainly subject to the prince (*yabghu*) of the western Turks. The dynasty was still ruling in the first quarter of the eighth century, when it continued to profess Buddhism.²⁴

With regard to Herat farther west, “Harev” (*hryw*) is listed in the inscription of the Sasanian ruler Shapur I (r. 239–70) at Ka’ba-yi Zardusht, near Persepolis, in Iran. The name “Hariy” (*hr’y*) is also mentioned in the Pahlavi (middle Persian) catalogue of the provincial capitals of the empire.²⁵ Moreover, Sasanian seals and engraved gemstones have been found in and around Herat.²⁶ Kushano-Bactrian coins have also been studied, revealing Sasanian fire temples and other iconography typical of Bactrian coins from this period.²⁷ However, the Sasanian grip did not extend into Herat’s hinterland. There, the northern branch of the Hephthalites and their political successors continued to rule in the Ghurid mountains and river valleys well into the Islamic period.

The third area that was part of the Sasanian domains was Sistan, a region that was south of the Hindu Kush in Afghanistan (centered around Zarang and Nimruz) and in southwestern Iran (centered at Zahidan).²⁸ The area was a shallow basin in which civilizations clustered around the Helmand riverine areas. *Sistan*—the Arabic form of the name—derives from the Middle Persian *Sakastan*, which is also mentioned in another inscription of the Sasanid ruler Shapur I at Naqsh-i Rostam, near Persepolis.²⁹ When the Umayyad Muslim armies established their base at Zarang in 652/3, Zoroastrianism was well established, marked by the presence of a chief *mobadh* and *hirbadh*, while the major fire temple of Karkuya continued to function long after the Umayyad conquest.³⁰ The Nestorian Church was represented with a bishopric that continued well into the Islamic period.³¹ However, there remained one part of the Sistan region that was not under Sasanian or Islamic control for two centuries, namely Qandahar (viz. al-Rukhkhaj and Zamindawar).

This leads us to the fourth region, which was Kabul and Zabulistan, the latter lying between Kabul and the Kabul River Valley on the north and the territories around the confluence of the Helmand River and Arghandab River of Qandahar and based around the city of Ghazna. From the third century B.C.E. to the first century C.E., the region had formed part of the Greco-Bactrian realm. It was subsequently overrun by nomadic tribes from the north, including the Kushans, Kidarites, and Hephthalites. Buddhism flourished there, as did Indic cults. The Zunbils and Kabulshahs were persistent in their resistance to Muslim rule for some two centuries, until the Saffarids of Sistan temporarily subdued them in 870.³² This did not prevent the Muslim armies and traders from carrying out business, in which Kabul served as an entrepôt for the India trade. The region was not brought into the *dar al-Islam* (realm of Islam) until the Ghaznavid conquests of the eleventh century.

CONQUEST AND THE TRANSITION TO CALIPHAL ADMINISTRATION

Back in the seventh and eighth centuries, the Umayyad Muslim conquests had toppled the Sasanian Empire. The fall of the Sasanian administrative capital at Ctesiphon (20 miles southeast of modern Baghdad) in 637 and the assassination of the last Sasanian emperor, Yazdgird III, in 651 at Merv had a domino effect. Farther east, the Muslim conquests were by no means immediate. The population of Afghanistan went through a repetitive pattern of submission, rebellion, and resistance, and eventually final submission. Balkh was the first city to come under direct Umayyad control, after its conquest by the Umayyad general Qutayba ibn Muslim in 709. Having previously garrisoned twelve kilometers away at al-Baruqan, the Muslim soldiers and their *mawla* (clients of Arab tribesmen) moved into the city of Balkh in 724/5.³³

The Umayyad dynasty ruled over Khurasan from its regional command center at Merv, following the example of the Sasanians. It was not the only continuation of Sasanian practice. The Barmakid family, who had previously run most of the district through the Buddhist Naw Bahar estate, were now proving to be useful local operators for the Umayyads. The caliphate was stretched far from its capital at Damascus, and needed to co-opt and eventually assimilate local power-holders. Among the most popular medieval Islamic conversion narratives is that of the formerly Buddhist Barmakid family. Islamic accounts describe the head *barmak* as a Muslim *mawla* who voluntarily traveled to Syria to declare his loyalty to the caliph Hisham ibn 'Abd al-Malik (r. 723–42). The Barmakids' influence increased after their support for the 'Abbasid struggle against the Umayyads, leading to the 'Abbasid takeover of the caliphate in 749.³⁴ The next generation of Barmakids formed the immediate entourage of the caliph Harun al-Rashid

(r. 786–809) in the new caliphal capital, Baghdad. There, Yahya ibn Barmak (d. 805) and his sons Fadl (d. 808) and Ja'far (d. 803) served as vizier and governor, respectively. In the tales of the *Arabian Nights*, the relationship between Harun al-Rashid and the Barmakids was turned into legend. The Barmakids had become an Afghan dynasty that permeated the highest echelons of caliphal power, both in the imperial center in Baghdad and in the vital province of Khurasan, where they participated in the creation of caliphal policies and practices. Yet they did not go native in Baghdad—at least not entirely. Rather, the Barmakid family used their contacts and influence in the western and eastern lands of the caliphate to bring together two previously disparate worlds. Yahya ibn Barmak (d. 805), for example, commissioned translations of Sanskrit texts and patronized a versified life of the Buddha.³⁵

Other indigenous winners during the first hundred and sixty years of caliphal rule in Afghanistan were the local rulers of Rob, a town lying a hundred and thirty kilometers to the southeast of Balkh, in Tukharistan. The Arabic documents from the Bactrian corpus attest the caliphal tax administration in this rural area, which required land surveys for the calculation of land-tax assessments and the issuance of tax receipts. The Bactrian documents contain the very first reference to the caliphate's *kharaj* tax on agricultural land and its produce, two decades before the next-earliest reference appears in the corpus of Egyptian papyri. As Geoffrey Khan has argued, the term *kharaj* stems from a Middle Iranian etymology, thus pointing to the Muslim adoption of elements of the pre-Islamic tax system of Khurasan.³⁶ Influential landholders, who colluded with the Umayyads and early 'Abbasids and became their *mawlas* (clients), reaped rewards. A case in point is the Kamird-far family, to whom the bilingual Bactrian document corpus probably belonged. The family managed large tracts of arable land and orchards for which they were consistently taxed.

But, as might be expected, not all local rulers or members of the old guard won out or supported the Umayyad project. Rival local elites vied for influence with the Muslim newcomers or used the new overlords to help settle old accounts. The *khar* of Rob, for example, showed Qutayba ibn Muslim an alternative access route to the fortress where his nemesis, the apostate-rebel Nizak Tarkhan, was hiding.³⁷ Along with his family and supporters, Nizak eventually met with an inglorious end: the Umayyads slaughtered thousands of them and ate bread made from flour milled with the copious amounts of blood that flowed from the massacre.³⁸

The Umayyads in Afghanistan faced opposition again after they reinstated the poll tax on new converts. Rebellions broke out in the Balkh, Herat, and Sistan regions. The uprising of a rebel named al-Harith ibn Surayj was particularly popular in the areas around Balkh, lasting from 734 to 746. The Baghdad-based chronicler al-Tabari (d. 923) reported that al-Harith followed the doctrine of the Murji'ite, who professed that faith alone was sufficient to be a Muslim.³⁹ This attracted support from those converts who were told that their conversion was not valid unless

accompanied by ritual acts. Al-Harith challenged the selection process for the governorship of Balkh, directly confronting the governor Nasr ibn Sayyar (d. 748) and even the caliph about the matter. Almost immediately afterward, the Umayyads were challenged again by rebels with strong support in Khurasan. This time the rebellion was led by Abu Muslim and the 'Abbasids, who also sought to bring the caliphate into line with Islamic principles. In 749, they succeeded in overthrowing the Umayyad caliphate and establishing their own in its place.

Moving westward, Herat was only of secondary importance to the Umayyads compared with other Khurasani cities like Merv, Nishapur, and Balkh. As a result, we read very little about Herat in the sources on this period, though Herat's status would certainly change by the time of the Timurids, as shown in the chapters in this volume by Nushin Arbabzadah and Jürgen Paul. One popular account describes the rebel Ustadhsis leading a major opposition to the early 'Abbasids from 767 to at least 770, during which he took control of Herat and Bushanj. Ustadhsis killed hundreds of Arab tribesmen and numerous 'Abbasid leaders in the process. He had converted to the Zoroastrian reformist doctrines propounded by Bihafarid (d. ca. 748 or 749), which embraced practices and prohibitions inspired by Islam. Ustadhsis's supporters are said to have numbered three hundred thousand.⁴⁰ He eventually escaped to a fort in Badghis, and thereafter Khazim ibn Khuzayma, the general of the 'Abbasid caliph al-Mansur (r. 754–75), defeated the rebels and arrested Ustadhsis.⁴¹

In the south, Sistan's capital, Zarang, surrendered to the Muslim armies in 652/3. It subsequently became an important base from which Umayyad and early 'Abbasid campaigns were undertaken in the east against the *zunbils*, local rulers of al-Rukhkhaj (Qandahar) and Zamindawar, as well as against the Kabulshah rulers of Kabul. Umayyad coins of the Arab-Sasanian type were minted in Zarang, and taxes were collected. The high tax burdens placed on the local population seem to have contributed to a rise in support for the Kharijites, who had fled from Kerman, in Iran, where they had earlier been defeated by the Umayyads.⁴² The Kharijites continued their militant campaigns in the small towns of Khurasan and Sistan of Afghanistan until the reign of the Saffarid dynasty between 861 and 1003. The vulnerability of the local population in Sistan and Bust to Kharijite attacks lent a *raison d'être* to the bands of local Muslim fighters known as *'ayyarun*. In time, these fighters gave rise to the Saffarid dynasty, which would go on to end non-Muslim control of Kabul.⁴³

Control over Afghanistan brought financial gain to the Umayyads and 'Abbasids alike. For example, according to Ibn Khurradadbih (d. ca. 911), in the financial year 826–27, Khurasan alone contributed 44.8 million dirhams of *kharaj* tax to the caliphal coffers.⁴⁴ The loss of this tax revenue to the Saffarid dynasty is frequently cited as having precipitated the overall demise of the 'Abbasid caliphate.⁴⁵ Control over the cities of Afghanistan, such as Balkh, also enabled direct access into the

lucrative trade with India via the land routes of the so-called Silk Road. By tapping into existing mercantile networks, the caliphate linked up with the wealthy *kafir* (infidel, non-Muslim) lands of India and Central Asia, thus bringing such exotica as elephants from India and musk from Tibet to the Islamic world and beyond. The Muslim chroniclers tell us that such long-distance trade filled Afghan bazaars with horses, camels, dried fruit, wine, spices, sweets, and textiles.⁴⁶

A NEW RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

The transition to caliphal rule also brought the new religion of Islam to Afghanistan. So how did Islam embed itself in Afghan society? More specifically, who were its proponents, and how did they transmit their new religious knowledge? What was the rate of conversion to Islam, and what may have motivated people to convert? And what strategies may people have used to retain local practices within the syncretistic environment that the caliphate inadvertently created? The following section tackles these questions by considering the case of Bactria (that is, Balkh and Tukharistan). In Balkh, as elsewhere in the caliphate, the proponents of Islam were the Muslim scholars, or *'ulama*. Forty of the seventy *'ulama* of Balkh described in the *Faza'il-i Balkh* lived there during the first two centuries of Islam. They were an eclectic mix of Arabs and *mawla* converts who had come from all over the caliphate, from the Nile to the Oxus. The *'ulama* in the early days of Islam were not professional Muslims as such, since their pursuit of Islamic scholarship was largely a private vocation, or at best a part-time job. The forty Muslim scholars of Balkh, who are described in the *Faza'il-i Balkh* at variable lengths of between half a page and more than thirty pages each, studied and memorized the Quran and its exegeses, along with hundreds of Hadith. They did this while keeping their day jobs as merchants, landowners, and suchlike: to be an *'alim*, a religious scholar, required private wealth.⁴⁷ This presents a great contrast with the lucrative later economy of Islam discussed in R. D. McChesney's chapter in this volume, which reveals various options for earning a living through religion by the sixteenth century.

The knowledge acquired by Balkh's *'ulama* was passed down through the scholarly generations known as *silsilas* (chains or lineages). The method of teaching was the *suhba* (disputation) carried out during a gathering (*majlis*) held in an informal setting such as a private home or a room in a mosque. This lack of educational formality gave access to Islamic learning to women, some of whom became scholars and teachers in their own right.⁴⁸ The *majlis* gatherings provided the glue for the *silsila* lineages of students and disciples who continued the transmission of religious knowledge.⁴⁹ This trajectory of Muslim education and professionalization shows that Balkh resembled other early Muslim religious centers farther west, most notably Damascus and Baghdad.⁵⁰

As a corollary of their religious knowledge, a large proportion of Balkh's *'ulama* distinguished themselves as pious ascetics (*zuhhad*). Men such as Ibrahim ibn Adham Mansur (d. 777/8) and Shaiq ibn Ibrahim al-Zahid al-Balkhi (d. 809/10) were especially celebrated for their asceticism. A *zahid* (ascetic) was someone who was unconcerned with the world, but not necessarily someone seeking mystical communion with God. The latter could possibly be a Sufi. However, the *Faza'il-i Balkh* does not use the term "Sufi." It is only from the fifteenth century onward in the Sufi hagiographical literature discussed later in this volume, in the chapter by Jürgen Paul, that these early mystics were retrospectively institutionalized as the founding fathers of Sufism. They are still remembered as such today.

Balkh's early Muslim scholars also included legal experts who advised and judged on the application of Shari'a in people's daily lives. Their remit was both broad and specific, covering a wide range of issues that included diet, personal hygiene, inheritance, property, and marriage rights. Despite the fact that they were appointed directly by the caliph, the early *qazis* (judges) of Balkh were powerful and independent. The *qazis* presented themselves as protectors of the general populace against the corruption and impunity of political rulers.⁵¹ Their confrontational stance against the political establishment may have led to a purported disbandment of the *qazi* establishment in Balkh in the ninth and tenth centuries. In its stead, the political authorities installed a system of courts known as *mazalim*, which specialized in the redress of grievances. By this means, complaints by members of the public would be heard and judged directly in public by the political leader, whether the governor or the vizier.⁵²

While we can identify the proponents of early Islam, thanks to the written testimony left by the *'ulama* who were the main authors of our primary sources, it is much harder to assess the effects of Islam on the wider population. Richard Bulliet has estimated that by the mid-eleventh century this part of the caliphate acquired a 90-percent Muslim population.⁵³ However, his method of using personal names as indications of conversion is arguably problematic. Moreover, such quantitative data do not tell us about the qualitative nature of events. What motivated people to convert, and under what circumstances did they change their religion? Here the Bactrian documents provide a significant piece in the puzzle, giving us a direct and unfiltered look into people's daily lives from the Umayyad period to the first two decades of 'Abbasid rule in the 770s. A study of the documents from both the Arabic and Bactrian language groups brings to life the case of Kamird-far (also known as Sa'id) and Zeran over a five-year period from 750 to 755. It is to this case study that we now turn.

In Bactrian document BT IX, dated to the year 750 (E.B.D. 527), three out of four brothers (named Kamird-far, Wahran, and Mir) agreed to own homes and estates equally, and to "possess the woman [Bactrian *zin*] whose name [is] Zeran . . . , as

it is not necessary for us to destroy our house.”⁵⁴ The document provides crucial evidence that in Rob, Tukharistan, fraternal polyandry was practiced until at least this late in the period of Islamic rule. The corpus of Bactrian documents ends here, and we cannot know how long the practice continued. But if we are to believe some of the Arabic heresiographical literature, or al-Biruni’s *History of India* (completed in 1030), then fraternal polyandry continued to be practiced until the first half of the eleventh century, and possibly longer.⁵⁵ That the practice had an early precedent is absolutely clear from the very first document in the Bactrian corpus. This is a marriage contract between two brothers and one woman called Ralik, dated to the year 333 (110 E.B.D.). The contract emphasizes that this practice “is the established custom in the land,” meaning that it was already in existence before the mid-fourth century.⁵⁶ The document also includes a justifying clause about “the need to keep the house together.” Thus, the practice of fraternal polyandry attested in the mid-eighth century may well be a continuation of an age-old custom from this part of Bactria. The impetus behind the practice was principally financial. Bactrian households were taxed in house units, which necessitated minimizing the inheritance into one line, thus limiting it to one wife shared by two or more brothers.⁵⁷

However, the story does not end here. Arabic document 29 (dated to 755) may refer to Kamird-far, one of the three brothers who married Zeran. The reference here is to the marriage of a convert to Islam called Sa’id (the Arabic name for Kamird-far) with a woman called Zeran, a manumitted slave who bore him four children. If this is indeed the same Kamird-far as in document BT I X, then we may well ask what led to this sudden shift from fraternal polyandry. The answer seems to lie again in the fiscal system that gave rise to fraternal polyandry in the first place: because the caliphate changed its house-based tax system into a tax on individuals. Once this Muslim tax system came into being, it was no longer necessary to share wives.⁵⁸

The third question to be explored relates to the antiquity of early Islamic Afghan rituals, and specifically the extent of Islamic syncretism with preexisting Afghan religious practices. Even in the Muslim homeland of the Hijaz, syncretism has been the mainstay of Islam. For example, both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars agree that in the *hajj* Muhammad reinstated a preexisting pilgrimage ritual. Several Western scholars also hold that the Prophet incorporated rituals from Arabian paganism, litholatriy (that is, stone worship), and even Judaism.⁵⁹ In Balkh, the situation was no different. The *Faza’il-i Balkh* makes reference to the veneration of multiple sacred sites, notably shrines built for the ‘*ulama* in Balkh between the eighth and the twelfth century. In the eyes of Shaykh al-Islam al-Wa’iz, the author of the *Faza’il-i Balkh*, what made these shrines sacred was not only the saintly body that lay buried in them but the pre-Islamic antiquity of the places where they were built. The author attributed to these places a history that went back as far as the Old

Testament. All twenty-seven of the shrines to *‘ulama* located within the city of Balkh were concentrated in five particular points in the city. One by one, Shaykh al-Islam al-Wa‘iz wove these sites into a narrative of sacred landscape. When superimposed on a map of medieval Balkh, the sites appear in a mandala-like constellation along the cardinal points of the compass and around a mound located at their spiritual (if not spatial) center.

It is not inconceivable that the Muslim sacred landscape of Balkh has a Buddhist past. Buddhism began to be institutionalized in the second century by the court of the Kushan king Kanishka I (r. ca. 127–ca. 140). Later, in the seventh and eighth centuries, Balkh’s landscape was described by Chinese pilgrims as being dotted with hundreds of Buddhist stupa shrines. Among Balkh’s Buddhist monasteries, the Nava Vihara was by far the largest. The Nava Vihara’s monks studied the religious teaching of the Shrivakayana (Vehicle of Listeners), to which the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang referred by the pejorative name of Hinayana (Lesser Vehicle).⁶⁰ After the Islamic conquest, the monastery’s Sanskrit name, Nava Vihara (which means “New Monastery”), was Persianized to *Naw Bahar* and became the namesake of one of Balkh’s three sacred gateways.

In the hypothetical but very possible scenario that, during the first century and a half of Islamic rule, Muslims adopted existing sacred sites and added to them, Balkh appears as a highly syncretic sacred landscape. In this view, the Buddhist past was melded with origin narratives from Zoroastrian and biblical sources. For example, the oldest of the five sacred sites in Balkh that al-Wa‘iz listed in his *Faza’il-i Balkh* is Gushtasp’s Mound (*tall-i Gushtasp*). He attributed to it the following biblical connection:

According to Anas ibn Malik . . . it is related by the Prophet (may God’s prayers and peace be upon him and his family) that Job the Forbearer (may God’s prayer’s be upon him) is at rest on Gushtasp’s Mound.⁶¹ At each gate there are seventy thousand angels praying for God’s mercy and praising and glorifying him, and the recompense for that will be bestowed upon the people of Balkh.⁶²

While the Buddhist meaning of Gushtasp’s Mound was lost by the time al-Wa‘iz wrote this account, in the late twelfth century, its sacredness was retained. In Zoroastrian tradition, Gushtasp had been the royal patron of Zoroaster. Such a continuity of sacredness has many parallels elsewhere in the Islamic world. By comparison, when looking at dozens of Anatolian sanctuaries that were transferred from one religion to another, F. W. Hasluck concluded in the 1920s that narratives of sacredness perpetuate the idea that particular places—both natural and man-made—have a quality that outlives the vicissitudes of time.⁶³ Naturally, Muslims did not adopt sites such as Gushtasp’s Mound without reconfiguring their symbolic meanings within Islamic language and imagery. But these sites nonetheless continued to be sacred and iconic.



FIGURE 7. The Naw Bahar, site of a fifth- through eighth-century Buddhist monastery, Balkh, 2009. (Photograph © Arezou Azad)

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter's study of Afghanistan's early encounter with Islam has highlighted the fact that the historical development of Islam in the region varied between the areas to the north and the south of the Hindu Kush, and those between the east and west of the country. In the eighth and ninth centuries, the main interest of the Umayyads and 'Abbasids lay in the north and southwest, in Balkh, Tukharistan, Sistan, and, to a lesser extent, Herat. In order to ensure these regions' political and economic allegiance to the distant caliphal capitals, the agents of the caliphate co-opted Afghan elites, including the Barmakids of Balkh and the *khars* of Rob. Islamization progressed over centuries in a slow and adaptive process, during which time Afghanistan saw the continuation of old religious practices within an Islamic language. By the tenth century, Afghanistan's Islamic scholars in the north and southwest had developed scholarly and professional religious specializations in much the same way as elsewhere in the caliphate. But in the south and southeast (that is, in Kabul, Zabulistan, and Qandahar), Islamization did not begin until the tenth and eleventh centuries. Even so, this did not hinder the caliphate from establishing firm trade links with such *kafir* lands so as to tap into the high-value India trade.

Much as in other parts of the caliphate, early Islam developed in a syncretic environment in the lands that we now call Afghanistan. But unlike anywhere else in the caliphate, in Afghanistan Buddhism fused with Zoroastrianism, early Abrahamic traditions, and local cult practices, as well as with Islam. By looking at this unique context, this chapter has tried to test the models proposed by Levtzion

and others. The conclusion must be not that Islam embedded itself in medieval Afghan society as a finished product but rather that the medieval people of Afghanistan gave early Islam some of its shape and color. For example, the early Murji'ite movement in Balkh (which according to the *Faza'il-i Balkh* was even known as Murjiabad, "Land of the Murji'ites") enabled people to convert to Islam without abandoning their age-old religious practices and rituals. Meanwhile, the Muslim conquerors and their local clients developed power-sharing strategies that secured an economically viable and politically sustainable Muslim engagement in Afghanistan. From the very early stages of Islamic history, this cocktail of religious combinations led to multiple versions of Islam in Afghanistan, which form a fitting backdrop to the developments described in the following chapters.