

SURVIVAL OF ZOROASTRIANS AFTER THE ARAB CONQUEST OF IRAN

Dr. Kersey Antia, Nov 17, 2018; updated Dec 28, 2018

In *Sistan Under the Arabs*,¹ C.E. Bosworth provides the description of the fire-temple by a 13th century geographer: the building was surmounted by two domes, each of these had a horn curving towards the other like the horns of a bull. Beneath these domes was the altar itself, with its fire, which was never allowed to extinguish. It was attended to by many priests, who sat twenty cubits from the fire and veiled their mouth lest the fire be polluted. He kept the fire continuously burning with tamarisk logs by means of a pair of silver tongs. Thus, there is evidence for Zoroastrianism surviving in Sistan at least up to the 13th century and as noted by me earlier, it survived in its remote regions until the 19th century.

From the meagre information provided by the *Ta'rikh-i Sistan*, we learn that there was in Zarang the Mobede-Mobedan named Shapur, and that the fire temple of Karkuya and its sacred flame remained intact after the Muslims came. But Shapur was then executed and his fire-temple razed.

The Chief Survey Officer with the Seistan Arbitration Mission, mentions seeing numerous ruins relating to Zoroastrians: "Of the period when the religion of Zoroaster flourished in Sistan there are abundant traces, and there can be no doubt that this form of religious belief flourished in Sistan long after the country was conquered by the Arabs, and there must have been large communities of Gabrs in Sistan who were tolerated by the early conquerors before the latter developed the bigotry that finally quenched the Sacred Fires and destroyed the altars on which they burned. He also witnessed many towers of silence, especially near the site of Ram Shahrstan, to the south of Za-rang, which according to many writers was the ancient capital of Sistan. One ruin there was specifically described to this Surveyor as an *Atish-kada* or fire-temple.

According to Bosworth, "During ar-Rabi's governorship a more systematic policy of Islamisation was introduced. More Arab scholars were brought in and local people were set to learning the Qur'an and the basic precepts of Islam (the text of the *Ta'rikh-i Sistan*, p. 91, has *marduman-ra jabr kardand* "they compelled people")."

He adds, "Yet despite official policy – which at this time was by no

1 Bosworth, Clifford Edmund. *Sistān Under the Arabs from the Islamic Conquest to the Rise of the Šaffārids (30-250/651-864)*. Rome: Ismeo, 1968, pp. 651-864.

means unanimously in favour of actively encouraging non-Arabs to join the Muslim *umma* – conversions cannot have been either numerous or quick. With the fall of the Sasanid monarchy, Zoroastrianism was deprived of its temporal backing. The higher levels of the official hierarchy, those of the Mobadh-Mobadhan at the top and the Ahuramazd-Mobadhan just below him, now collapsed, and this disappearance of leadership contributed to the speedy Islamisation of the Iranian upper classes and of the cities and larger towns. But in the countryside and villages, the local Mobadhs often retained something of their old influence over their flocks. The flat and open configuration of Sistan worked against it remaining a major stronghold of the old faith, as did the mountainous regions of for instance Azerbaijan and Fars down to the 10th and early 11th centuries. However, we have seen that the local consciousness in Sistan had strong feelings of solidarity with the ancient culture and traditions of Iran.” The *Ta'rikh-i Sistan* mentions an extra item of revenue, called the *mal-i-adharuyi* which seemed to be a payment for the land of fire-temples. It also mentions that “in 912 the Samanid governor Mansur b. Ishaq, disposed from power by a pro-Saffarid revolt, took refuge in the house of a friendly Zoroastrian (*gabr*). Zoroastrianism in Khurasan and Kirman also kept some vitality. There were in the 10th century still significant numbers of its adherents in Quhistan – a fact which may have favoured the profound grip which Isma'ili extremist Shi'ism later acquired there – and a fire-temple still existed in Herat. In Kirman, Zoroastrians remained numerous and influential” until the end of the 9th century.

It seems the Islamisation policy of ar-Rahi did not yield speedy results. A stricter policy for suppressing the Zoroastrian faith was later attempted. According to Jahiz a deliberate policy was enforced by Ziyad for extinguishing the sacred fires of the Zoroastrians in Fars, the heartland of the Sasanid empire, starting with the fire-temple of Kariyan near Daeabjird. The situation, however, was different on the borders of the Islamic empire, where the hold of relatively small bands of Arab soldiers was quite precarious.

According to Bosworth (p. 24), Zuyad ordered that when 'Ubaidallah b. Abi Bakra arrived in Sistan, he was to kill Shapur, the chief Herbadh, and extinguish the sacred fires of the Zoroastrians. So 'Ubaidallah went off to Sistan with these orders. The dihqans and Zoroastrians of Sistan sought him out and told him that this course of action could only drive them into revolt. Then the Muslims of Sistan protested to him, ‘Did our Prophet, God’s prayers be upon him, or the Rightly-Guided Caliphs, ever do anything like this against a community with whom they had made a peace treaty, that we should in fact put this command into practice? Since this certainly was never done before, we should not do it now, for it would be contrary to the sacred law of Islam and to the terms

of the peace treaty’.

They wrote a letter to the Caliphal court setting forth this view. The reply came back, ‘The order should not be carried out. These people are in a treaty relationship (*mu’ahad-and*), and that place of worship [sc. the fire-temple of Zarang] is their own property. They say that they worship God, and that they hold this fire-temple and this *khurshid* (? site for solar worship) not as places which they adore as such, but just as we have the mihrabs of mosques and the Ka’ba at Mecca. Since this is indeed the case, the temple should not be destroyed: the Jews retain their synagogues, the Christians their churches and the Zoroastrians their fire-temples. All are in treaty relationship with us, so how can we make any distinction between their places of worship? Moreover, they resent the destruction of any object or place which is of ancient standing. If our Prophet, God’s prayers be upon him, had so wished, he would not have left any of this in existence, but would have extirpated all unbelief and all religions other than Islam. But he did not do this, and he did not uproot them; instead, he made peace with them on the basis of their paying the poll-tax or *jizya*. May it be to the glory of Islamic religion that whilst ever the world and time exist, the Muslims who hold fast to the essential truths of their beliefs and religion (although both seeing and realizing the defects of their own personal faith), may perpetually renew their thanks to God, He is exalted!’” (*Tarikh-i-Sistan* pp. 17-18). This is so much in conformity with the ruling of the Prophet about the Zoroastrians of Bahrain conquered by the Arabs as noted by me earlier. How one wishes the Arab conquerors of Iran had heeded his ruling and not succumbed to Persian wealth, women and enslavements on a mass scale perhaps on a scale never known before.

“The element of Zoroastrian leadership in Sistan continued all though the 7th century”, and there is a mention of a Zoroastrian as the spokesman of the people of Sistan.

There was a serious rebellion in Bust in 767 in which two Zoroastrians, Adharuya al-Majusi and Marzban al-Majusi (Mobed and governor of the Magi) are also mentioned as leaders. Bosworth writes “Their forces were soon strong enough to attack Sistan itself; Yazid b. al-Mansur was worsted in battle,” and retired to Nishapur. Since tribute to the Calif was not paid “because of the weakness and divisions of the Sistan Arabs” since the time of al-Hajjaj, subjugation of Sistan could not have been possible without fully securing the base of Bust.

According to the *Ta’rikh-i Sistan*, Hamzawas was of Iranian dihqan stock. He was also called “Hamza b. Adharak,” Adharak being derived from Iranian *adhar* “fire”.

According to Shahrastani, Hamza had joined the Khariji movement

which was very prevalent then in Sistan. There was another Khariji leader, Al-Hudain of Uq, a maula who had led a rising in the region in 791-2 but was killed by government forces in 793. Hamza first gained prominence as the killer of an unjust *Amil*. Tabari, Gardizi and Baghdadi all assign the year 795-6 for Hamza's revolt. Thus, even 150 years after the Arab invasion, the Persians kept resenting and rebelling against the Arab rule under one ground or another, and Bosworth provides significant evidence for it, though only salient facts could be included herein.