

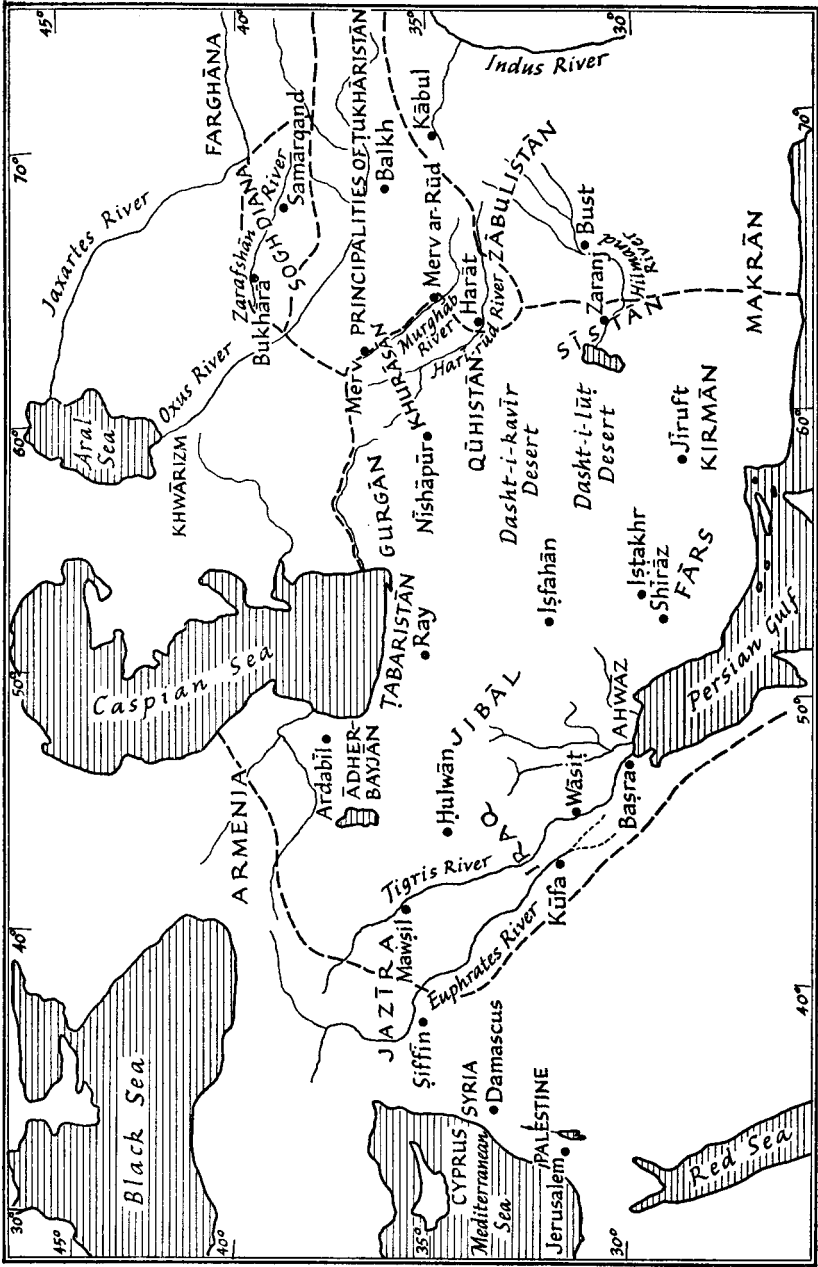
I

THE POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY OF
KHURĀSĀN AND THE EAST

The first problem for a historian is to define the area of his interest in terms of geography and population. In some cases this requires very little effort and is comparatively easy. A historian of the British Isles, dealing with a relatively small and self-contained area with clearly defined English, Scottish and Welsh divisions, would not find much difficulty. But, for an Islamic historian, this is a difficult task to be undertaken with particular care at every turn of the immense area of space and time covered by Islamic history. Islam, practically from its beginning, brought together many peoples of different lands, with well-established cultures, traditions and political systems. The assimilation of all these elements, after a century of strife and conflicts, brought about the Islamic civilization with its easily recognizable features.

It was not only Sāsānian and Byzantine domains that contributed to the world of Islam; Khurāsān and the East (*al-Mashriq*) played a vital part in the formative years of the Islamic society. Yet this part has been underestimated by many scholars who, unfortunately, have not understood the political geography of the East. Khurāsān has been treated as an open-ended province to which Soghdiana was vaguely attached. It was assumed that, at the time of the Arab conquest, they were within the Sāsānian sphere of influence if not part of the Sāsānian empire. Almost one hundred years later, a revolution suddenly worked itself out there and spread to the rest of the Arab empire. Then, for nearly a century, the area fell into abeyance after which the so-called Persian dynasties (Tāhirids, Sāmānids, etc.) arose. Many of these apparently inexplicable historical developments would have been easier to understand if an effort had been made to establish the political geography of the East at the time of the Arab conquest. This is what I propose to do here.

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Approximate boundaries of the Sāsānian empire at the time of the Arab conquest

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I *Khurāsān of the Sāsānians*

The geographical definition of Khurāsān has always been subject to political circumstances there, or rather to the strength of the power ruling over Iran. As the word Khurāsān means literally the land of the east, it was used sometimes to cover all the regions in the east of Iran, even including Transoxiana; while at other times it covered only part of Khurāsān as we know it now. Yāqūt, the Arab geographer, recognized this fact,¹ observing that the Arab geographers were misleading in their definition of Khurāsān because they included under this name all the lands which used to be under the Arab governors of Khurāsān.² However, it has been established that, at the time of the Arab conquest, the Murghāb River, or, more precisely, the lower part of the Murghāb from Merv ar-Rūd to the north of Merv, formed the eastern boundary of the Sāsānian empire.³ Thus Khurāsān of the Sāsānians, at that time, was only the districts of Nishāpūr, among which the districts of Qūhistan were counted,⁴ and the two cities of Merv and Merv ar-Rūd with their immediate neighbourhood west of the Murghāb; indeed the last two cities were outposts of the eastern borders.⁵ It is not without significance that though we have a very detailed account in the Arabic sources of the conquest of the districts of Nishāpūr, yet, when these same sources describe the conquest of Merv and Merv ar-Rūd, they mention only one *rustāq* (district), at most, along with each of these cities.⁶ In the narratives concerning the Arab conquest of Khurāsān, there is mention of an office holder who was probably the Sāsānian governor-general of Khurāsān. Ibn Khurdādhbeh alone mentions a *pādhūshān* as the *spabhad* (general of the realm) of

¹ Yāqūt, *Mu'jam al-Buldān*, ed. F. Wüstenfeld, Leipzig, 1924, vol. II, p. 410.

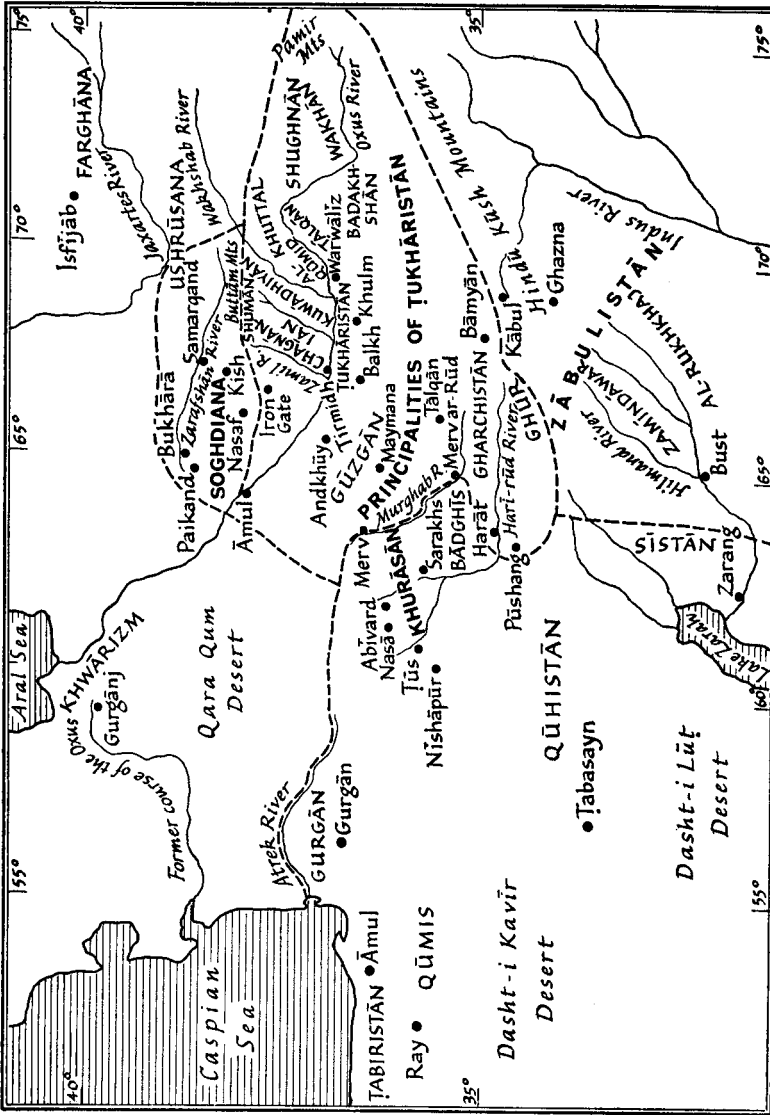
² *Ibid.*, p. 409; Ibn Khurdādhbeh, *Kitāb al-Masālik wa'l Mamālik*, ed. M. J. de Goeje, Leiden, 1889, p. 18.

³ J. Marquart, "Eranšahr", *Abhandlungen der Königlichen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen*, vol. III, 1901, pp. 74-5; H. A. R. Gibb, *The Arab Conquests in Central Asia*, London, 1923, p. 1.

⁴ Ya'qūbī, *Kitāb al-Buldān*, ed. M. J. de Goeje, Leiden, 1892, p. 278; al-Balādhurī, *Futūḥ al-Buldān*, ed. M. J. de Goeje, Leiden, 1866, pp. 403-5; Ibn Sa'd, *aṭ-Ṭabaqāt al-Kabīr*, ed. Sachau *et al.*, 1905-21, vol. 5, p. 33.

⁵ Ibn Ḥawqal, *Sūrat al-Ard*, ed. J. H. Kramers, Leiden, 1938-9, vol. II, p. 434; E. Chavannes, *Documents sur les Tou-Kiue (Turc) Occidentaux*, St Petersburg, 1903, p. 251.

⁶ Balādhurī, *Futūḥ*, p. 406; al-Ṭabarī, *Annales quos scripsit Abū Ja'far . . . al-Ṭabarī*, ed. M. J. de Goeje *et al.*, Leiden, 1879-1901, vol. I, pp. 2897-8.



Khurasan and the East

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all of Khurāsān.¹ Other sources mention a *kanārang* as governor of Ṭūs,² together with the *marzbāns* (wardens of the marches) of the various districts of Khurāsān. Christensen suggests that the title of *kanārang* carries with it the connotation of a “governor of a province”,³ but Minorsky was able to identify it as the “Lord of the eastern March” who was “ruling in the remote Persian province co-terminous with the lands of the Hephthalites”.⁴ It is clear now that the *kanārang* was the title of the Sāsānian governor-general of Khurāsān, whose authority, as might be expected, diminished after the collapse of the Sāsānian central government in the west. As we find *marzbāns* in Sarakhs and Abīvard, so we find *marzbāns* in Merv and Merv ar-Rūd. These *marzbāns*, who were chosen from the local nobility, were charged with the administration of their districts; and, because Merv and Merv ar-Rūd were frontier outposts, their *marzbāns* had also the military obligation of defending these frontiers. The *kanārang* also had the military duty of defending the countryside, frequently exposed to the raids of the Hephthalites from Bādghīs,⁵ and for this reason he resided in Ṭūs which occupied a central position, a fact which caused the Arab chroniclers to identify him with this city.⁶ With the collapse of the central government of the Sāsānians each *marzbān* acted as an independent representative of his district before the new invaders. Most of them offered no resistance to the Arabs, and were only too glad to conclude peace treaties, assuring the continuation of their authority under the new régime. In Khurāsān of the Sāsānians, as in the rest of the empire, the *dihqāns* who formed the local nobility held the upper hand, and their principal function was the allocation and collection of taxes.⁷ According to the Sāsānian system, they, as well as the warriors, the priests and the civil servants, were exempted from the poll tax. The burden of the taxes fell heavily on the peasantry, and they also had to serve in the infantry in the army. In the cities the bourgeoisie were in a better situation; they paid the poll tax but they did not have to serve in the army.⁸

¹ Ibn Khurdādhbeh, p. 18.

² Balādhurī, *Futūb*, p. 405; Ṭabarī, vol. 1, p. 2886.

³ A. Christensen, *L'Iran sous les Sassanides*, Copenhagen, 1936, p. 102, note 3.

⁴ V. Minorsky, *Iranica*, Publications of The University of Teheran, vol. 775, Teheran, 1964, p. 262.

⁵ Marquart, “Eranšahr”, pp. 74–5.

⁶ Balādhurī, *Futūb*, p. 405; Ya'qūbī, *Tārīkh*, ed. M. Houtsma, Leiden, 1883, vol. 11, p. 129.

⁷ Christensen, *L'Iran*, p. 107.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 315–16.

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When trying to follow the Arab conquest of Khurāsān, it is important to keep in mind the fact that the Murghāb was the easternmost border of the Sāsānian empire, because the Arabs must have realized that once they had conquered the "small" Khurāsān of the Sāsānians and advanced east of the Murghāb they would be in conflict with completely different sovereigns, if not peoples. Although these peoples were mostly of Iranian origin, their independent historical development had led to different social, political and cultural backgrounds. The Arabs must have realized, then, that they were opening up new fronts against enemies who proved by their resistance to the conquerors that they had better-organized armies than the remnant forces of the Sāsānian empire. The choice of Merv to be the garrison town for the Arab armies, and later the capital of the Arab governors, is the best indication that the Arabs recognized this fact. In the beginning their intention, as heirs of the Sāsānian empire, was probably to maintain the Murghāb as their eastern border while raiding the areas to the east to keep their armies busy. As it turned out later, following the same pattern as the previous conquerors from the west, they were compelled to advance not only to the Oxus but even further to the Jaxartes, bringing under Arab domain the lands in which had flourished previously the Greco-Bactrian, the Kushan and the Hephthalite empires. In contrast to the previous conquerors, the Arabs were able to integrate these areas into their empire, and in due course they became great centres of Islamic civilization.

2 *The Hephthalites ("Hayāṭīla")*

Although the Chinese sources throw some light on the history of these regions yet, in spite of much research done in this field, it is still to some extent a matter of speculation. From the earliest times there had been successive waves of emigration of nomadic tribes of Iranian origin from central Asia westwards to settle down in the area rightly called "Outer Iran".¹ These nomads were soon assimilated to sedentary life, though some of them were not fully assimilated and led a semi-nomadic life. We are concerned here with the last wave of these nomads, mainly the Hephthalites, known in the Arabic sources as the *Hayāṭīla*.

¹ R. Grousset, *The Civilizations of the East. The Near and Middle East*, London, 1931, p. 133.

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It is generally accepted that they take their name from their eponymous ancestor, or perhaps from the ruling dynasty. They probably appear for the first time in the fourth century, among the armies of the later Kushans, helping them against the Sāsānians. Soon after, they became the successors to the Kushan empire in the east. The ethnic origin of the Hephthalites is difficult to determine. In spite of the theories constructed on the basis of suggested etymologies of one or two words, the fact remains that we have no sources for the history of eastern Iran in this period. While most scholars are inclined to accept the Hephthalites as of Iranian origin, a few suggest a Turkish origin.¹ R. N. Frye concludes that

One may well expect Altaic, i.e. Hunic elements among the Hephthalites, but again the evidence points primarily to Iranians. It is possible that some of the early rulers were Huns, but there were still many Iranians in Central Asia, and the people of eastern Iran among whom the Hephthalites settled were also Iranian, so we may consider the Hephthalite empire in eastern Iran and north-west India as basically an Iranian one.²

Although one may not agree with R. Ghirshman in all his suggestions about the history of the Hephthalites, he offers a plausible interpretation of this difficult and obscure subject. He convincingly points out one factor which distinguishes the Hephthalite empire from the empires of Bactria and the Kushans, and which had a great influence on the history and development of this area. In contrast to the two previous empires, which in the course of their expansion southwards had to stop for some time to the north of the Hindū-Kūsh, the Hephthalites occupied the areas to the north and to the south of these mountains at much the same time. It seems that Hephthalite tribes were divided into two major divisions—the northern tribes, who kept the name Hephthalites, and the southern tribes, whose tribal name was the Zābu-

¹ For further discussions of the history of the Hephthalites see: W. M. McGovern, *The Early Empires of Central Asia*, Chapel Hill, 1939, Supplementary notes, pp. 471–83; R. Ghirshman, *Les Chionites–Hephthalites*, Le Caire, 1948; F. Altheim–R. Stiehl, *Geschichte der Hunnen. II Die Hephthaliten in Iran*, Berlin, 1960; K. Enoki, "On the nationality of the Hephthalites", *Memoirs of the Research Department of the Toyo Bunko*, 18, Tokyo, 1959, pp. 1–58; G. Widengren, *Xosrau Anosurwan, les Hephthalites et les peuples Turcs*, *Orientalia Succana*, 1, 1952; A. D. H. Bivar, *Hayātīla*, *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, New Edition, Leiden, 1954–.

² R. N. Frye, *The Heritage of Persia*, London, 1962, p. 227.

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lites, from whom the area of Zābulistān took its name. These southern Hephthalites, the Zābulites, expanded successfully south-eastwards into India, while the northern tribes, the Hephthalites, had to go westwards for their expansion, and they clashed with the Sāsānians, inflicting on them a series of defeats beginning in A.D. 484 with a battle in which the Sāsānian king Peroz lost his life. After a period of half a century of fighting, the final victory rested with the Hephthalites, and they became virtually the masters of Persia, from whom for half a century they exacted a heavy annual tribute in cash. The Hephthalite empire in the first half of the sixth century A.D. extended over Soghdiana, the Oxus basin and the lands to the north and south of the Hindū-Kūsh.

There is ample evidence that the trade which flourished under the Kushans continued under the Hephthalites and became one of their major sources of income; and the Soghdians also continued to play a major role in this trade. Though the Sāsānian influence on the life and culture of the Hephthalites cannot be denied, Buddhism was still the predominant religion of the whole empire. However, because of the religious tolerance of these people, other religions were found among them, like Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism and even Christianity. At the time of Yuan Chwang, the Chinese pilgrim, Buddhism was very strong south of the Iron Gate, though north of it among the Soghdians Zoroastrianism was gradually taking its place.

Finally the Sāsānians had to seek the alliance of the rising new power beyond the Jaxartes, namely the western Turks, to rid themselves of Hephthalite domination. The two allies were able to defeat the Hephthalites in A.D. 563–568. This resulted in the partition of their empire between the two victors, and for a brief moment the Oxus became the boundary between the Iranians and the Turks. The Sāsānians were not able to hold their newly acquired lands for very long, and with their gradual weakening and the rising power of the Turks, the latter were able to extend their suzerainty southwards to include the Hephthalite lands north of the Hindū-Kūsh.¹ Apparently the Hephthalites of the south were able to escape the fate of their brethren in the north, to meet their final destruction later at the hands of the Muslims, but not until after a stubborn resistance which lasted well over two hundred years.

¹ R. Ghirshman, *Les Chionites–Hephthalites*, pp. 67–133.

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3 *The Principalities of Ṭukhāristān*

The defeat of the Hephthalites to the north of the Hindū-Kūsh did not mean their disappearance from the scene. They continued to live side by side with the previously settled population and were probably more closely assimilated into it. In some places where they were not fully assimilated and the semi-nomadic element was dominant, they were able to form their own principalities, probably encouraged by the Turks, and they continued to give the Sāsānians much trouble on their north-eastern frontiers.¹ In fact, on his way to India in A.D. 630 Yuan Chwang found that all the Hephthalite territories south of the Iron Gate were divided up into twenty-seven principalities with separate chiefs.² These came under Turkish suzerainty, but, because of the lack of a strong central government and the frequent internal conflicts among the Turks, they enjoyed a semi-independent status.³ The oldest son of the Jābghū of the western Turks was appointed as a general in command, with the title of Shād, and had his residence near Warwālīz,⁴ possibly with the principality of Huo (Qunduz) and the city of Balkh under his governorship.⁵

From A.D. 630, when the Chinese government started its intrigues against the western Turks, until A.D. 658, when they were destroyed by the Chinese, there was a period of near-anarchy in this region. A son of the former Shād founded the dynasty of the Jābghūs of Ṭukhāristān which ruled over the district we know as Ṭukhāristān proper. The chiefs in the other principalities, and probably others who seized the opportunity to form new principalities, recognized the new Jābghū as their suzerain, though his authority could hardly have been anything but nominal.⁶ The Chinese sources inform us that in A.D. 661 the government of China, after formally annexing the territories between Khotan and Persia, tried to reorganize them into sixteen governments under Chinese suzerainty. But this attempt failed because China had to devote all its energy to check the dangerous advances of Tibet in central Asia. If Turkish interference in the administra-

¹ Gibb, *Arab Conquests*, p. 3; Ghirshman, *Les Chionites-Hephthalites*, p. 96.

² T. Watters, *On Yuan Chwang's travels in India*, London, 1904-5, vol. 1, p. 102.

³ Chavannes, *Documents*, pp. 263-4, 299.

⁴ Watters, vol. 1, p. 106; Gibb, *Arab Conquests*, p. 8.

⁵ Watters, pp. 75-6, 108-9.

⁶ Gibb, *Arab Conquests*, p. 8; Watters, vol. 1, p. 270.

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tion of the subject territories was limited to the appointment of military governors and the collection of tribute, Chinese interference was practically nothing more than diplomatic manoeuvres, and thereafter these principalities enjoyed an even greater measure of independence, only linked together by their acceptance of the nominal suzerainty of the Jābghū of Ṭukhāristān.¹

Among the principalities, Ṭukhāristān occupied a predominant position, yet it seems rather difficult to define what Ṭukhāristān was. Gibb draws our attention to the fact that the name Ṭukhāristān is used very loosely, in the Arabic records, with misleading effects.² Barthold suggests that it was used in two different senses: the first and narrower sense defines the area east of Balkh and west of Badakhshān south of the Oxus; the second and larger sense defines the area east of Balkh on both sides of the Oxus.³ The Chinese sources provide a wider definition than even Barthold's larger sense. Yuan Chwang, speaking about the land of the Tu-hou-lo (Ṭukhārā), defined it as reaching on the east to the Tsung-ling, on the west to Persia, on the south to the great mountains (the Hindū-Kūsh) and on the north to the Iron Gate; the river Oxus flowed through the middle of it from east to west.⁴ Balādhurī used the word Ṭukhāristān in a similar sense, indicating that the lands immediately to the east of the Murghāb were considered at the time of the Arab invasion as part of Ṭukhāristān.⁵

In spite of much research on the Ṭukhārā people and Ṭukhāristān, no satisfactory suggestion has been made.⁶ It is beyond the scope of this book to decide the origin of the Ṭukhārā people, but it seems that they were Iranians who emigrated to this region in earlier times, and at the time of the Arab invasion formed a part of the settled population. As Gibb observed, they were "noted in the Chinese annals for their commercial enterprise".⁷ In this work Ṭukhāristān is used to mean the principality of that name, i.e. the district which lies east of Balkh and west of Badakhshān to the south of the Oxus, in contrast to the Principalities of Ṭukhāristān which means the principalities under the suzerainty of the Jābghū of Ṭukhāristān at the time of the Arab invasion.

¹ Chavannes, *Documents*, pp. 263, 264, 274, 287, 299; Gibb, *Arab Conquests*, pp. 7-9.

² Gibb, *Arab Conquests*, p. 8.

³ W. Barthold, "Ṭukhāristān", *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Leiden, 1939.

⁴ Watters, vol. 1, p. 102.

⁵ Balādhurī, *Futūḥ*, p. 406.

⁶ See the excellent note by W. M. McGovern (*Early Empires*, pp. 479-83) on Dahia and Tachari.

⁷ Gibb, *Arab Conquests*, p. 2.