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978-1-107-01879-2 - The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran: Rural Revolt and Local Zoroastrianism

Patricia Crone

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## The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran

Patricia Crone's latest book is about the Iranian response to the Muslim penetration of the Iranian countryside, the revolts triggered there, and the religious communities that these revolts revealed. The book also describes a complex of religious ideas that, however varied in space and unstable over time, has demonstrated a remarkable persistence in Iran across a period of two millennia. The central thesis is that this complex of ideas has been endemic to the mountain population of Iran and has occasionally become epidemic with major consequences for the country, most strikingly in the revolts examined here and in the rise of the Šafavids who imposed Shī'ism on Iran. This learned and engaging book by one of the most influential scholars of early Islamic history casts entirely new light on the nature of religion in pre-Islamic Iran, and on the persistence of Iranian religious beliefs both outside and inside Islam after the Arab conquest.

**Patricia Crone** is Mellon Professor of Islamic History in the School of Historical Studies, Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton. Her numerous publications include *Slaves on Horses: The Evolution of the Islamic Polity* (1980, 2003); *God's Caliph: Religious Authority in the First Centuries of Islam*, co-authored with Martin Hinds (1986, 2003); *Pre-Industrial Societies: Anatomy of the Pre-Modern World* (1989, 2003); and *Medieval Islamic Political Thought* (2005).

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# The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran

*Rural Revolt and Local Zoroastrianism*

PATRICIA CRONE

*Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton*



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## Preface

This is a book about the Iranian response to the Muslim penetration of the Iranian countryside, the revolts that the Muslims triggered there, and the religious communities that these revolts revealed. It is also a book about a complex of religious ideas that, however varied in space and unstable over time, has shown remarkable persistence in Iran over a period of two millennia. The central thesis of the book is that this complex of ideas has been endemic to the mountain population of Iran and has occasionally become epidemic with major consequences for the country, most strikingly in the revolts examined here and in the rise of the Safavids who imposed Shi'ism on Iran.

The revolts to which Part I is devoted have been studied several times before, above all by Sadighi (Ṣadīghī) and Daniel. Though I have added some new material, mostly from Chinese sources and Central Asian archaeology, the main novelty of this part lies in its approach. Part II, on the other hand, tries to do something entirely new. It subjects the religious beliefs of the rebel communities to systematic analysis, traces back the beliefs in question to pre-Islamic times, and seeks to determine their relationship with Zoroastrianism. This part is based on Arabic and Persian sources in combination with a wide array of Pahlavi, Greek, Syriac, Buddhist, Manichaean, and other sources, including Middle Iranian texts recovered from Central Asia, Central Asian archaeology again, and, needless to say, a mass of secondary literature. Part III also tries to do something entirely new, namely to offer a systematic examination of the marital patterns and reproductive strategies discernible behind the accusations of 'wife-sharing' levelled at the rebel communities and related groups, with reference to much the same array of sources as those used in Part II. This is followed by a discussion of the role of the marital patterns in question in the formation of a communist utopian ideal in Sasanian Iran. The final chapter traces the extraordinary continuity of

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the complex of beliefs and practices from early Islamic down to modern times, with heavy use of secondary literature again.

#### WHERE TO FIND WHAT IN THE BOOK

The book is addressed primarily to Iranianists and Islamicists, but some parts of it should be of interest to scholars in quite different fields as well, notably specialists in early Christianity, Gnosticism, late antiquity, gender history, the comparative history of empires, and pre-modern communism. They will not want to read the entire book; many other readers probably will not either (though I obviously hope that there are some who will). Accordingly, I here briefly indicate where they can find the material most likely to interest them.

Most readers will probably find it helpful to start with Chapter 1, which introduces the main actors and sets the scene, but they can part company thereafter. For historians of the 'Abbāsīd caliphate the most relevant part of the book is Part I. Historians and sociologists of empires can make do with Chapters 1 and 8, which consider the Arab handling of the natives they had conquered and the latter's reaction in comparison with native responses to incorporation in the European empires. Islamicists interested in extremist Shī'ism and experts in Zoroastrianism (and Iranian religion in general), on the other hand, can proceed to Part II and top it up with the conclusion. Specialists in Judaism, Christianity, and Gnosticism can skip the introduction and go straight to Chapter 14, which discusses the Elchasaite, Manichaean, and early eastern Christian conception of divine incarnation, with an attempt to trace it to its (Mesopotamian) roots in Chapter 15, in the section called 'The Image and the mahdi'. But there should also be something of relevance for specialists in Christianity and Gnosticism in Chapter 10, on cosmology, and in the first pages of Chapter 19, on monotheism, dualism, and the religious trend in later antiquity; those curious to see living versions of Elchasaite should read more of Chapter 19, especially the section on the Ahl-i Ḥaqq. Finally, readers in search of marriage patterns and reproductive strategies should go to Chapter 17, while historians and sociologists interested in pre-modern communism should go to the much shorter Chapter 18. All readers should know that every chapter of the book can be read on its own.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I can say for sure that I would not have written this book if, more than thirty years ago, my colleague in Oxford, John Gurney, had not asked me



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to teach a course on the transition from pre-Islamic to early Islamic Iran. I taught this course for the thirteen years I spent in Oxford and eventually added the nativist prophets as a special subject. By the time I left Oxford for Cambridge, I knew that I wanted to write a book about the rebellious prophets one day. I must accordingly start by expressing my gratitude to John Gurney for getting me interested in things Iranian and to all the students who took these courses for making the subject so rewarding to teach.

If I had written the book back then it would have consisted of little more than Part I of the present work, for what fascinated me in those days was the nature of the revolts and the fact that one can be deeply influenced by people to whom one is utterly hostile. I was not particularly interested in the religious beliefs that the revolts revealed, except as clues to the social background and motivation of the rebels. Having written about Mazdak, moreover (thanks to the same transition course), I did not think I would have anything to add on the subject of women and property. All this drastically changed when I eventually decided to write. The little book for a wide audience that I had anticipated turned into some kind of monster that dragged me further and further away from my home territory, so that I often despaired of ever getting back. I doubt that I would have persevered with what eventually became Parts II and III if I had not had the good fortune to be at the Institute for Advanced Study, where I had time to fight the monster until I felt I had it under reasonable control.

Reasonable control is one thing, intimate familiarity of the type arising from years of immersion is quite another. Full mastery of the Zoroastrian, Manichaean, Buddhist, Christian, and sundry other literary traditions of relevance to this book is beyond the capacity of a single person and I still feel a certain trepidation about having ventured in where angels fear to tread. I hope I have not made the specialists wince. If I have, I must apologise in advance to the many who have helped me over the years. They include Oktor Skjaervø, a fellow Scandinavian to whom I am much indebted for unfailing assistance in connection with questions of a philological nature; Lance Jenott, who helped with Gnostic matters (disputing the validity of that very label); Kevin van Bladel, from whom I have learned more than the references that the reader will see acknowledged in the footnotes; the graduates with whom I read texts on Khurramism in a seminar at Princeton University in 2009; and countless members of the Institute for Advanced Study, both permanent and transient, whom I have pestered with questions over the years. Of those, my greatest debt is to Masoud Jafari Jazi, whose presence at the Institute greatly improved my

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knowledge of Persian language and literature, who answered more questions than anyone else, and with whom I had the pleasure of co-authoring an article on a topic connected with this book; he has also kept me abreast of recent publications in Iran. Last but not least, I must thank Michael Cook, Philip Kreyenbroek, and Maria Subtelny for reading the entire typescript and making numerous corrections and suggestions for improvement.

## CONVENTIONS

In so far as possible I refer to texts and translations alike even when the texts are in languages (and more particularly scripts) that I do not read. I do this to enable specialists to go straight to the text without having to look up the translations in order to find the reference, which often makes a simple task extremely time consuming. One needs the original to judge an interpretation regardless of whether the non-specialist has simply adopted the position of another specialist or proposed his or her own view. When I refer to texts in languages unknown to me I depend on other people's references, however. They may not always be right, and sometimes I only quote a small section of a longer passage covering several pages and do not know exactly where my section comes. In that case I simply give the reference as I find it: an approximate reference is better than none.

On the question of transcription, I fear I am guilty of much inconsistency. I try to use the transliteration system customary for the particular language involved, including the standard transliteration of modern Persian as if it were Arabic. But I could not bring myself to use the *x* with which specialists in pre-Islamic Iran transliterate the sound that Islamicists reproduce as *kh* because it is so counter-intuitive. I use *kh* in the transliteration of Arabic and Iranian words alike, with one exception: in the transliteration of consonantal skeletons from middle Iranian languages I defer to specialist usage. Further, I use *v* and *w* interchangeably in transliteration from Iranian languages, and a name transliterated with *š* in one place may be transliterated with *sh* in another because the source in the second case is Arabic or new Persian. The names of Sasanian kings are given without diacritics in their popular forms. Following advice once given to me by Sebastian Brock, I omit diacritics in the transliteration of Syriac, though again I may not have been entirely consistent.

I take the liberty of using *hijrī* dates alone in discussions of chronology but no longer take the parallel liberty of using AD dates alone when the dates are routine. Though double dates are cumbersome and impossible to

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take in at a glance, they have been used throughout in deference to those who view the absence of *hijrī* dates as fraught with symbolic significance. I use the form 365/975f. in preference to 365/975–6 because it minimises the number of figures one has to take in. When I refer to sources in the form 365 = ii, 136, the former figure refers to the text and the latter to the translations; and when references take the form of 160.5 or 160.-5, the former means page 160, line 5 and the latter p. 160, line 5 from the bottom.

Patricia Crone  
Princeton, May 2011

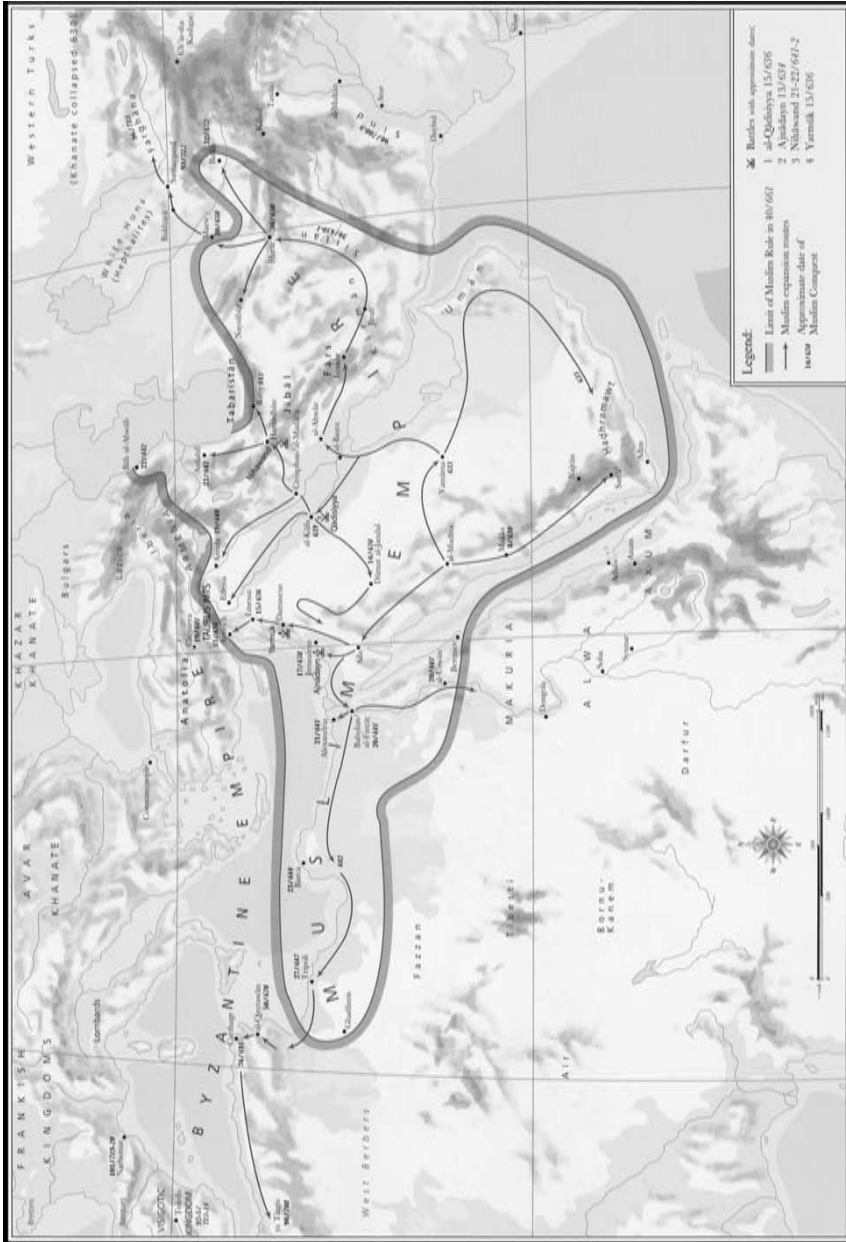
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MAP I The early Arab conquests. Adapted from Kennedy, *Historical Atlas of Islam*, 7.

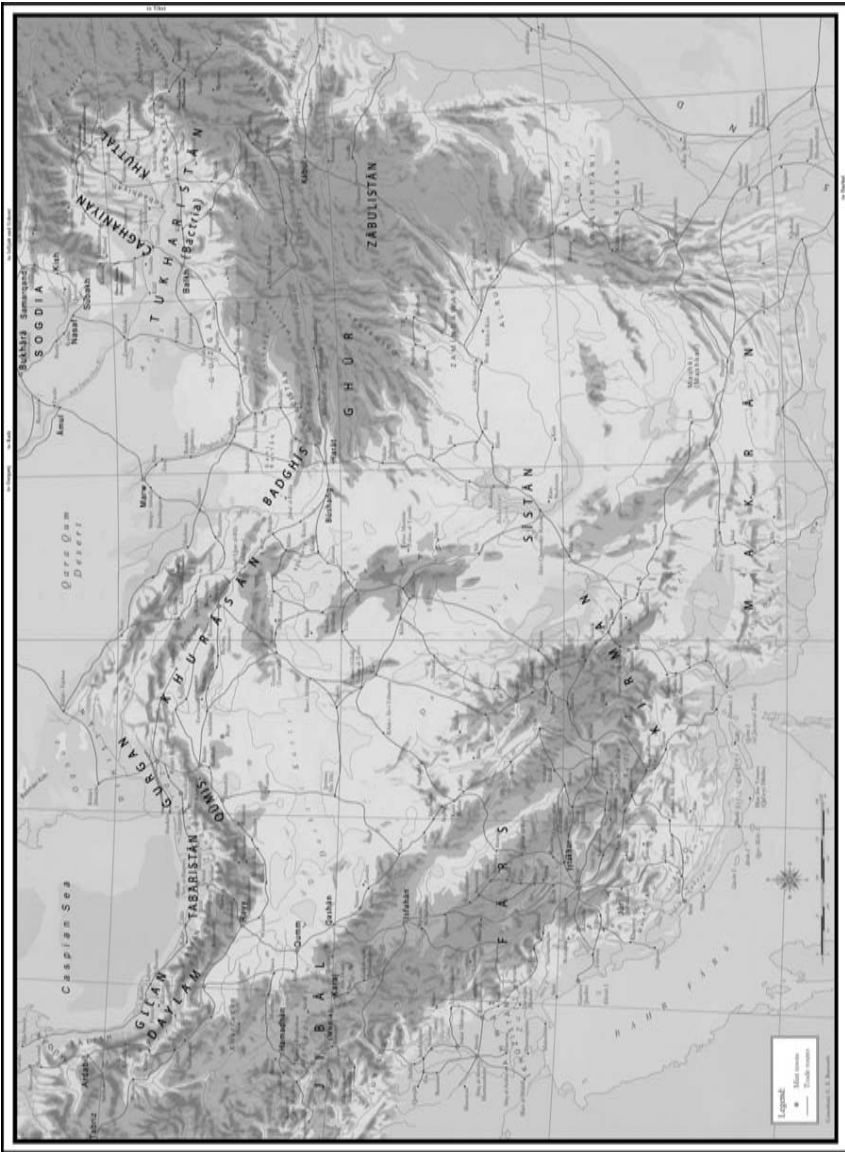
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MAP 2 Early Islamic Iran. Adapted from Kennedy, *Historical Atlas of Islam*, 134.

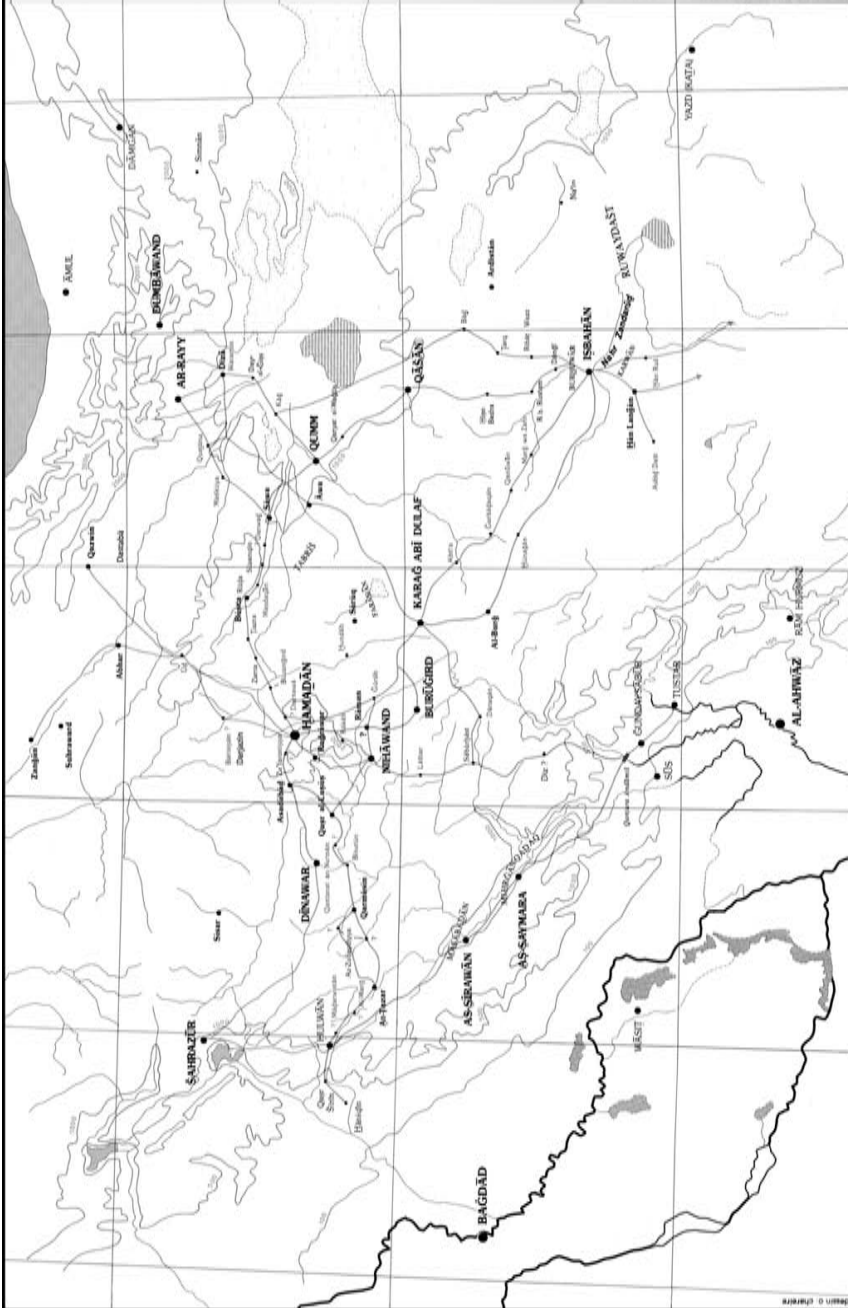
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MAP 3 The Jibal. Adapted from Cornu, *Atlas du monde arabo-islamique*, V.



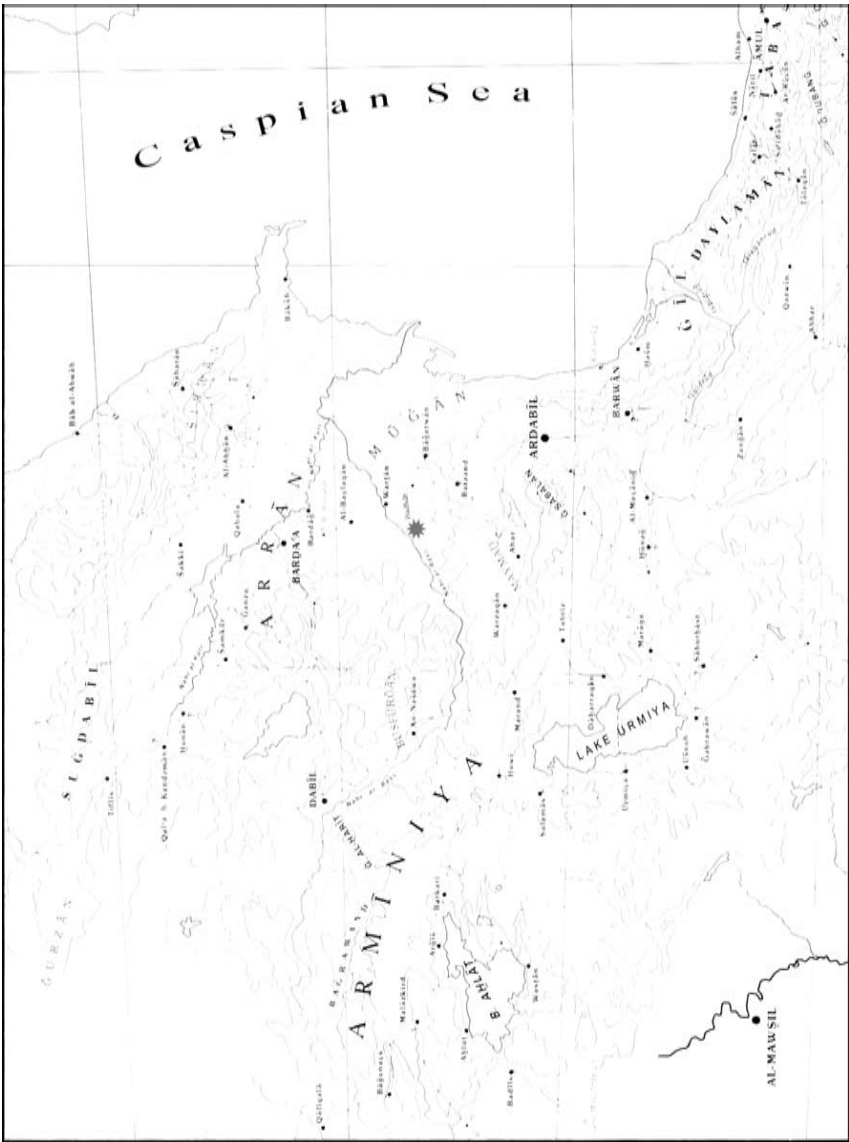
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MAP 4 Azerbaijan. Adapted from Cornu, *Atlas du monde arabo-islamique*, XVI.

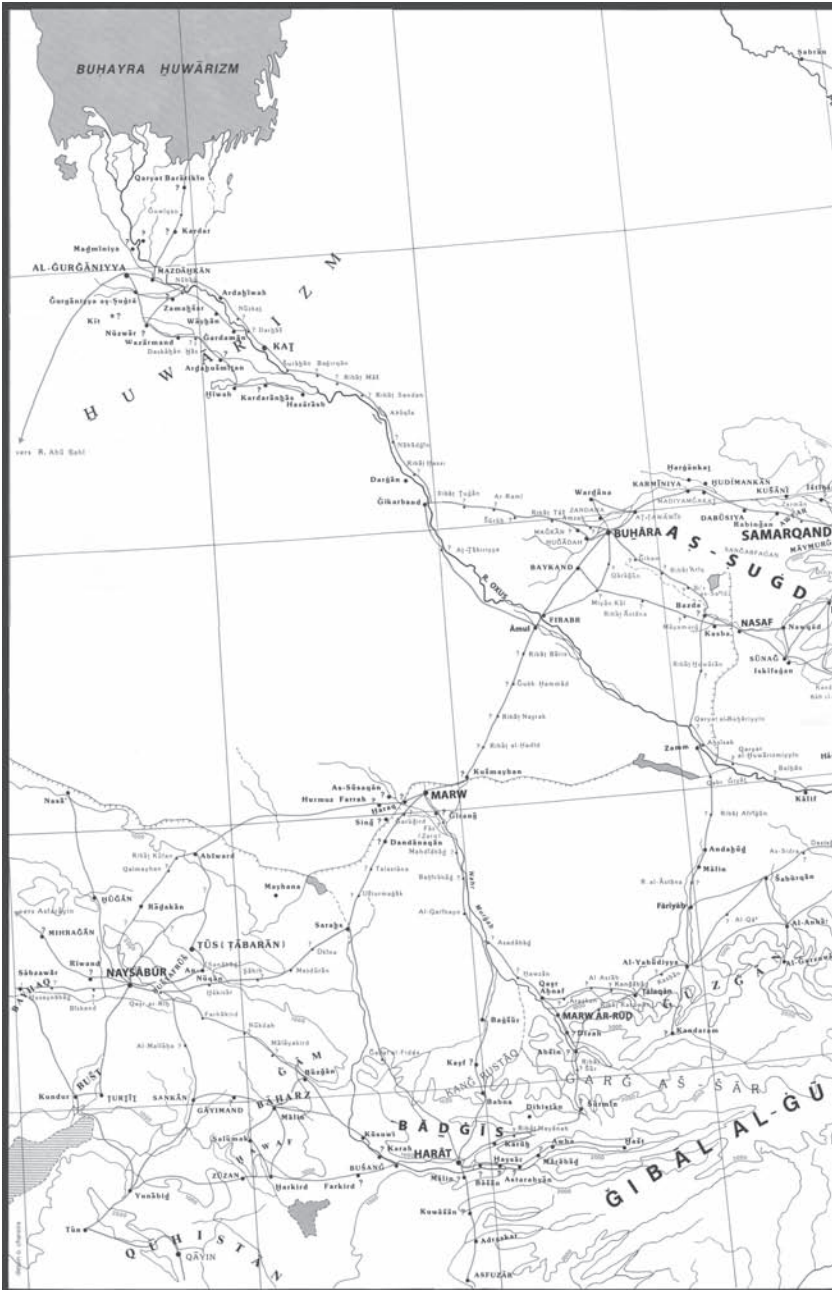
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MAP 5 Khurāsān and Transoxania. Adapted from Cornu, *Atlas du monde arabo-islamique*, XVII.



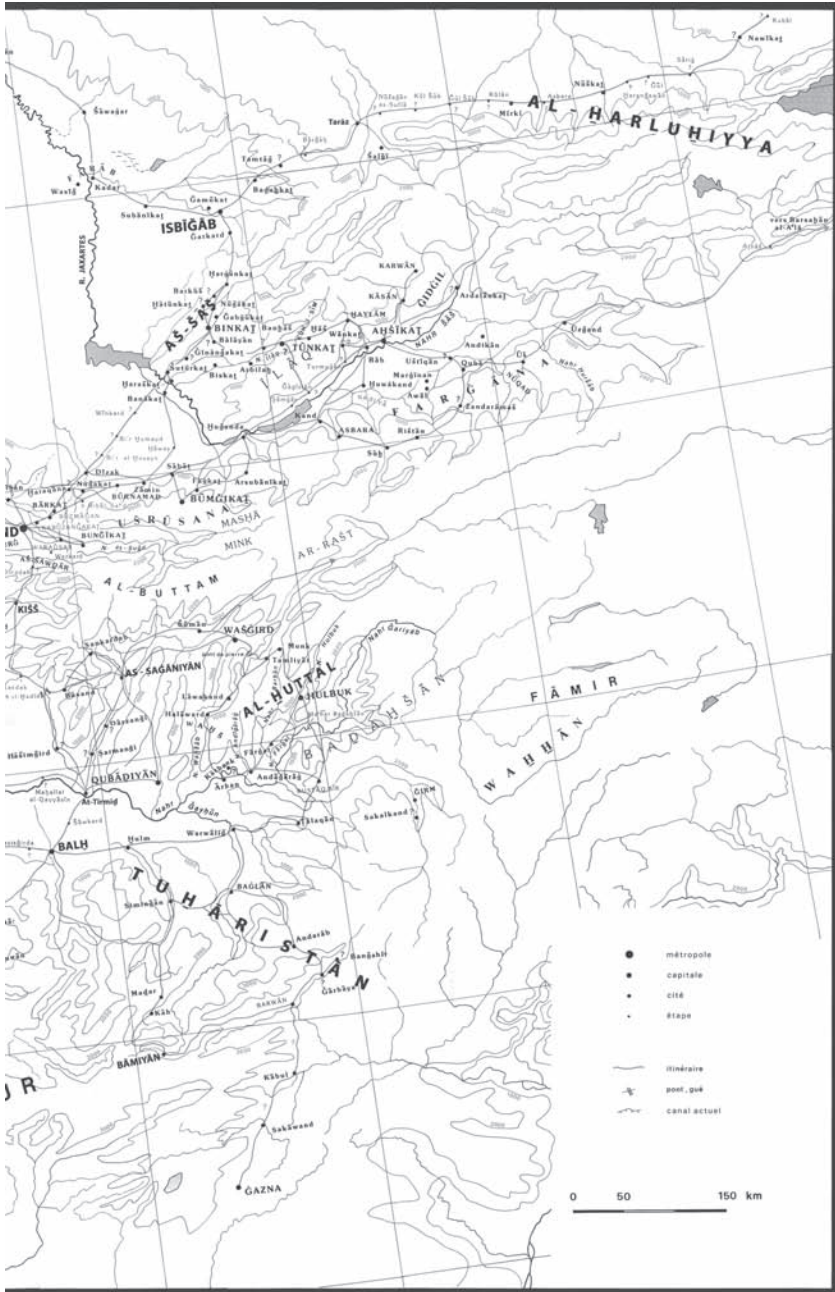
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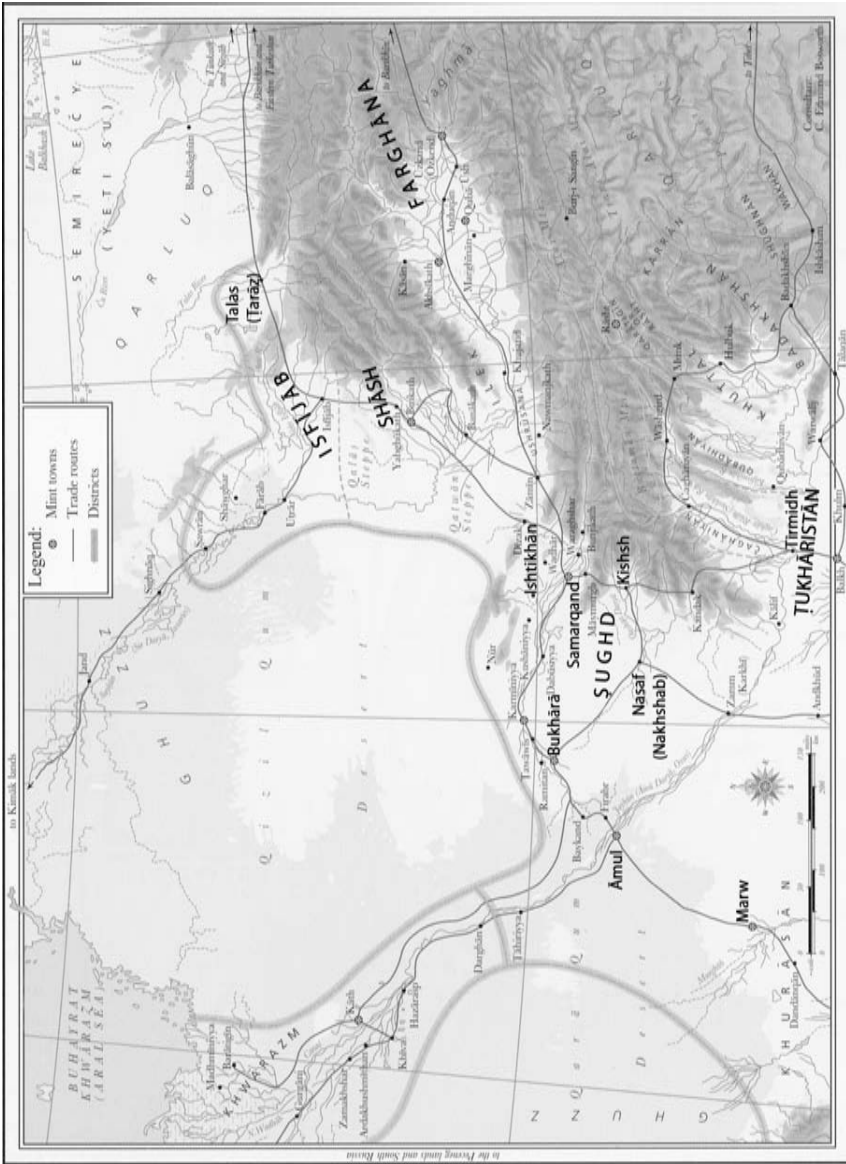
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MAP 6 Transoxania. Adapted from Kennedy, *Historical Atlas of Islam*, 41a.