

The Emergence of New Polities in the Breakup of the Abbasid Caliphate

Hugh Kennedy

IN the first half of the tenth century, the Abbasid caliphate disintegrated. In the years between 908 and 945, it changed from being a major regional power, ruling the lands from the western border of Egypt in the west to the frontiers of Khurasan in the east with pretensions to universal sovereignty over the Muslim world, to a caliphate whose borders were confined to the Abbasids' half-ruined palace in Baghdad. Political power had been seized by the family of Persian fishermen from the shores of the Caspian Sea.¹

In some ways, this development can be compared to the collapse of Roman rule in the Western Empire during the fifth century. In both cases, we can see the failure of an imperial ideal to bind together different groups, the influence of a military establishment that was as ineffective as it was expensive and whose needs and demands came to dominate the business of state. In both cases, the breakup of empire led to the emergence of new, effectively independent polities and new elites from groups that previously had been excluded from power and influence, such as the Būyid fishermen just mentioned.

But there were significant differences as well. In the West, the end of empire was marked by an influx of new people from beyond the frontiers, groups with new languages and new identities. The tenth century saw no such migrations in the Middle East; not until the coming of the Seljuq Turks and their Ghuzz followers in the mid-eleventh century were there substantial movements of people.² In the West, we can see the gradual emergence of new kingdoms, based on ethnic identities. In the Middle East, this did not happen. New polities certainly emerged, but, with one important exception, Armenia, they were not based on ethnic identities. This was not because there were no ethnic differences: Arabs, Persians, Daylamites, Soghdians, Khwarazmians, Baluchis, Kurds, and Berbers all had some measure of ethnic identity, but none of them formed a lasting state by harnessing these ethnic identities.

1. For an overview of this period, see Kennedy, *Prophet*, pp. 172–294; Kennedy, “Late Abbasid Pattern”; for a good general discussion of allegiances and identities in this period, see Mottahedeh, *Loyalty*.

2. For the early Seljuks, see Peacock, *Great Seljuk Empire*.

This inquiry has an importance that goes beyond questions of medieval history, fascinating though they are. The “failure” to establish viable nation-states in the Middle East, whether in the tenth or the twenty-first century, feeds into a whole orientalist discourse about the political “backwardness” and “failure” of Islamic societies. Part of the argument is that political allegiances were formed and dominated by tribal and sectarian divisions, inevitably considered both pointless and destructive, which prevented the natural and healthy growth of nation-states that had made Western Europe so great.

In this chapter, I shall discuss what identities people did adopt in the confused political society of the tenth-century Middle East, where everyone could see that the old certainties were disappearing but nothing new appeared to replace them, and why these identities did not give rise to states comparable to those of Western Europe half a millennium before. The first section will focus on tribal identities and the circumstances in which they might provide the basis of state formation. I will then turn to legal identities and the contrast between the ethnically based law systems of Western Europe and the law systems of the Middle East, which were based on religious affiliation. The third section will look at Muslim sectarian identities and try to suggest some reasons these did not form the basis of state identities before the coming of the Safavids in sixteenth-century Iran. I shall then address two examples: the Armenians and the Kurds. The Armenians did eventually form the basis of a nation-state; the Kurds did not. Finally, I will deal with the question of Persian and Egyptian identities and why neither of these developed into a national identity.

TRIBAL IDENTITIES

In the first two centuries of Islam, up to the Abbasid Revolution of 750, and in some ways up to the death of Hārūn al-Rashīd in 809, Arab tribal identities were the most important signifiers of status and connection. Nor were Arab tribal identities the only ones in play. The Kurds also had tribal identities that reflected the structures of their often transhumant societies, but they never developed the position in literature and the wider elite culture enjoyed by the celebrated ancient tribes of the Arabs. Tribes play an important, even central, role in the history of the first two centuries of Islamic rule as presented by the Arabic sources.³ Tribal rivalries and conflicts are a major part of the sources’ understanding of this history. There is a developed vocabulary to describe these identities. These words (*‘ashīra*, *ḥayy*, *qabila*, to name only the most common) are used extensively. However, like much of the lexicography of classical Arabic, it is very difficult to work out any regular rules for the use of these terms or any sort of hierarchy

3. Crone, “Tribe”; Hoyland, *Arabia*, pp. 113–134; Dawod, ed., *Tribus*, with the contribution by Godelier, “À propos des concepts.”

(e.g., whether an *‘ashīra* is larger or smaller than a *qabīla*, or if the differences are regional, temporal, or authorial). What is clear is that they present themselves as the “sons” (*banū*) of a common ancestor, thus Banū Tamīm, indicating and claiming a biological link.

Classical Arabic names, like personal names in late republican Rome, are things of beauty and conveyors of a large amount of information. From the point of view of this discussion, the key element is the *nisba*, which is usually the final element in the name; so in the case of Abū Sa‘īd Yazīd b. Mazyad al-Shaybānī, it is the al-Shaybānī element that is important. *Nisbas* can relate to a tribe (as in this instance) but can also relate to a place of origin or a profession.

The concern with tribal identity gives rise to a vast and complicated schematic literature in which literally thousands of names are listed in complicated genealogical schemes. In Ibn al-Kalbi’s *Jamharat al-nasab* (Compendium of Genealogy) as tabulated by Werner Caskel,⁴ there are some twenty thousand named individuals, all of whom died before the year 800 and all of whom are assigned to their tribal lineages. So far, so good; it is a wonderful schema and pays powerful tribute to the tribal ideal as an organizing principle in society.

But we should not be deluded into believing that this elegant picture reflects the reality of tribal allegiances. For this, we need to seek the help of the social anthropologists of the twentieth century, most important, William Lancaster.⁵ These present a number of challenges to the Ibn al-Kalbī vision. First, this work suggests that for most Bedouins, the limit of genealogical memory is at most five generations; before that, it is vague or nonexistent. The only exceptions to this are certain “sheikhly” lineages that are remembered for longer, because they can be used to legitimize social status.⁶ Even in these cases, the pre-five-generation sections of the genealogy will present only one name in each generation. The effect of this is that people simply do not know how they are related to most other individuals who bear the same tribal *nisba*. Rather than a complicated schema of relations among distant cousins, people tend to resort to “must have been,” genealogies that argue that “we camp together, we tend our animals together, we go on raids or smuggling expeditions together, so we must be related at some point in the past.” That is to say that present relationships of convenience are deemed to have a biological origin because that is how the society works and explains itself.

This gives rise to the idea of what Lancaster calls the “generative genealogy,” that is, that people adopt the tribal identification that suits their needs at the time. Although the tribal network presents itself as biologically determined, it is, in fact, just like any other signifier of identity, a description of where individuals

4. Caskel and Strenziok, *Ġamharat An-Nasab*.

5. Lancaster, *Rwala Bedouin*.

6. See Kennedy, “Arab Genealogical Literature.”

want to place themselves in a wider society. Though there are real constraints of immediate kinship-group memories and perhaps differences of accent and dress, individuals can and do change their tribal identity to suit changing circumstances. Tribal identities are, in fact, the logical expression of social and economic aspirations couched in the language of kinship. They are not irrational, pointless, or destructive but rather working out of important and lasting concerns among the populations that use them. Bearing these considerations in mind, we can see how these genealogical concerns can shed light on behaviors of groups and individuals in the early Islamic world. A few examples must suffice.

The early Islamic conquests had the effect of intensifying tribal links, at least in the short term and at least in Iraq. It might be thought that the opposite would occur, that a new Islamic identity would come to replace tribal affiliations. That this was not the case was, in part at least, the result of the settlement of the Arabs in the garrison cities of Basra and Kufa. For administrative purposes, and above all the purposes of payment, the Arab settlers were divided into tribal groups, the diwans that recorded their names were listed under tribal headings, and the distribution of payment was entrusted to those whom the authorities deemed to be the heads of the tribes. Thus, members of Shaybān who had never had any contact with one another before, now found themselves part of a new tribal community with a common interest in securing their share of resources. In some ways and for some individuals, the conquest and the settlement that followed intensified the importance of tribal identities. In other cases, it did not. In a paper I published with John Haldon, I argued that at the battle of Siffin (656) between the supporters of 'Alī and Mu'āwiya, regional identities (Iraqi and Syrian) essentially overrode tribal bonds, pitching Iraqi Shaybānīs against Syrian Shaybānīs.⁷

When we come to look at the post-Abbasid period in the second half of the tenth century, we see another situation in which Arab tribal identities become important. With the breakup of the Abbasid caliphate, many individuals and families in the Fertile Crescent found themselves looking for new identities after the collapse of the imperial system. At this time, we see the emergence of Arab Bedouin tribes as major political forces. But in the main, they were not the tribes that had been important at the time of the first Arab conquests. A good example is the case of the Banū 'Uqayl, who founded an important dynasty in what is now northern Iraq.⁸ The 'Uqayl were an ancient tribe (at least according to the genealogists) but not a very prominent or numerous one. In the tenth century, however, they came to dominate this area. It is, of course, possible that they bred faster than their neighbors, but this is hardly a sustainable explanation. Much more likely is that an ambitious and successful dynasty of 'Uqayli chiefs attracted followers from many different groups who then defined themselves as 'Uqaylis

7. Haldon and Kennedy, "Regional Identities."

8. Kennedy, "Uqyalids."

and were welcomed as such. Many may have come from other, less dynamic tribal groups, but there is a further possible explanation. Archaeological and textual evidences point to the abandonment of much of the agricultural settlement in the Jazira in the course of the tenth century,⁹ an abandonment caused in large part by the collapse of the markets for agricultural produce in Baghdad during this period. It may well be that many of the peasant farmers of the area opted to become pastoralists and assimilated to the major nomad tribes of the area, taking their identity and inserting themselves into the tribal genealogy.

DYNASTIC AND SECTARIAN IDENTITIES

The most obvious identities when reading the chronicles of the time are dynastic. History is divided and punctuated by the rise and fall of dynasties, Samanids, Saffarids, Ghaznavids, and so on, a structure that informs medieval sources and continues to be used by modern historians. Dynastic prestige and ancient lineage, especially if connected to the glorious Iranian past and its celebrated ruling family, the Sasanians, provided an important legitimizing discourse for the assumption of power, but it did not create a wider identity. The Samanid dynasty in its heyday was widely respected within and outside the borders of the lands over which it ruled, but the inhabitants did not describe themselves as Samanids any more than the inhabitants of Central Europe in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries would have defined themselves as Habsburgs. If they went to Baghdad, they might say they came from Khurasan or more likely that they came from a city such as Nishapur, Bukhara, or Samarqand.

It is perhaps surprising that religious sectarianism did not play a larger part in state formation in the post-Abbasid period. There were areas—to call them states suggests a formalism and structure that they lacked—that had Shi'ite identities and accepted the authority of an imam from the house of 'Alī, but these only established themselves in remote and poverty-stricken parts of the Muslim world, cut off by deserts and mountains from the wider Muslim world. The Zaydī realms of the small towns and villages of the mountains to the south of the Caspian Sea and of northern Yemen are part of this. Zaydī rule in the Caspian provinces lasted until the sixteenth century, in Yemen until 1962, but as already pointed out, it was religious allegiance rather than ethnic identity that ensured their longevity.

The Fāṭimids established a state first in North Africa and then in Egypt in which the caliph's right to rule was based on his descent from Prophet Muḥammad and his daughter Fāṭima, but this did not result in an Egyptian state with a Shi'ite identity. The Fāṭimids established their new center of government in Cairo and a new center of learning, the Azhar, to elaborate and propagate their ideology, but

9. Berthier, *Peuplement*.

they did not attempt to convert the majority of the population to their beliefs. When Fāṭimid rule collapsed in 1171, Shi'ism almost entirely disappeared in Egypt. It is not until the sixteenth century in Iran that we can see a state whose identity is totally bound up with its sectarian allegiance. Until the sixteenth century, Iran was not in any real sense a Shi'ite country. True, there were Shi'ite groups living there, but they were scattered among the broader population. The Safavids changed all that. In a development strikingly similar to those in Western Europe in the same period, they decided that the religion of the ruling house, Imami Shi'ism, should be the religion of the whole country, *cuius regio eius religio* as expressed in the treaty of Augsburg (1555) at exactly the same time as the Safavids were consolidating their power in Iran. To do so, they had to import scholars, mostly from what is now Lebanon, to construct a coherent ideology. For the first time in Islamic history, a large polity had what was in a real sense a state religion, and this lasted over the next four centuries. Well beyond the fall of the Safavids in 1722, Iranian identity became inextricably linked with Shi'ism, a faith that separated them from their Sunni neighbors, the Ottomans to the west, and the Uzbeks and Afghans to the east, more clearly than any political frontier.

WARLORDS AND WARLORDISM

“Warlordism” is not an elegant word in English (indeed, it may not be a real word at all), but it is a useful basis of discussion. The word can be used in a general way to describe any military leader, but it would be helpful to attempt a more circumscribed definition. A warlord in the tenth-century Middle East was a man who took control of an area and, most important, the revenues it yielded to employ soldiers (*ghilmān*, sing., *ghulām* is the term most often used in this period) to maintain his power. The warlord was essentially a self-made figure, he was not the scion of a well-respected family, there was no ideological or religious foundation of his power, and he was not the leader of a powerful tribe relying on his fellow tribesmen to support him. His power might be impressive, but it was also ephemeral. On the death of the great man, there were no bonds of kinship or faith to hold his followers together, and they scattered to find new paymasters. The swift rise and even swifter fall of the warlord was a characteristic feature of the history of the tenth-century Middle East. The warlord's domain had some of the features of a proto-state, notably the existence of a military force and an apparatus for collecting taxes and tribute, but it had no tribal, ethnic, or religious bonds to hold it together. These were states but essentially one-generation, pop-up states that left no legacy beyond records in ancient chronicles.

A classic example of this sort of warlord was Yūsuf b. Abī Sāj (d. 928).¹⁰ He came from a family of Eastern Iranian origin, but there is no indication that his

10. For a meticulous account of the Sajids, see Madelung, “Banū Sāj.”

followers had any bonds of Iranian ethnic identity. It was his ability to pay rather than any other claims that attracted his followers and retained their services. His brother Muḥammad had established himself as a military leader in the mountainous areas of Armenia and Azerbaijan. On his death, his *ghilmān* rejected the claims of his son and transferred their allegiance to Yūsuf, no doubt reckoning him to be a better paymaster. Yūsuf claimed to be governing on behalf of the Abbasid caliph in Baghdad and made a bargain with the court of the sort that was called *damān*, essentially an agreement to pay some of the revenues to the caliph if and when it suited him. If he failed to pay, which was often, the caliph had the choice of sending a military expedition, expensive and of uncertain outcome, or negotiating a smaller sum. Yūsuf was, to all intents and purposes, an independent ruler. He also conducted an entirely independent policy with the Christian Armenian princes. In the Armenian sources, he is portrayed as a tyrant and oppressor, though reading between the lines, it is clear that he tried to play the princes off against one another. Interestingly, despite the fact that he was a Muslim leader fighting Christian enemies of the faith, he never claimed to be a *ghāzī* or leader of a *jihād*. Although he defined himself, at one level, against the Armenians, his following never claimed any ethnic identity that we can discover. His downfall came when the government of the caliph al-Muqtadir (r. 908–932) persuaded him, with vast sums of money and a free hand in spending it, to leave his upland fastnesses and come to the plains of Iraq, where the Shi'ite Qarāmiṭa rebels were threatening to take Baghdad itself. His troops, used to mountain warfare, were outmaneuvered by the Qarāmiṭa, and he himself was taken prisoner and put to death. His followers were dispersed, and his ephemeral state vanished.

Yūsuf b. Abī Sāj was a characteristic figure of the age, taking advantage of the revenue system to maintain his military power but making no effort, it would seem, to establish a lasting state. Perhaps his career, with its ambiguous relationship with a decaying imperial authority, has more in common with Stilicho or Aetius than with the kings of the Franks or Burgundians.

ARMENIANS AND KURDS

To investigate the nature of ethnic identities in the Middle East during this period, I would like to examine and compare two quasi-ethnic identities and their functions in political life: the Kurdish and the Armenian. The fundamental question is why the Armenians seem to have retained an ethnic identity that defined their political reality for centuries to come, while the Kurds did not, or, to put it another way, why there is now a republic of Armenia and not a republic of Kurdistan. And then the further question: how much of this contrast is the result of events in the tenth century?

Armenian identity has been the subject of much historical discussion, much of it very parti pris, but despite the tendentious nature of many of the claims, there is still a basic reality that merits discussion.¹¹ The first factor must be geography. From the first centuries of the Common Era, if not before, Armenians are to be found in Eastern Anatolia and the Caucasus, and there have been populations defining themselves as Armenian in these uplands ever since. This does not mean, of course, that there was always an Armenia with generally recognized borders. In the eleventh century, the Kingdom of Armenia was conquered first by the Byzantines and then by the Seljuq Turks. Many Armenians left their ancestral lands and established themselves in Cilicia in Southern Anatolia, where in due course a new Armenian kingdom with a very distinctive Armenian culture was founded, lasting almost to the end of the fourteenth century. In the ancient lands, the loss of the kingdom and the political identity that went with it never led to the loss of a cultural and religious identity, all of which made possible the revival of Armenian nationalism in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This territoriality was reinforced by the fact that most Armenians led settled lives in agricultural villages and small towns. There must have been transhumant shepherds, but even they would have kept to familiar pastures and well-trodden ancestral routes.

A common language was, of course, an important factor. Not only was the language a common speech among the Armenians, even though very few non-Armenians would have learned it, it was also a written language from at least the fourth century onward. This writing was the bearer of a whole wealth of historical identity, tales of kings, of heroic fights with outside invaders, of saints and martyrs who had given their lives for their faith and their people. Even in times when there was no independent state, this literature kept alive the memory that there had once been one, a glorious and heroic one, which might again be restored.

The third element was religion. This was doctrinally distinctive and separate from Byzantine orthodoxy. It was also exceptional in that it was coterminous with the linguistic group. It was, and always has been, impossible for non-Armenians to convert to Armenian Christianity; it is thus a national church in a way that no other Christian or Muslim sect has ever been. Furthermore, the religious institution had an impressive physical presence in the landscape. The churches and monasteries, superbly built of the hard stones of Eastern Anatolia and the southern Caucasus, were a constant reminder of the ancient heritage, and though the kings and princes might have vanished, their memories were kept alive by the monks and priests and the iconography and inscriptions of the buildings. A hierarchy from Catholicos to humble priest provided a vision of organization even

11. For the general history of Armenia in this period, see Vacca, *Non-Muslim Provinces*. For the question of Armenian identity in the ninth and tenth centuries, see Vacca, "Conflict."

when the secular one had disappeared. No one factor accounts for the persistence of Armenian ethnic identity through centuries of political disaster and geographical upheaval, but no one can deny its reality.

Like Armenian identity, Kurdish identity was well established at the time of the Muslim conquests.¹² The earlier history of the Kurds is difficult to establish, and the debate tends to get bogged down in unresolvable philological problems. What is clear is that the Arabic sources recognize the Kurds as a group from an early period and talk about their geographical distribution and political role. Let's start with geography. By the time the Arab geographer al-Iṣṭakhrī was writing in the 930s, he was able to give a detailed account of numerous Kurdish camps (*zumūm*) with their own leaders and their own fiscal regime in Western Iran between Shiraz and Isfahan.¹³ In his words, the Kurdish chiefs had taken over all the functions of the *sulṭān* (the state in this context) including collecting the *ṣadaqa* alms tax and other dues and keeping the roads safe from robbers. From other sources, we know of Kurds in Azerbaijan and Southeast Anatolia. In fact, their geographical distribution was widespread but not concentrated.

Their identity was partly based on their lifestyle and the way in which they exploited their environment. The Kurds seem to have lived a largely transhumant existence, moving from summer pastures in the Zagros Mountains to winter pastures in the plains of Iraq, along well-established and well-defined routes. The occupation of this ecological niche enabled them to live a semi-independent life without infringing on the rights and livelihoods of other populations. From the point of view of identity, one important aspect of this pattern should be noted: the Kurds moved through mountain valleys cut off from other groups by mountain barriers. They did not, therefore, necessarily come into contact with other Kurdish tribes, living a similar but parallel lifestyle. There was no shared space in which they would gather and affirm their common identity.

The geographical range of the Kurds also changed in the early Islamic period. Sometime around the end of the first millennium CE, the Kurds of Fars and the southern Zagros disappear, to be replaced by Turkish-speaking transhumant groups such as the Bakhtiari and Qashqai still to be found in the same area today.¹⁴ What changed here is difficult to reconstruct. It may be that the Kurds were driven out by incoming Turkish-speaking populations whose advance was connected with the coming of the Seljuqs. It is equally possible that the Kurdish populations assimilated to an incoming Turkish-speaking elite, adopting their language and tribal identities and redefining themselves as Turks. Or most likely, it was a combination of both. Be that as it may, the Kurds continued to dominate

12. On the Kurds and Kurdish identity, see James, "Territoire"; James, "Arab Ethnonyms."

13. Al-Iṣṭakhrī, *Al-Mamālik wa'l-Masalik*, ed. de Goeje, pp. 113–115.

14. Vanly, "Déplacement."

in the northern Zagros and in the mountains of Southeastern Anatolia, areas in which, of course, they remain an important element in the population down to the present day.

Like the Armenians, the Kurds had a distinctive language, an Indo-European language quite unlike Arabic and only distantly related to Persian. Unlike Armenian, however, it was never a written language. Unlike with Arabic, there was no intellectual discussion in Kurdish, and it was never used for any form of written administration. Unlike New Persian, which was establishing itself as a language for poetry and history during the tenth century, Kurdish remained nothing more than a rural vernacular. Why this happened is not entirely clear. Part of the explanation is certainly that Kurdish was not used in any religious discourse. There is no hint that anyone even considered translating the Qurʾān or any of the works of Greek learning that were appearing in Arabic at this time into Kurdish. When Kurdish-speaking rulers patronized literature or learning, it was always in an Arabic medium, and there was no national myth that even remotely resembled the *Shahnameh*.

There was, in short, no elite patronage of a distinctively Kurdish culture. Here again, there is a striking contrast to both Armenian, where the church and some princely households patronized literature, and New Persian, which was enthusiastically adopted as the medium for court poetry and an increasingly wide range of secular literature. This disdain for Kurdish is reflected in the titles borne by Kurdish leaders and chiefs. Whereas Armenian nobles clearly bore Armenian names and titles and Persian rulers might take old Iranian names and titles, Kurdish leaders had Arabic names, and their choice of titles was always taken from the onomasticon of contemporary Arab rulership. Equally, the Kurds had no pre-Islamic history to remember and to provide a legitimizing discourse. The Armenians, of course, had memories of the early days of Christianity and the heroism of Armenian warriors and saints in resisting Sasanian persecution, while the Persians could look to the vast history of monarchs and heroes, both mythical and historical, that made up the *Shahnameh* tradition.

As we have seen, the Armenian presence in the landscapes of Eastern Anatolia and the Caucasus was visibly asserted by a very distinctive style of architecture. The churches of this period are unmistakably Armenian. In Bukhara in the tenth century, a distinctively Persian architecture was announced by the building of the Samanid mausoleum. There is not much extant building that can be linked to Kurdish patronage, but what there is shows no distinctive “ethnic” character but rather works in Arabic and Persian styles.

What perhaps lies at the heart of this is that there was no attempt to articulate Kurdishness as a bearer of power or a vehicle to create alliance across tribal boundaries. There were Kurdish dynasties, such as the Marwanids of Diyarbakır who ruled much of Southeast Anatolia from the 980s to 1085, when their territory was conquered by the Seljuqs, but their chronicler, Ibn al-Azraq, recounted

their deeds in Arabic as virtuous but conventional Muslim monarchs, hardly mentioning their Kurdish identity. The *‘ulama* and poets who ornamented their court wrote entirely in Arabic. A century later, Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn (Saladin) was known to be of Kurdish ancestry, but he never used it to develop his political power, identifying instead as a Muslim and a servant of the Abbasid caliph, nor did his enemies ever use it as a way of denigrating him. It was simply not relevant.

In this respect, there is a possible parallel with position in Egypt.¹⁵ The breakup of the caliphate did not see the emergence of an Egyptian ethnic identity. Egypt was, of course, a wealthy and distinct province, but the culture was clearly Arabic, and Coptic culture retreated to cloister and the liturgy. One reason for this may have been that the Egyptians of the tenth century had no real access to the great history of pharaonic times. It was probably around 400 CE that the last person able to read hieroglyphs died. Egyptians in the early Islamic period knew that there had been pharaohs, because both the Torah and the Qurʾān told them so, painting unflattering pictures of proud tyrants. But they did not know the name of a single pharaoh or have access to any mighty deeds that they might celebrate. Of course, the relics of pharaonic architecture were all around—after all, you could not fail to notice the pyramids, but it is a measure of the lack of any ethnic self-confidence that they were held to be Joseph’s granaries, because Joseph was a familiar figure from the Qurʾān, denying any agency to any native Egyptian enterprise. It might be interesting to reflect just how different the history of the Middle East might have been if the *Histories* of Herodotus had been translated into Arabic. They would have opened up a whole world of memory of Pharaonic Egypt and Achaemenid Iran which might in turn have provided the foundations of a conscious ethnic identity. But they were not.

IRANIAN IDENTITY IN THE POST-ABBASID PERIOD

What can be said about Iranian ethnic identity during the long tenth century? Was there ever the potential to create a political identity? Why was there no equivalent of the Iranian state that the Safavids were able to create from 1501 on?

In this context, it should be noted that “Iranian” was never used as an ethnic description or even as a geographical term. “Eran” and “Eran-shahr” had been used in pre-Islamic times and extensively in *Shahnameh*, but it was not applied to contemporary Iran by Muslim authors until the fourteenth century, when the concept was developed by the Il-Khanid descendants of Genghis Khan, searching for new narratives to bolster their rule.¹⁶

15. On local identity in early Islamic Egypt, see Omar, “‘Crinkly-Haired People.’”

16. For recent discussions of Arab and Iranian identities in the early Islamic period, see Savant, *New Muslims*; Savran, *Arabs*.

In some ways, the prospects look favorable for the development of an ethnic identity. Iran had, by this period, a distinct linguistic identity. By this time, Middle Persian (Pahlavi), the language of the Sasanian kings and the Zoroastrian *mawbadhs* and *herbadhs*, had almost ceased to be a spoken language. In his very interesting account of the province of Fars in the early decades of the tenth century, al-Iṣṭakhrī explains that there were three languages in use.¹⁷ There was the *fārisiyya* (New Persian), which was the most generally used vernacular; Arabic, which was the language of the *sultān*, that is, the administration; and finally, there was the *bahlawiyya* (Pahlavi), the language of the Magians, which they spoke among themselves. By the beginning of the next century, Pahlavi had ceased to be a current language just as most of the fire temples in the area had fallen into disuse.

That left New Persian, which is clearly based on Middle Persian but with an Arabic overlay and an Arabic alphabet (with three additional letters). The relationship between the Persian and Arabic elements in the language is broadly comparable with that between the Anglo-Saxon and Latin elements in English. The language of everyday life—food, drink, beasts, members of the family, things that you can touch and see—are Persian words, whereas the vocabulary of administration, abstract thought, and, above all, religion is of Arabic origin. The grammatical structures are Persian. The origins of this mongrel language remain the subject of discussion. Richard Bulliet argues that it arose as a vernacular to service the cotton trade and other commercial activities across the different Arabic and Persian dialects.¹⁸ I believe that it starts as, literally, an *urdu*, a language that began in the military camps of the armies of the Abbasid armies, where Arab and Persian speakers worked together and had to find a vehicle for mutual comprehension. In the course of the early tenth century in the hands of poets such as Rudaki (d. 329/940–41), this language became a written one in which poetry, especially panegyric and love poetry, was expressed. By the mid-tenth century, the great history of al-Ṭabarī was translated into this new language, and at the beginning of the eleventh century, it was consolidated in Firdawsī's great *Shahnameh*, a work that established New Persian in the sort of way in which the *Authorized (King James) Bible* established English six hundred years later.

In *Shahnameh*, this language became the bearer of a strongly nationalist message, stressing the antiquity of the royal tradition and the ancient rivalry between Iran and Turan (the Turkish world) to the east. Iran had an ancient tradition of monarchy, which, unlike the ancient Egyptian tradition, was well known to people in the tenth century. Firdawsī encapsulated and immortalized this in his great epic poem, the first half of which was devoted to the history of the

17. Al-Iṣṭakhrī, *Al-Mamālik wa'l-Masalik*, ed. de Goeje, pp. 138–139.

18. Bulliet, *Cotton*, pp. 140–141.

dynasty of Kayanid kings and the great hero Rustam. As far as we know, these kings had no basis in historical fact. The medieval Persians knew no more of the Achaemenids, builders of such highly visible monuments as Persepolis, than medieval Egyptians knew of the pharaohs, but at least they had a tradition that went back to the earliest days of the human race. With Alexander the Great, the *Shahnameh* becomes historical, at least after a fashion, and the long account of the deeds of the Sasanian kings is effectively versified history. Although Firdawsī was a Muslim, the whole epic ends with the coming of Islam and a great melancholic threnody for the splendors of the old Persian monarchy and its court.

The Persians had an ancient language and culture or, rather, cultures. In the formative tenth century, there was a marked difference between Eastern and Western Iran, the border lying in the great salt desert that occupies the central lands of the Iranian plateau and at the city of Rayy, just southeast of modern Tehran. The new Persian culture flourished in the east, at the court of the great Samanid emirs in Bukhara (287–395/900–1005), who proclaimed their descent from the Sasanian kings of old. In the west, at the same time, the leading political power was the Būyids, already mentioned.¹⁹ Although they sometimes revived Sasanian royal names (Fana-Khusraw, Fīruz),²⁰ they used Arabic titles, and their rich and varied court cultures were entirely conducted in Arabic. Furthermore, in an age when the divisions between Sunni and Shi'ites were becoming increasingly defined, the Samanids were clearly Sunni, self-proclaimed supporters of the Abbasids, while the Būyids were Shi'ites.

Neither of these dynasties attempted to make use of the concept of Iran as a political identity or assert itself as rulers of all Persians; instead, the identities they worked with were regional and sectarian. The Būyids and their military following were not described as Persian. They were Daylamites with a distinct language and mountain culture. They were foot soldiers rather than the successors of the heavily armored cavalry of late Sasanian Iran. As with the case of the Kurds, there was no Daylamite literature, no Daylamite architecture. At one level, the Būyid rulers did encourage an ethnic and religious identity among their followers, based on their infantry military traditions, their styles of dress (which, it seems, clearly distinguished them from their fellow citizens when they came to rule areas such as Fars), and their religious identities, for the Daylamites and their leaders were Shi'ites in contrast to the majority of the populations they ruled. Like the Arian Visigothic kings of Spain, they were separated from the majority of their subjects by this different religious identity.

19. Bosworth, "Iran"; Donohue, *Buwayhid Dynasty*.

20. Madelung, "Minor Dynasties."

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This is necessarily a short and rather speculative argument, but it raises significant issues. Faced with the disintegration of the imperial power, the people of the tenth-century Middle East had multiple identities that might provide a narrative for their lives. They could look to tribal identities, lifestyle identities, linguistic identities, identities forged from cultural memories, and religious identities. They could also look to urban identities as Baghdadis, Damascenes, and so on. Perhaps these many possibilities are why ethnic identities were so rarely developed. There is no doubt much more to be said on this subject, and the true explanation may never be agreed on, but the subject is an important one: the absence of national states, at a time when the nation-state was regarded as the pinnacle of human social organization in the nineteenth century, became a device used by both imperial administrators and academic orientalisks to denigrate the peoples of the Middle East and undermine their claims to political and cultural independence.