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The Evolution of the Term *Sulṭān* in Early Islam

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Abstract

This article discusses the use of the word *sulṭān* in Arabic political and historical discourse in the period before the term is regularly used as a title of rulership attached to an individual in the middle of the fifth/eleventh century. It describes four phases, *sulṭān* as abstract authority, *sulṭān* as state or administration, *sulṭān* as an informal descriptor of a powerful individual and *sulṭān* as a formal title used on coins. It argues that the changing uses are related to the changing nature of power and authority in the Muslim community.

Keywords

Administration – caliph – Islamic rulership – *sulṭān*

Introduction

Perhaps the most important question which pre-occupied politicians and historians in the first four centuries of Islam, was the question of legitimacy of different claims to leadership of the community. The words used to describe the holders of power and rulership in classical Arabic historiography are many and varied: *khalīfa*, *malik*, *amīr* and *sulṭān* are only the most common. All these terms have many different and often disputed meanings, and we must constantly be aware that these meanings will change in different periods, in

different areas of the Islamic world and between different writers. The vocabulary of power is not fixed for centuries, it changes to reflect changed circumstances and, in turn, the adoption of new words and meanings can change the political dynamic. Writers used the vocabulary at their disposal to make different claims for different sorts of authority. The use of words was constantly developing and being experimented with to make different points. To understand what the terms mean and what was understood by them, we must keep these variables in our minds and not take any dictionary definition as in any way definitive.

Muḥammad had led the nascent Muslim community by reason of his status as prophet (*nabī*) and messenger of God (*rasūl Allāh*), but it was generally accepted that he was the last of the prophets, that great line of leaders and visionaries which traced its origins through Jesus, Moses, Abraham to Adam himself. As the Muslims' texts say, he was the "seal of the prophets." Muḥammad himself, at least according to the Sunni tradition, made no clear provision for his succession. In the event when he died in 11/632, control was seized by a small group of his oldest and most loyal companions from the days of his early struggles in Medina. Over the next forty years they ruled with the title of Caliph or (*khalīfa*) and Commander of the Faithful (*amīr al-mu'minīn*), the usual title of formal address, caliph being used in historical and political narrative and in poetry. Both titles were ambiguous in different ways. In the case of *amīr al-mu'minīn*, the first element meant commander, giver of orders, in both the military and civil realms, that much was clear, but the *mu'minīn* were more problematic: did this unusual term refer just to the Muslims, or also to people of other faiths who gave their allegiance to the Islamic rulers?¹

Khalīfa was also ambiguous, and its interpretation has been the subject of considerable scholarly debate.² Should it be translated as deputy, meaning the deputy of God on earth, with all the implications of a close if undefined relationship with the Divine? Or should it be translated as successor, meaning successor of the Prophet in his non-religious role as political and military leader? Both interpretations are philologically sustainable. In either case it was agreed by both Sunnis and Shi'is alike, that the caliph should be a member — by biological descent — of the Prophet's tribe of Quraysh. When the Umayyads, followed by the Abbasids, were effective rulers of most, if not all of the Muslim world, this was not a problem. When, however, from around the year 390/1000 onward, supreme leadership passed into the hands of Turkish warlords (sometimes first-generation converts to Islam) with no conceivable claim to be

1 For the identity of the *mu'minīn*, see Donner, *Muḥammad and the Believers*.

2 See Crone and Hinds, *God's Caliph*; Kennedy, *The Caliphate: A Pelican Introduction*.

members of Quraysh, the old vocabulary of rulership ceased to be fit for purpose. It was at this stage that *sultān* as a designation of an individual holding supreme political and military power, began to be used.

In a sense we all know what the word *sultān* means.³ From the coming of the Saljuq Turks in the mid-fifth/eleventh century, if not before, it is a title of monarchy, referring to a man, a specific individual, Sultān Sanjar for example. Images spring to mind, portraits of Qā'it Bāy or Mehmet the Conqueror, captured in the Bellini portraits with their huge turbans, or what the English poet Shelley (in *Ozymandias*) so memorably described as “the sneer of cold command.” *Sultān* remained the most important title of the Ottoman rulers up to 1340/1922 and is still used as a royal title in Oman, Brunei and Malaysia. Of course, there is still room for considerable discussion as to the powers that this title confers, the relations between *sultān* and *khalīfa* and numerous other issues, but the personalisation of the term is indisputable.

Definitions of *Sultān*

Sultān, which has cognates in both Hebrew and Aramaic, is a term found in the Quran thirty-four times.⁴ In her article on “Authority” in the *Encyclopaedia of the Quran*, Wadad al-Qadi shows how the term means proof or argument and can mean authority as well, but only in the sense of authority supported by proof: “The authority with which the Quran is concerned is essentially religious with credal, theological, legal, eschatological and moral implication.” The prophets, notably Moses, are provided by God with power and authority supported by proof. Idols and other false gods lack this sanction (*sultān*). God gives *sultān* to a *malik* (king). Satan has *sultān* over humans. Devin Stewart argues that it can also be a written message with a physical letter or message conferring responsibility.⁵ It is always used in the abstract and never refers to

3 For a clear account of the basic evolution of the term through history, see Bosworth, *Sultān*; for the use of the term in the Quran, see al-Qadi, *Authority*. Perhaps surprisingly, the standard histories of Islamic political thought have almost nothing to say about the use of *sultān* before its adoption as a royal title in the fifth/eleventh century; there is no discussion at all in Black, *The History of Islamic Political Thought*; Lambton, *State and Government in Medieval Islam*; and Crone, *Medieval Islamic Political Thought*. Only Lewis, *The Political Language of Islam* has a succinct, one page discussion (page 35).

4 For a detailed and persuasive account of the various uses of *sultān* in the Quran, see Stewart, *Images of Writing and the Concept of Sultān in the Quran*.

5 Stewart, *Images of Writing*.

political or temporal power. It is found in the hadith literature referring in the abstract to power, either of God or men, but not an institution.

Turning to the early Arabic lexicography, we get another perspective on the evolution of the term. Putting aside Ibn Durayd's (d. 321/933) definitions in *Jamharat al-Lughā* — "an inflammation of the blood" or "the blazing of a fire" — we are given a number of definitions related to abstract power, authority and dominion. It is not until the *Ṣiḥāḥ* of al-Jawharī (d. ca. 398/1007) that we find the definition of "king, sovereign, governor," the word being used to describe an individual.⁶ Thereafter these meanings are repeated in later dictionaries like the *Tāj al-'Arūs* of al-Zabīdī (d. 1205/1790).

It may not be coincidence that al-Jawharī lived and worked for most of his life, when he was not travelling among the Bedouin searching for purer and more authentic meanings, in his native Farab (a trading town on the north-east frontier of the Muslim world where the settled lands met the steppes of Central Asia) and other areas of north-east Iran, until he died. It is interesting that he was working at the time and in the area in which the use of the term *sultān* is first firmly attested as a title of rulership.

***Sultān* in the Political Rhetoric of the Umayyad and Early Abbasid Periods**

The term *sultān* is used in the political rhetoric of the Umayyad and early Abbasid period in the sense of "proof" or "authority" as we find it in the Quran. At this time, it never seems to be used in the later sense of the state, apparatus of government or ruler.

We can see this, for example, in the way the term is used by al-Ya'qūbī in his *Ta'riḫ* (written ca. 261/875). The term occurs in the list of maxims of government attributed to Ziyād b. Abī Sufyān (aka Ziyād b. Abīhi), governor of Iraq during the caliphate of the first Umayyad ruler, Mu'āwiya. This is the earliest of such collections of advice in the Arabic tradition. "The foundation of *sultān*," he says, "consists of four things, abstaining from unlawful wealth, closeness to those who do good, harshness to evildoers and truthfulness of tongue."⁷ *Sultān* here clearly refers to the moral qualities required of a ruler, not to the people or mechanism of power, a usage very similar to the Quranic concept. In al-Ṭabarī's

6 For a discussion of al-Jawharī's *Tāj al-lughā wa-ṣiḥāḥ al-'Arabiyya*, see Baalbaki, *The Arabic Lexicographical Tradition*, 373–381.

7 Ya'qūbī, *Ta'riḫ*, II, 279; trans., III, 915.

version of the sermon which Ziyād preached on taking up the office of governor of Basra, he rules “by the *sultān* of God which he gave us.”⁸

In a sermon preached in the mosque in Kufa after the city had been taken (or liberated) from Umayyad rule in 132/749, the Abbasid Dāwud b. ‘Alī, uncle of the first caliph Abū-l-Abbās al-Saffāh, addressed the inhabitants about the *translatio imperii* which they were witnessing:

(God) has made manifest among you a caliph of the house of Hāshim, brightening your faces and making you victorious over the army of Syria and transferring the *sultān* and the glory of Islam to you.⁹

Again it is God’s support and approbation which is meant here.

Sultān meaning “State” or “Government”

During the first half-century of Abbasid rule, the use of the word seems to have evolved. It is used more commonly in the historical narratives of the period and has come to denote the state or government apparatus, but not the person of the ruler or caliph.¹⁰ It may be relevant that this usage seems to appear during the heyday of Barmakid authority in the caliphate. The Barmakids, a family of Persian origin from Balkh, now in northern Afghanistan, are widely credited with the development of the Abbasid bureaucracy in the year before their dramatic fall from power in 187/803.¹¹ It may be that the use of *sultān* to describe the very real and substantial bureaucratic structures was first developed in Barmakid circles. Writing much later, Ibn Khaldūn says that Ja’far b. Yaḥyā the Barmakid was called *sultān* because he held the most powerful position in the state.¹² Yet there seems to be no contemporary attestation of this. In the last years of Hārūn al-Rashīd, one Rāfi‘ b. Layth, grandson of Naṣr b. Sayyār, the last Umayyad governor of Khurasan, who rebelled against the authority of the Abbasids, had recruited followers from all over eastern Khurasan “to resist

8 Ṭabarī, *Ta’rikh*, II, 75.

9 Ibid., III, 32–33.

10 A good discussion of the use of the word *sultān* in the sense of administration or state comes from the caliphate of Cordoba; see Manzano Moreno, *The Court of the Caliph of al-Andalus*, 104–146.

11 For the most recent account of the Barmakids with full bibliography, see Van Bladel, *Barmakids*; for their possible role in administrative developments, see Kennedy, *The Barmakid Revolution in Islamic Government*, 89–98.

12 Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddima*, II, 8–9.

the *sulṭān*.” In this case the term has come to refer to the real political and military power of the state.¹³ Similarly at almost exactly the same time, in an account of the disturbed state of Syria after the death of Hārūn, al-Ya‘qūbī notes that, “there remained not a single area where people were not fighting each other, with no *sulṭān* to prevent them or disperse them.”¹⁴ Again, *sulṭān* represents a clear and present (or, in this case, absent) political power. At the same time, it is still an abstract idea without a real corporeal or material reality.

In 257/871, we are told in the same source, there was a rebellion in upper Egypt against the *aṣḥāb* (officials) *al-sulṭān*.¹⁵ By this time, the *sulṭān* had, so to speak, grown arms and legs, or more specifically, a cadre of men who were identified as belonging to it.

In another third/ninth century (ca. 250/864) historical source which deals with many different sorts of administrative matters, al-Balādhurī’s *Futūḥ al-buldān*, the term *sulṭān* is seldom used. When it does occur, the author uses it in the sense it had acquired by the time he was writing. We are told, for example, that the *sulṭān* found men to cultivate deserted estates in Palestine after a devastating plague at the beginning of the reign of Hārūn.¹⁶ Later, during the reign of al-Mu‘taṣim (218/833–227/842), the nobles of Armenia, encouraged by the presence of a lenient governor, began to defy the *sulṭān*.¹⁷ When Abū Dulaf al-Qāsim b. ‘Īsā al-‘Ijlī began to build up his estates in al-Jibāl in the mid-third/ninth century, “he came to the notice of the *sulṭān*.”¹⁸

It is interesting to trace the evolution of the term in the final sections of al-Ṭabarī’s monumental *Ta’rikh*, written during the author’s own lifetime and largely presented without the use of *isnāds* or formal critical apparatus. His information about the reigns of the caliphs al-Mu‘taḍid (279/892–289/902) and his son al-Muktafī (289/902–295/908) thus reflects the contemporary usage of his time rather than the collection of anecdotes from previous ages which could result in inadvertent anachronism. His narratives, and the linguistic usage which goes with them, are, in many cases, dependant on letters which reached Baghdad from the provinces or military commanders in the field. When reporting these, he frequently says that letters came ‘*alā l-sulṭān*, “to the *sulṭān*.” In this way the *sulṭān* has acquired a geographical location, Baghdad.¹⁹ It is not just letters which come to the *sulṭān*, but people as well. In 287/900

13 Ya‘qūbī, *Ta’rikh*, II, 528.

14 *Ibid.*, 534; trans. III, 1199.

15 Ya‘qūbī, *Ta’rikh*, II, 622.

16 Balādhurī, *Futūḥ*, 158.

17 *Ibid.*, 211.

18 *Ibid.*, 314.

19 For examples, see Ṭabarī, *Ta’rikh*, III, 2194, 2195, 2220, 2249, 2251, 2254, 2267.

messengers from the eunuch Waṣīf, acting in collusion with Ibn Abī l-Sāj who was leading a rebellion against the caliphate in Armenia and Azerbaijan, came to the *sultān* to try to persuade Caliph al-Muʿtaḍid to appoint their master to the governorship of a province on the Byzantine frontier.²⁰ Here again the word seems to be the capital in a geographical sense. In 293/906 a group of about ten men came from Mecca to the *Bāb al-sultān*, “Gate of the *sultān*,” to ask al-Muʿtaḍid to send men to defend them from a rebel in the Yemen, again giving a geographical specificity to the word.²¹

At the same time the *sultān* also has employees and servants. In 289/902 one of the military officers of the *sultān* was killed in Rayy.²² When Kufa was attacked by the *Qarāmiṭa* rebels in 293/906, the resistance to their onslaught was led by one Ishāq b. ʿImrān, the agent (*ʿāmil*) of the *sultān* in the city. The soldiers of the *sultān*, who were reinforced by men despatched by the *sultān* from other areas of Iraq, came to help them.²³ In 302/915 we find Bishr, agent of the *sultān* in Tarsus, writing to the *sultān* in Baghdad about his successful raid against the Byzantines, while in Egypt in the same year, the *sultān*’s men led by their *ʿāmil*, had successfully fought off men from the Maghreb supporting the Fatimids.²⁴ The *sultān* even had its own banner (*ʿalam*) — which in 294/906 was sent along with some troops to try to defend the hajj caravan against the attacks of the *Qarāmiṭa* —²⁵ and its own political agency — in 297/909 the *sultān* appointed Subkarā governor of Fars.²⁶

In al-Ṭabarī’s account of this period *sultān* means both the capital as a geographical location, and the state as a military and political actor. It is closely connected with the caliphs, who appear under their own names, but has a distinct independent identity, an identity which continues uninterrupted through the reigns of al-Muʿtaḍid and al-Muktafi.

More information on the meaning and nature of *sultān* from the later fourth/tenth century can be found in the documents and letters in the Cairo Geniza.²⁷ The Judaeo-Arabic texts use the word to describe the state and its agents. It never refers to the Fatimid rulers in person who are always *khalifa* or imam. The *sultān* has different agents with different powers. They can be courtiers whose power depends on their relationship with the caliph and his

20 Ibid., III, 2195.

21 Ibid., III, 2267.

22 Ibid., III, 2208–9.

23 Ibid., III, 2261–7.

24 Ibid., III, 2292–3.

25 Ibid., III, 2271–3.

26 Ibid., III, 2285.

27 See the excellent discussion in Goldberg, *Trade and Institutions*, 164–177.

family or officials who are employed to do jobs like collecting customs dues. The latter are paid very little by the *sultān*, but are unsupervised agents who make most of their money out of direct relations with the merchants who pay them to avoid more formal taxes. The Geniza material deals almost entirely with commercial matters and the affairs of merchants, but no doubt the role of the *sultān* in rural and agricultural taxation was very similar. Even under the powerful rule of the early Fatimids, the *sultān* seems to have had little if any responsibility for keeping the roads safe — merchants had to hire their own guards — and no responsibility for protecting ships belonging to subjects of the caliphate from hostile attack.²⁸

In none of these sources is *sultān* used as a personal title of rulership. Though the usages are often ambiguous, the term means “the authorities,” or, in a real sense, “the state.” It is of course a well-known cliché of modern historical writing that people in the Middle Ages, West as well as East, had no concept of the state or vocabulary to express it. I believe that this is, at some times and in some places, untrue and that *sultān* can express this concept. The ancient word *sultān* was thus adopted and adapted to reflect a new and emerging historical reality, a reality in which the caliphate was managed by an established and continuing institution which had a functioning existence throughout the reigns of successive caliphs and even individual dynasties.

To make this point, I shall investigate the use of this term at a micro-level, in the works of two writers, Abū Ishāq al-Iṣṭakhrī (d. ca. 340/951), the geographer, and Abū ‘Alī Miskawayh (d. 420–1/1030), the philosopher and historian. I have chosen these two because they are both highly intelligent and perceptive writers, keenly interested in their different ways in making sense of the bewildering events of the first half of the fourth/tenth century which saw the collapse of the political structures that had been in place since the early Muslim conquests or, in the case of Fars, from before then.²⁹

Sultān in al-Iṣṭakhrī’s Geography

Al-Iṣṭakhrī’s account of Fars, as edited by Ibn Ḥawqal in the *Kitāb ṣūrat al-arḍ*, is of exceptional interest for the study of provincial administration on the Islamic world in the third/ninth and early fourth/tenth centuries.³⁰ It is

28 Goldberg, *Trade and Institutions*, 174–175.

29 For another study of the use of *sultān* by an author in his period, see Maleh, *Caliphs and the Generic Representation of Rulers’ Power*.

30 Ibn Hawqal, *Ṣūrat al-arḍ*, 259–304.

especially interesting in terms of this enquiry because the many uses of the term *sultān* cannot refer to the caliph in person, since no caliph ever visited the province and its administrative capital Shiraz. Perhaps because the author was a native of the area — or so we must assume from his name which derives from Iṣṭakhr, the ancient, pre-Islamic capital of the province — it is much richer in detail about local conditions than the descriptions of other areas of the Muslim world. At times the author makes first person interventions, for example when talking about his Farsi patron and guide (*shaykhunā*), Abū Maṣṣūr Aḥmad b. ‘Ubaydallāh of the family of Marzbān b. Zadbih.³¹ It is difficult to be precise about the date of the account, but he mentions at one point changes that occurred after the Daylamite (Buyid) takeover of the province in 322/934.

The history of Fars in the third/ninth and fourth/tenth centuries is complex.³² The Abbasid administration in Samarra essentially lost control of the province after the death of al-Mutawwakil in 247/861. After that, control was disputed between the Abbasids, the Saffarids coming from Sistan, and the east and local adventurers like Muḥammad b. Wāsil. Despite the swift change of rulers, however, the main impression given by al-Iṣṭakhrī’s account is one of institutional continuity from the Sasanian period down to his own day. He gives no systematic account of the chronologies of political power and mentions rulers like Ibn Wāsil³³ and the Saffarids only in passing. At one point he refers to them generically as the *mulūk*, with rich landowners (*tunnā*) and the administrators (*al-mukhālīṭūn li-l-sultān min ‘ummāl al-dawawīn*) as the dominant social classes.³⁴

Al-Iṣṭakhrī’s work gives us a rounded illustration of the meaning of the concept of *sultān* and its operations.³⁵ He uses the word to describe the continuing administrative institutions of Fars, institutions which continue despite the changes of ruler and dynasty. The *sultān* has its own personnel and its own records and archives, the *dīwāns*. *Dīwāns* are an essential part of the organization of the province. Al-Iṣṭakhrī shows how the *dīwāns* have records of tax liabilities which show not just how much different areas owe, but also what districts different places belong to. The *dīwāns* have records of all the castles, (perhaps five thousand of them) in Fars, a subject of considerable interest to al-Iṣṭakhrī, and he adds that the only way to discover the number and

31 Ibn Ḥawqal, *Ṣūrat al-arḍ*, 292.

32 For Fars in this period, see the important article by Paul, Who were the Mulūk Fārs?

33 Ibn Wāsil was the effective ruler of Fars (256/870–261/875); see Paul, Mulūk Fars.

34 Ibn Ḥawqal, *Ṣūrat al-arḍ*, 290.

35 In his French translation of Ibn Hawqal’s work, Gaston Wiet, usually, but not entirely consistently, uses the word *état* to translate *sultān*.

ownership of these structures is by exhausting work (*bi-ta'ab*) in the *dīwāns* and the *dīwān al-ṣadaqāt* is the only place you can find out the numbers of the Kurdish tribesmen. As the *dīwāns* have their own personnel (*ahl*), al-Iṣṭakhri, who was presumably not one of these, explains how you would have to ask them to investigate for you.³⁶

The *sultān* was a significant landowner and the *ḍiyā'* (sg. *ḍay'a*, estate) *al-sultāniyya* are mentioned on a number of occasions. The *ḍiyā'* consisted of villages which were confiscated (*qubiḍat*) or abandoned or for "other reasons. They were taxed differently from other lands:

The lands are cultivated by peasants (*al-nās*) who pay two fifths of [the value of] the produce. The lands are not taxed as other lands are on the basis of a survey (*al-masāḥa*) but by division (*muqāsama*) and the farmers (*al-akira*) pay in cash, in dirhams.³⁷

We are not, sadly, given any estimate about the extent of these lands or what proportion of the income of the *sultān* in the province was derived from this source.

The role of the *sultān* was also important in urban and commercial property, the revenues from which were known as *mustaghallāt*. The earth (*turba*) belonged to the *sultān* and the merchants built souks, which were their property, on it and paid a ground rent (*ujrat al-arḍ*) for the land. The *sultān* also owned the mills (*al-ṭawāhīn*) and collected rent (*ujra*) on the houses where rosewater was made. The textile trade was the most important manufacturing industry in Fars, as in other parts of the Islamic world, and the *sultān* played an active part in it: "In every town there is a *ṭirāz* [a place for weaving cloth] belonging to the *sultān*." In Fasā, types of garments were made which were exported everywhere (*ilā l-āfāq*, "to the horizons," a favourite expression of al-Istakhri's), and there was a *ṭirāz* for fine brocade which had no equal anywhere. The *sultān* seems to have been paid for certain sorts of textile:

Wool is worked (*yu'mal*) for the *sultān*. [...] Raw silk (*quzz*) is taken to the *sultān* in the form of finely worked curtains as well as silk and wool garments which are taken to many of the *amṣār* (administrative centres).³⁸

36 Ibn Ḥawqal, *Ṣūrat al-arḍ*, 272.

37 Ibid., 303.

38 Ibid., 299.

Despite the numerous references to *tirāz*, it is unclear whether this is a physical building or simply a process by which the *sultān* acquired the fine textiles which were an essential part of political patronage and reward.

The *sultān* had its own uniform (*zayy*) consisting of long robes (*aqbiya*, sg. *qabā*) with pockets (*juḡūb*) “like those of the secretaries.” Others wore *darārī* (sg. *darrā’a*, woollen garment), “even if they were Persians (*furs*).” They had belts around their waist and their boots (*khifāf*) were smaller than those of Khurasan. Our author then goes on to explain how things changed in his day when most of the people dressed in the Daylamite way (whatever that might have been).³⁹

The *sultān* functioned in Arabic. Al-Iṣṭakhrī explains that there were three languages in use in the province. The most generally used was Fārisiyya (New Persian). Although there were some different words used in different areas, the language was generally understood. Then there was Bahlawiyya (Pehlavi) “which was used for the writings and histories (*ayyām*) of ‘Ajam (non-Muslims).” This language was also used among the Zoroastrians (*majūs*) for writing between each other, but it was not widely understood and needed to be interpreted if the local people were to understand it. Finally, there was the ‘Arabiyya which was used for the correspondence (*makātabāt*) of the *sultān* and the *dīwāns* and the people al-Iṣṭakhrī calls the general public (‘*āmmat al-nās*).⁴⁰

Al-Iṣṭakhrī’s account of the *sultān* in the province of Fars shows us an administration with its own self-conscious identity, controlled by a small number of families, some of which could trace their descent from Sasanian times.

Sultān in Miskawayh’s History

My second example is the use of the word *sultān* in the history of Miskawayh, or to be more accurate, the section of his history which deals with the caliphate of al-Muqtadir (r. 295–320/908–932) and his successors.⁴¹ As historians do, I must begin with caveats, two of them in fact. The first is that Miskawayh was probably writing his account at least seventy years after the death of al-Muqtadir, in an era when the political power of the Abbasid caliphate was

39 Ibid., 289.

40 Ibid., 289.

41 Miskawayh, *Tajārib al-umam*, I, 1–464. My references are to the Arabic text as edited by Amedroz because this gives direct access to Margoliouth’s English translation for non-Arabic readers. There is a full recent edition by Sayyid Ḥasan, *Tajārib al-umam*.

no more than a distant memory. He drew very extensively on earlier accounts by men like Thābit b. Sinān and Ibn al-Zanjī who lived much nearer the time, but we cannot ignore the possibility that he edited these accounts in the light of the political usages of his own day. The second caveat is that we often read Miskawayh's work through the lens of Margoliouth's English translation. I am a great admirer of Margoliouth's work which I think brilliantly captures much of the spirit of the original and is in itself a minor monument of English literature. However, he clearly accepts that *sultān* is a near synonym of caliph in these narratives, but I believe that a closer reading does not entirely support this interpretation.

In the history of Miskawayh, the caliph al-Muqtadir is referred to by his caliphal title and by his *laqab*. It is the caliph or al-Muqtadir who utters words, gives orders, rides in boats or on horses, spends time with his harem and eventually gets killed. The *sultān* never does any of these things. In some forty uses of the term which I have located (and I freely admit that I may have missed some), I cannot find a single example in which the term is used to denote an individual human being. To be sure, many of the usages are ambiguous and could be construed, as Margoliouth does, to refer to the caliph in person, but none of these are clear.

So what then is the meaning of *sultān* in Miskawayh's writing? I would argue that here, as in al-Iṣṭakhrī, it means the government or the state, an institution which transcends and survives the individuals who work for it. In this it is to be distinguished from the *mamlaka* (from the same Arabic root as *malik*, king, and perhaps best translated as "kingdom," though Margoliouth preferred "empire"), a word Miskawayh uses to denote the area over which the Abbasids exercised some effective power at this time, a much smaller area, clearly, than the caliphate of earlier centuries.

The *sultān* has a palace, the *dār al-sultān*.⁴² The caliph's private quarters, the harem, are within this palace but do by no means constitute the whole of it. There are large semi-public areas separated from the caliphal residence by the office and quarters of the *ḥājib* (chamberlain) who keeps an eye on everyone entering and leaving. The disgraced vizier Ḥāmid b. al-'Abbās was warned to behave himself since he was "on the carpet (*bisāṭ*) of the *sultān* and in the *dār al-mamlaka*."⁴³ Outsiders to the system used the term *sultān* to denote the Abbasid government. The Samanid ruler Ismā'īl b. Aḥmad (r. 279/892–295/907) accused the *sultān* of protecting one of his military commanders who had defected to Baghdad.⁴⁴

42 Miskawayh, *Tajārib al-umam*, I, 11–12, 56, 72, 185–6.

43 *Ibid.*, I, 62.

44 *Ibid.*, I, 16.

The *sultān* has wealth and revenues. The *amwāl* (possessions) *al-sultān* and *huqūq* (properties) *al-sultān* are to be distinguished from the *bayt māl al-khāṣṣa*, the Caliph's private treasury.⁴⁵ When revenue officials failed to collect what was due, 'Alī b. 'Īsā described the (financial) damage "to the *sultān*."⁴⁶ The *sultān* gives banners of appointment (*liwā'*) and robes of honour to new governors.⁴⁷ Ḥusayn b. Ḥamdān is described as a rebel against the *sultān* (*man khālafa al-sultān*)⁴⁸ and Ibn Abī l-Sāj wrote to the *sultān* with congratulations on the (temporary) conquest of Rayy.⁴⁹

The *sultān* also has servants and employees. Government officials are described as *khadam al-sultān*, "servants of the *sultān*,"⁵⁰ and banners and letters of appointment were only valid if carried by "a servant of the *sultān*" (*khādim min khadam al-sultān*).⁵¹ Payments are made by the paymaster (*munāfiq*) of the *sultān* who has financial agents (*ummāl*).⁵² Soldiers of the Abbasid armies are described as *aṣḥāb al-sultān* in campaigns against the Hamdanids and the *Qarāmiṭa*.⁵³

For a view of the way the term was used in the late fourth/tenth century, a generation after al-Iṣṭakhri and the reign of al-Muqtaḍir discussed above, we can turn again to Miskawayh's account of the reign of that most inauspicious of rulers, the Buyid 'Izz al-Dawla Bakhtiyār who more or less controlled Baghdad and central Iraq in the years 356–367/967–978. In the index to his translation of Miskawayh, Margoliouth states that *sultān* was Bakhtiyār's title but a closer reading suggests that this was not in fact the case. Miskawayh seems to use the term to mean the political authority of the Baghdad administration. It is interesting that he does not use the term when describing the contemporary Buyid administration of Rayy and Fars and this suggests that the *sultān* remained attached to the erstwhile capital of the caliphs. Only on one occasion does he mention "the palace of the *sultān*" when referring to Rukn al-Dawla in Rayy. For example, in 359/969–70 one Abū Qurra held the government of Wasit directly from the *sultān*:

He was extremely bold in his dealings with the *sultān* of whose money he would dispose in a way no-one else ventured, and he was besides skilful

45 Ibid., I, 18, 27–8, 63, 108, 135.

46 Ibid., I, 63.

47 Ibid., I, 21.

48 Ibid., I, 37.

49 Ibid., I, 45.

50 Ibid., I, 24, 101.

51 Ibid., I, 46.

52 Ibid., I, 148, 154, 173.

53 Ibid., I, 37, 176, 179.

in finding means of getting his way with the *sultān* and acquainted with modes of earning and bestowing secret profits. He would indeed bestow small bribes on viziers and governors and thereby earn great profits for himself.⁵⁴

He goes on to explain how Bakhtiyār's vizier found himself forced to buy barley at vastly inflated prices from him. The *sultān* in this and other narratives of the time is clearly not the ruler in person but the "viziers and governors" and the administration more generally. Later on in the same year we are told of Aḥmad b. Khāqān who held land around Wasit "as a fief from the *sultān* on such terms as he chose and it was impossible to compel him to pay."⁵⁵

Sultān Becomes a Personal Title of Rulership

In an important essay, Remy Gareil has argued that the use of *sultān* as a personal title can be traced back to the beginning of the fourth/tenth century. He categorises uses of the term into three senses. The first is the Quranic and early Islamic sense of abstract authority, the second is the early Abbasid sense of administration or state, and the third is the sense of an individual ruler. More specifically he points to a reference in al-Ṭabarī in the year 284/893 to a Christian who was "doctor to the *sultān*" arguing that this is the first time there is a use of the term which unambiguously refers to the caliph as a person. Working from a wide selection of contemporary and near contemporary sources from the fourth/tenth and fifth/eleventh sceneries, he notes 947 uses of the term. In a statistical analysis of these occurrences, he shows that the vast proportion of the references are to *sultān* in the second sense, that is as the administration or state, but that the number in the third sense, as the designation of an individual ruler, greatly increases from the mid fourth/tenth century and he links this clearly to the takeover of power in Baghdad by the Buyids. The argument is impressive and well documented though there still remains considerable ambiguity in the sources.

By the second half of the fifth/eleventh century the term *sultān* had acquired its later and modern usage as a royal title. It was first used systematically by the Seljuqs and was later adopted by the Mamluks in Egypt and the Ottoman sultans who seem to have preferred it to the title of caliph, which they also possessed.

54 Ibid., II, 260.

55 Ibid., 268.

There were essentially two stages in this process. In the first, which we find in the second half of the fourth/tenth century, the term *sultān* denotes the ruler as the holder of power but it is not an official title (*laqab*) used on coins or in official correspondence. In the first half of the fifth/eleventh century, *sultān* was unofficially ascribed to rulers. Among the later Buyids we find the ruler of Fars bearing the name of *Sultān al-Dawla* (r. 403/1012–415/1024) but this seems to be part of a compound title comparable with 'Izz al-Dawla, Aḍud al-Dawla and others born by monarchs of the dynasty.

The coming of the Ghaznavids saw the title in more official use. The two great historians of the dynasty differ on the usage. For Bayhaqī the Ghaznavid ruler Mas'ūd (421/1030–432/1041) is always given the ancient Arabic title of *amīr*; but al-'Utbi (d. ca. 431/1040) consistently uses the epithet of *sultān* for Mas'ūd's father Maḥmūd.

In 447/1055 the Seljuq ruler Tughril Beg was given the title *al-Sultān* by the Abbasid caliph. According to al-Rāwandī,

The Commander of the Faithful (al-Qādir) ordered that they should make the *khuṭba* from the minbars of Baghdad in the name of Tughril Beg and that his name should be engraved on the coinage (*sikka*) and that his titles (*alqāb*) should be proclaimed as “The *Sultān* Rukn al-Dawla Tughril Beg Muḥammad b. Mikā'il the Right Hand (*yamīn*) of the Commander of the Faithful.”⁵⁶

This was clearly the moment when *sultān* became an official title, given at the express order of the caliph and combined with public acknowledgement from the pulpit and on the coinage. From then on it was the regular title claimed and assumed by the chief of the numerous Seljuq families and it was, with the exception of the caliphate, to which the Seljuqs never aspired, the most senior title available to a Muslim prince. It implied complete political independence, though the fiction was maintained that it was a title granted by the caliph until well into the ninth/thirteenth century. At the same time, the Ghaznavid ruler Ibrāhīm b. Mas'ūd (r. 451/1059–492/1099) and his successors used the title on the coins in their much reduced realms. By the end of the century we can say with confidence that *sultān* had become a normal title of absolute authority, firmly attached to the person of the monarch himself. It evolved, in fact, a bit like the English term “majesty”, an abstract noun that became the personal title of the monarch, as in “His Majesty the King.”

⁵⁶ Rāwandī, *Rāḥat al-ṣudūr*, 105. The text gives the date as 437 but, as the editor notes, this should be 447.

It is interesting to note that this change went along with the evolution of government. The bureaucratic structures of Abbasid rule, with its different *dīwāns* and multitude of *kuttāb* (secretaries), had crumbled and disappeared in the course of the fourth/tenth century. Under the early Seljuqs, these structures were replaced by household government and, apart from the vizier who was now the chief personal secretary to the monarch, the main officials bore household or military titles. The secretaries who headed the *dīwāns* had been replaced by the stirrup holder and the cupbearer. It was only natural that the use of the term *sultān* should change to reflect this new reality. Just as the use of the term *sultān* to denote the apparatus of the state had been a product of the burgeoning bureaucracy under the Barmakids, so its evolution to an individual title reflects the personal nature of Seljuq rule.⁵⁷

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57 For the court of the early Seljuqs, see Peacock, *The Great Seluqs*, 156–188.

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