



ERC Project: The Early Islamic Empire at Work – The View from the Regions Toward the Center

Working Paper 01

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‘Abbāsīd Administrative Legacy in the Seljuq World



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Universität Hamburg
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Early Islamic Empire Working Paper Series
ISSN 2366-214X
Hamburg, November 2015

ERC Project: The Early Islamic Empire at Work –
The View from the Regions Toward the Center
Universität Hamburg
Edmund-Siemers-Allee 1
20146 Hamburg, Germany
General Editor: Stefan Heidemann
Volume Editor: Hannah Hagemann
W: <https://www.islamic-empire.uni-hamburg.de/>

Author's Address:

Prof. Dr. Jürgen Paul
Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg
Email: juergen.paul@orientphil.uni-halle.de

Jürgen Paul

‘Abbāsīd Administrative Legacy in the Seljuq World’*

Abstract: The paper studies the question of the transition in Iran from a centralized bureaucratic empire to a state structure based on land grants and personal relationships between ruler and retainers. It analyses the spatial structure of Sanjar b. Malikshāh’s eastern Iranian empire in two sections. In the first section, the vassal zone where subdued kings ruled, a household zone where governors tried to found hereditary dynasties, and the imperial oasis which was under direct control of the central administration are described. In the second section, an aristocratic zone is identified where local lords held sway, sedentary as well as nomadic ones, who did not depend on imperial appointments for their position. In conclusion, the paper observes that personal relations of the *khidma* type were paramount even if the empire was still able to tax agricultural lands to a large degree and therefore could also pay the army in cash.

Keywords: Seljuq empire, Sanjar, “politics of land”, *khidma*, aristocracy.

* This paper is based on a presentation given at the November 2014 workshop on “Administrative Structures, Concepts, Approaches, and Comparisons” organized by the ERC project “The Early Islamic Empire at Work - The View from the Regions Toward the Center” at the University of Hamburg.

Introduction:

Centralized Bureaucratic Empire and the “Politics of Land”

In the three centuries which divide the beginning of regionalization in the ‘Abbāsīd empire (in the first half of the 9th century CE)¹ and the “second imperial period” of the Seljuqs (Sanjar’s rule, 1096-1117 CE as provincial ruler, 1117-1157 CE as overlord)², really important changes occurred in the eastern Islamic lands. One of these, and for the purposes of this paper, arguably the most important one, was the change from a centralized imperial administration to a mixed one in which centralized administrative routines continued to have their place, but another very different style dominated, personal relationships being ever more important, with institutionalized forms relegated to the status of residues. This raises the question whether this was linked to a change from centralized imperial administrative routines to the so-called “politics of land” characteristic in the view of some authors of “medieval” polities around the Mediterranean and in Western Europe.³ “Politics of land” means that the army is no longer paid directly by the center, but that rights to levy taxes or other forms of income are shared out to the army and other officials in lieu of salary. As a consequence, and increasingly, taxes are being privatized.⁴

In the view of historians of late antiquity and the middle ages working on Western Europe and the Mediterranean, the ability of the empire to tax agricultural production is the central issue. As soon as the empire begins to lose this ability, other forms of government, non-institutional ones, have to be found. For the stability and sustainability of its rule, the empire then has to rely on personal relations between the emperor or king and his retainers, followers, servants, vassals – however you may call them. Under the conditions of the “politics of land”, it was only through such relations that large empires could exist and fission be prevented at least for a while. It is at that point that the empire has recourse to the “politics of land” mentioned above.

¹ Regionalization in the east started with the establishment of the first regional dynasties. The Tāhirids not only governed much of Iran, but also held important posts in the imperial centre. Nevertheless, their rule meant that the caliphal administration no longer had direct control of their provinces. See KENNEDY 2004.

² The term is Köymen’s, *ikinci imparatorluk devri*. KÖYMEN 1954.

³ WICKHAM 2005. In this *magnum opus*, Wickham presents case studies for this process from more than a dozen regions around the Mediterranean, in Western and Northern Europe. For the Near East, his studies of Egypt and Syria are remarkable.

⁴ WICKHAM 2005, 57-59. In a later study (WICKHAM 2011), Wickham states that the early ‘Abbāsīd empire was perhaps one of the states best able to raise taxes from agricultural produce. He does not address the question of how and when the ‘Abbāsīd empire lost this capacity.

In Iran under the early ‘Abbāsīds and at least until the mid-9th century CE, the capacity of the central *dīwān* to raise taxes from agricultural production is well attested in the sources.⁵ This is also true for the first regional states which took over in Iranian regions beginning in the early 9th century CE. For quite a number of provinces, we have exact figures for the tax proceedings. For instance, Ibn Funduq, a 12th-century CE author who had access to earlier materials, tells us that in the days of the Ṭāhirids (more particularly, he quotes ‘Abdallāh b. Ṭāhir, r. 828-845 CE), there were 395 villages in his home district of Bayhaq; out of these, 321 owed the *kharāj* land tax, the remaining 74 were taxed with the tithe (*‘ushr*), and the *kharāj* yielded 178.796 dirham, whereas the tithe was worth 57.800 dirham.⁶ Another source gives 44.846.000 dirham for the entire province of Khurāsān in the same period.⁷ According to these figures, then, Bayhaq was a minor district, giving roughly half a percent of the annual tax proceedings of the province, and still, this sum was meticulously recorded.

Such figures are on record for a number of provinces and districts.⁸ In particular for the district of Qum do we have very detailed information about the process of tax assessment and revenue extraction.⁹ In some cases, there is also information on expenditure; for Sīstān there is a provincial budget.¹⁰ All

⁵ This is a more or less direct consequence of the decision not to let the Arab warriors of the conquest period privately appropriate the land (and to settle there as landlords), but to consider the conquered lands as booty of the Muslims in their entirety – whether this decision really was taken by ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb is not important in this context. WICKHAM 2005, 91-2; KENNEDY 2004. For a discussion of ‘Umar’s decree, see SCHMUCKER 1972, 124-134.

⁶ Ibn Funduq 1317, 34.

⁷ Ibn Khurdādhbih 1889, 39. The corresponding section is entitled *al-ladhī wuẓẓifa ‘alā Abī l-‘Abbās ‘Abdallāh b. Ṭāhir min kharāj Khurāsān wa l-a‘māl al-maḍmūma ilayhi li-sanatay 211-212*. De Goeje has “Rôle du montant qu’Abou l-Abbās Abdallah ibn Ṭāhir avait à payer au trésor pour l’impôt du Khorāsān et des autres provinces soumises à son autorité”; this would mean that we are looking at the sums which went to the central administration. This is not important in our context. - Khurāsān in this list includes Rayy, Gurgān and Transoxiana as well as Sīstān and other provinces which all fell under Ṭāhirid rule at that time. The districts are listed individually. On top of the taxes in cash, some levies in kind are also mentioned, e.g. Turkish slaves for Kabul.

⁸ Conveniently listed in SPULER 1952, 467-476. Fārs is a case where information is comparatively good due to the regional history of Ibn al-Balkhī; Ibn al-Balkhī 1921, 171. As an example: during the reign of al-Muqtadir (895-932 CE), the sum in the tax registers for Fārs, Kirmān and ‘Umān was exactly 2.331.880 dinar (“in red gold”), *ibid.* What is important here is not the amount itself, but the detailed listing in the register. This is evidently not a rough-and-ready levying in lump sums.

⁹ Qumī 1341; DRECHSLER 1999. List of tax yields at Qum according to Qumī in SPULER 1952, 473.

¹⁰ *Tārīkh-i Sīstān* 1314, 30-31. The income is set at 3.512.000 dirham for the land tax alone and at 3.597.000 dirham if other types of taxes are included. Regarding expenditure, the budget lists some 2 million dirham for a position which must be the army; a later source quoted by Bahār says: “2.512.000 went to the army”, *Tārīkh-i Sīstān* (1314), 31 note 3, quoting the *Ihyā’ al-Mulūk* by Malik Ḥusayn-i Sīstānī (17th century); that would put the army’s share at roughly

these figures refer to the 9th or 10th century CE; I am not aware of any such reports for a later period, certainly not for Seljuq times. Account keeping of this type involves regular counting and measuring of village lands and keeping track of the irrigation; it is said that in many cases, taxation followed the method of *misāḥa*, measuring the cultivated soil and assessing tax burdens according to the quality of the soil, the type of irrigation, and the crop.¹¹ Other forms were the *muqāsama*, which meant that the tax was assessed in a portion of the harvest and probably was not assessed regularly; the *muqāṭaʿa* was a form used particularly for distant regions, where the tax was negotiated and handed over to the central administration by local emirs in a lump sum, often quite low.

Tax farming of course came into the picture in many places: this already meant a loosening of central control. But even without tax farming, tax extraction could not work without the active support of local notables, large landowners and so forth. Most of the incoming taxes went to the army; the budget of Sīstān shows that around 56% of the tax income was spent on military personnel. The army must have been the main recipient everywhere.

In Iran after the period of centralized ʿAbbāsīd rule, we seem to have a similar process. As shown, the ʿAbbāsīd empire at first was clearly able to tax agricultural production throughout Iran, but apparently it lost this ability at some point. This weakening of the capacity to tax was most intense in the western provinces and particularly in the Iraqī lowlands where economic decline began to make itself felt, and where as a consequence, the army could no longer be paid in cash: the army commanders were given the right to raise revenue on the spot. This decision, roughly datable to 935 CE, is seen as a watershed in some sources and also in the scholarly literature.¹²

The successor states of the ʿAbbāsīd empire in Khurāsān in the 10th and early 11th century CE, the Sāmānīds¹³ and the Ghaznavīds¹⁴, however, seem to

70%. – Other important positions are the repairing of fortifications, upkeep of prisons, the irrigation system, religious buildings, institutions and personnel. – The budget is not dated.

¹¹ Handy description in Qumī 1341, 101-106.

¹² The date is the appointment of the first *amīr al-umarāʾ*, Ibn Rāʾiq. This event is described as a watershed – and indeed as the beginning of the end of good government – in Ibn Miskawayh 1914-16, II, 96. It was the handing over of the administration to the military which made the caliph powerless and left the central bureaucracy with much diminished competences. The *iqṭāʿ* system – which is what best corresponds to the “politics of land” in a Middle Eastern context – was inaugurated at the same time, but only in the Iraqī lowlands and those regions in Western Iran where direct caliphal control had subsisted until then.

¹³ Narshakhī/Schefer 1892, 31, under the heading “On the ḥarāğ of Bukhara and its district”, we read: *ba-rūzgār-i āl-i Sāmān wa umarā-yi sāmān yakī bār hazār [wa] hazār wa šad wa šast wa hašt hazār wa pānšad wa šast wa šiš diram wa paṅğ dānik wa nīm būda ast*, “in the times of the Samanids, it was 1.168.566 dirham and 5 dāng and a half”, a dāng being a sixth of any measure. See SPULER 1952, 476, who refers this statement to the 9th century CE; this does not correspond to Narshakhī’s dating (“the Samanid period” would rather be the 9th as well as the

have been quite good at levying taxes, and there is little doubt as to their armies having been paid in cash. The ‘Abbāsīd system of centralized administration, thus, continued in eastern Iran in these remarkable states, on a reduced but still extraordinarily large scale.¹⁵ In eastern Iran, the transition from a taxed-based empire to an empire based on the politics of land and the almost exclusive importance of personal relations between the ruler and his army commanders and various other retainers therefore could have gained momentum only after the coming of the Seljuqs in the 1030s CE.¹⁶

Vassal Zone, Household Zone, Imperial Oasis

This part tries to show the characteristics of the personal relations between the sultan (Sanjar) and his leading emirs; it also addresses the question with whom – besides the leading emirs – the sultan had such personal relations. The thesis is that these relations, called *khidma* in Arabic and *khidmat* in Persian, “service” in English by default, linked the sultan not only to the leading emirs, but also family members and “subdued kings” or vassal kings.

The history of *khidma* still remains to be written. It is evident that earlier dynasties relied on similar forms. Mottahedeh has studied comparable relationships in the Būyid states of western Iran¹⁷, and Marlow supposes a similar situation in the Sāmānid case.¹⁸ The Ghaznavid case has yet to be studied under this perspective, and so has the post-Seljuq situation, e.g., under the Ghūrīds and the Khwārazmshāhs. It seems that some kind of formalised, contractual dual relationship between the ruler and his closest retainers was present long before the reign of Sanjar; but this is beyond the scope of the present paper.

Khidma also was eminent in the relations between regional rulers and lesser lords. I have treated *khidma* and surrounding problems elsewhere, and

10th century CE). There is a slightly lower figure in Narshakhī/Schefer 1892, 35. Again, it is not important whether this taxation was high or not: the precise figures are a sure sign that the tax administration did not yet rely on tax farming, but that taxes still were raised by the central administration itself. – Narshakhī/Rīdāwī 1939, 39 and 44.

¹⁴ Payments going to the Ghaznavid (and Sāmānid?) armies were called *bīstgānī*, apparently a twenty-*mithqāl* payment handed out four times per year. Al-Khwārazmī 1968, 65, where the Arabic term is *‘ishrīniyya*. See also BOSWORTH 1969. For the Ghaznavid fiscal administration, see BOSWORTH 1963, 65-91.

¹⁵ See the discussion of positions in the Sāmānid administration in MARLOW 2015.

¹⁶ Spuler’s latest figures come from the early 10th century CE for Khurāsān, the late 10th century CE for Sīstān and Transoxiana. There is no figure later than ca. 980 CE. The book covers Iranian history until the coming of the Seljuqs.

¹⁷ MOTTAHEDEH 1980/2001.

¹⁸ MARLOW 2015, 33-36.

the argument will therefore not be repeated in detail here.¹⁹ *Khidma* implies a dynamic process of benefit bestowed on a retainer, rights earned in service, and an increase in benefit coming with time, but also with distinction in service. It is thus a relationship where mutual rights and obligations are prominent. It is formally concluded in a ceremony which often involves the taking of oaths, some of them extant in writing. It is expected to last for a lifetime, and to a certain extent, it is hereditary in that a lord is expected to respect the rights his retainer has earned by bestowing benefit on the (deceased) retainer's son(s). The ceremony was also used for permitting "rebellious" emirs and subdued kings to be reintegrated into the power network of a given ruler.

The aim in this paper is to show how rulers in 12th century CE Iran, in particular in Khurāsān, relied on personal relationships of the *khidma* type, and how much the political and military elite was permeated by *khidma* bonds. The present article addresses the question of what a system of personal bonds as principal vector of ruling a large empire meant to the administration, and in particular the spatial makeup of the empire. The thesis is that Sanjar's empire no longer was of the centrally administrated type which is typical for earlier stages in the history of Iran and in particular the early 'Abbāsīd empire and its first successor states, but that on the other hand the transition to "politics of land" occurred only in part.

At first, we have to discard Nizām al-Mulk and his *Book of Governance*. In this memorandum, the great vizier (d. 1092 CE) admonishes the sultan (Malikshāh b. Alp Arslan, 1072-1092 CE) not to allow the provincial governors to strike local roots; for that purpose, they have to be moved every two or three years. In order to prevent local dynasties to develop, moreover, no office and no *iqṭā'* should be hereditary. Nizām al-Mulk gave more counsel in that direction. In all, it seems that he insisted on an institutional kind of relationship.²⁰

The point is that all this was never implemented, at least not in Sanjar's empire. In Sanjar's empire, positions were hereditary. Governors were not moved around, but on the contrary, a number of provincial dynasties emerged, and Sanjar not only accepted this as an inevitable evil, but he actively contributed in the process. In order to show how this worked, a look at the spatial organisation of Sanjar's empire can be helpful. Sanjar did not rule a unified centralized empire; the impression that he did emerges from the official

¹⁹ PAUL 2014; PAUL 2015a. See also JURADO ACEITUNO 1995; this was the first study devoted to *khidma* as a social relationship, and my own research on the topic is based on it to a considerable extent.

²⁰ Nizām al-Mulk/Schefer 1891, 37; Nizām al-Mulk/Darke 1962, 55; translation Darke 1960, 43. The relevant passages also in LAMBTON 1998. – It should be noted that Nizām al-Mulk had served in the Ghaznavid administration before joining the Seljuqs.

correspondence and appointment deeds, but is not born out by the narrative sources.²¹ Thus, the components of Sanjar’s empire were not just provinces – a province could be an administrative unit which is seen as such from the centre, and seen from the centre, they all have the same status – but they differed in their relation to the centre and thus very much had a life of their own.

Sanjar’s empire can be broken up spatially into several zones. I distinguish a vassal zone, a household zone, and the imperial oasis. The first zone – the vassal zone – included the countries where Sanjar’s name was mentioned in the Friday sermon and on coins: they stretched from the Mediterranean to the Indus and from the Central Asian steppes to the Ḥijāz with Mecca and Medina. It is immediately clear that Sanjar did not actually *rule* over all these territories. It is perhaps best to say that many kings accepted him as an overlord, and besides the two insignia of sovereignty, the coinage and the Friday sermon, this could imply a number of other rights for Sanjar. One of the most important rights Sanjar claimed for himself in certain vassal kingdoms was to have a say in succession struggles.

There were two types of vassal kings. The first type were family members, in particular the western Seljuqs (or Iraqī Seljuqs), but also the Seljuqs of Anatolia and of Kirmān. For these, Sanjar was the head of the family, and at least with regard to the Iraqī Seljuqs, this was serious: it had been a reason for warfare; Sanjar had gone to war in order to get accepted as the family head by his western nephews.²² The second type were subdued kings, members of dynasties whom the Seljuqs had defeated at some point and who nevertheless had been allowed to continue as kings in their respective realms. Such vassal kings were the Qarākhānids (with their main centre at Samarqand), but also the Ghaznavids on the border to India, and the ruler of Sīstān in south-eastern Iran. Later, when the Ghūrid ruler in the mountainous regions of central Afghanistan became more important, he was also given that status. The Bāwandid ruler of Ṭabaristān and Māzandarān sometimes accepted

²¹ The administration of Sanjar’s empire has been studied extensively by HORST 1964 and LAMBTON 1957. Both proceed from the copies or drafts of official documents transmitted in *inshā’* collections, and both do not check their results against what we find in the chronicles. – It is useful to make a difference between the “image” of a state and its actual workings. See Migdal’s statement: “The state is a field of power marked by the use and threat of violence and shaped by (1) *the image of a coherent, controlling organization in a territory, which is a representative of the people bounded by that territory*, and (2) *the actual practices of its multiple parts*”. MIGDAL 2001, 15-16. Italics in original.

²² The campaigns of 1119 CE (against Maḥmūd, 1118-1131 CE) and 1132 CE (to impose Ṭoḡhrīl, his candidate for the western throne, 1132-1134 CE). Even later in his life, Sanjar was adamant about being the family head, e.g., with regard to Mas’ūd (1134-1152 CE).

Sanjar as overlord, sometimes he was more reluctant, but on the whole, he can be counted as a vassal king as well.²³

Alongside the ceremonial precedence of being mentioned in the Friday sermon and having coins minted in his name, Sanjar apparently thought that an important prerogative was his right to intervene in succession struggles in the vassal kingdoms. He did so more than once in the Iraqi Seljuq domains²⁴, more than once too in Transoxiana with the Qarākhānids²⁵, and at least once with the Bāwandids.²⁶ He probably would have done so with the Ghaznavids and the Sīstānīs as well, but there was no succession in these two kingdoms during Sanjar's forty years of rule as overlord.²⁷ In some cases, the vassal kings also fought in Sanjar's wars, in particular the ruler of Sīstān who showed his valour as a soldier many a time, including at Qaṭwān, the crushing defeat Sanjar suffered in 1141 at the hands of the Qarākhītāi.

The vassal kingdoms thus constitute a kind of outer zone of Sanjar's empire. At least some of their kings are shown to have passed through ceremonies of submission which involved stepping on Sanjar's carpet, kissing his hand or even the ground before him, dismounting when greeting him, walking at his stirrup, and so forth. This *khidma* ceremony is a momentous sign of conceding political precedence. It was obligatory when relations returned to normal after a vassal king had "rebelled", but it could also be arranged in order to demonstrate that a given king really was a vassal king.²⁸

In a number of cases, family terminology is used for such kings; this is evident in the case of members of the Seljuq family, but Qarākhānids, the Ghaznavid and the Sīstānī are also included, they are called "sons" or sometimes "brothers", in rare cases they call Sanjar their "father".²⁹ On the other hand, terms denoting bondage are also used in their respect. In sum, they

²³ For the Bāwandids, see MADELUNG 1985. Sanjar interfered in Bāwandid succession questions at least once, in 1142 CE, when he backed the pretender Tāj al-Mulūk Mardawīj against Shāh Ghāzī Rustam. Ibn Isfandiyār 1389, II, 80-81.

²⁴ See above, note 20.

²⁵ Sanjar's brother Barkyāruq had already installed a Qarākhānid at Samarqand; Sanjar was to follow suit: he was involved in Qarākhānid succession struggles in 1102 CE and again in 1130 CE.

²⁶ See above, note 21.

²⁷ Both incumbents were extraordinarily long-lived. In Sīstān, Naṣr b. Khalaf ruled 1106-1164 CE; Bahrāmshāh the Ghaznavid held power from 1117 CE (he was in fact put on the throne during a Seljuqid intervention, by Sanjar) until his death in 1157 CE, with an interruption from 1150 CE to 1152 CE when Ghazna was occupied by the Ghūrīds.

²⁸ Examples in PAUL 2014. Detailed treatment of *khidma* as a ceremony in PAUL 2015, chapter 7 section 1, "*Hidma* als Zeremonie".

²⁹ The Qarākhānid appears as "son" (*Aḥkām*, 20a) and as "brother" (B. Juwaynī 1329, 30 and 62; *Aḥkām*, 120a); Bahrāmshāh the Ghaznavid is a "son" and calls Sanjar a "father" (*Aḥkām*, 101b, 99a, 99b); the Sīstānī Naṣr b. Khalaf is "son" and "brother" (*Aḥkām* 37a, 92a); the Ghūrīd is "son" (B. Juwaynī 1329, 89); the Qumāj emirs are "brother" or "son", depending on the generation (*Aḥkām*, 116b; B. Juwaynī 1329, 35 and 39).

are made to appear as obedient members of Sanjar's household. But it is clear that in fact they were no such members: they were themselves heads of independent royal households. Household terminology, including terminology of bondage, is used within the framework of *khidma* relations. The *khidma* relationship of ceremonial subservience, coupled with other obligations such as joining the overlord in his wars, perhaps best corresponds to what is called vassalage in a European context. Therefore, the zone of Sanjar's empire where such kings ruled can be called the vassal zone.

The remaining area was Sanjar's own kingdom, the large province of Khurāsān plus some adjacent areas. This still immense area was divided up in several provinces. The central administration was located at Marw if it was not itinerant together with the sultan.³⁰ Central Khurāsān was administered probably from Nishapur, at least that was the case earlier and later. No provincial governors are known for either Marw or Nishapur if I am not mistaken. Another important region was Balkh, the lands between the Hindukush mountain range and the Amu Darya. This was the hereditary province of the Qumāj emirs. A Qumāj emir had been Sanjar's atabek; he or his son was appointed at Balkh some time before 1130 CE; and the Qumāj family ruled there until 1163 CE, that is to say, until some years after Sanjar's death (1157 CE).³¹

The most prominent hereditary provincial dynasty, however, were the Khwārazmshāhs; Sanjar fought them intensely from the late 1130s CE until shortly before he fell captive to the Ghuzz Turkmen in 1153 CE.³² The Khwārazmian dynasty stemmed from Anūshtegin who had been a slave in Malikshāh's household, and it became hereditary with Quṭb al-Dīn Muḥammad (1097-1127 CE); his son Atsız (1127-1156 CE) was at first one of Sanjar's leading commanders, later he "rebelled"; in the following wars, he accused Sanjar of not having fulfilled his obligations as his lord in *khidma*, and Sanjar

³⁰ Some important research has been done on itinerant kings in medieval Iran: Charles Melville discovered the subject with his contributions on Shah 'Abbās (MELVILLE 1993) and Öljeitü (MELVILLE 1990); recently he has written on Shāhrukh (MELVILLE 2013). David Durand-Guédy has said everything there can be said about the Iraqi Seljuq ruler Mas'ūd (DURAND-GUÉDY 2011). In the case of Sanjar, such research cannot be done due to the scarcity of the sources: we simply do not know whether he went anywhere for the summer or the winter, we scarcely can tell where the royal hunting grounds were located. Archeological surveying and excavations at Marw, however, have yielded some hints that the central administration was indeed located there; HERRMANN 1999.

³¹ Appointment deed for Abū l-Faṭḥ Qumāj after his father and grandfather had been killed in their war against the Ghuzz, probably early in 1153 CE, see B. Juwaynī 1329, 73-80. Detailed treatment of the Qumāj emirate at Balkh in PAUL 2015a, chapter 5, section "Die Qumāj-Emire als Regionalherrscher in Balḥ".

³² Köymen treats them on a par with the subdued kings; he also thinks that the Khwārazmshāh Atsız aspired to just that status. KÖYMEN 1954, 318; KAFESOĞLU 1956, 44-65.

accused him of having left that *khidma* without cause. Both therefore felt that their rights grounded in the *khidma* relationship had not been respected.³³

There is much less information about Herat and the province of which this city is the central settlement; an emir called ‘Alī Chatrī was sent there before 1150 CE – we know that because he defected to the Ghūrids. He left apparently because he thought that Sanjar had grown weak and that the future strong man in the region would be the Ghūrid ruler - ‘Alā’ al-Dīn Jahānsūz had imposed himself in the region from Balkh to the borders of India.³⁴ Sanjar defeated the Ghūrid and his partners in 1152 CE, and whereas the Ghūrid ruler was treated with clemency, ‘Alī Chatrī was executed; Sanjar had him hacked in two.³⁵

In the west, the province of Jibāl must be mentioned, its capital city is Rayy, and it was administered for some decades formally by an emir called Gawhar al-Khādīm, who sent his slave general ‘Abbās there; in fact, it was ‘Abbās who ruled the province, and after his death, his son took over at least for a short while.³⁶

Rayy is interesting because ‘Abbās was not alone there. He had a scion of the ruling Seljuq house with him, Sulaymān b. Muḥammad, Sanjar’s nephew, and probably it was in fact Sulaymān who was formally in charge; at least we find his name on the provincial coinage (together with Sanjar and the caliph).³⁷ I mention this because the pattern of provincial rule normally should have been the dynastic appanage. Rayy is a case where this principle held good. Another one could have been Gurgān, at least for a short while, when Mas‘ūd b. Muḥammad was governor there (he later went west and became sultan there, 1134-1152 CE).³⁸ The problem with Sanjar was that he had no sons.

The relation between these governors and the sultan is also ruled by *khidma*. This entailed a number of obligations, but the governors also earned rights in that service. We have less information about ceremonies in this context, but it can be surmised that at the outset of the relationship – when the man in question received his appointment deed – such a ceremony was obligatory. It also was obligatory when such a governor was accepted again in *khidma* after having rebelled, as was the case with Atsız the Khwārazmshāh.³⁹

³³ Detailed treatment in PAUL 2013.

³⁴ ‘Alī Chatrī’s defection is seen as a case of *mamlūk* disloyal behaviour in TOR 2011. For the Ghūrid expansion to the west and north in the early 1150s CE, see GHAFUR 1960, 29-32.

³⁵ Ibn al-Athīr 1982, XI, 164; Nīshāpūrī 2004, 60.

³⁶ Paul 2015, chapter 5, section “‘Abbās in Rayy”. Bundārī 1889, 217-219; Ḥusaynī 1933, 119.

³⁷ MILES 1938, 213-4, for the coins. Miles was not sure who this *malik* was; there can be little doubt, however, that it was Sulaymān b. Muḥammad. SCHWARZ 1992, 58.

³⁸ B. Juwaynī 1329, 18.

³⁹ PAUL 2013.

The provincial governors – who could have been princes, but in Sanjar’s case most of them were military slaves, sometimes having a Seljuq prince with them – led their troops in Sanjar’s wars. They were required to come to court regularly, and at least when summoned. We know much less about financial obligations. The tax emoluments of each province seem to have been used for the upkeep of the provincial troops, mostly.

The terms used for these provincial governors belong to the field of bondage and obedience.⁴⁰ But in some rare cases, including the Qumāj emirs, family terms are also used: the Qumāj emirs are called “son” and “brother”, but they are practically the only ones as far as I can see to be thus honoured.⁴¹ Family members and military slaves alike were subject to the rules of *khidma* with the dynamics of benefit, service, and increase evolving between them and the sultan. For both groups likewise, *khidma* ceremonies played an important role, when the relationship started and when it was renewed after an interruption or disturbance, something which the sources call rebellion.

Family members and military slaves both belong to the sultan’s household. The sources do not actually make a difference between provinces going to family members on the one hand and to leaders of military slaves on the other. In either case, the provinces are given as *iqṭā’* to the incumbent who then comes to be a provincial or regional ruler. Therefore, I think it is appropriate to term these provinces the “household zone” of Sanjar’s empire. As far as the provinces within this zone were allotted to members of the household (family plus military slaves) as *iqṭā’*, some sort of “politics of land” was thus applied within the royal household.

It is a moot point to what degree the politics of land were applied on the provincial level, that is, to what degree subordinate military figures received land grants. This seems to have been the case in Gurgān and in Rayy – for both provinces we have reports mentioning such “military *iqṭā’āt*”.⁴² In Khurāsān, *iqṭā’* was mostly used for the process of giving pasture to nomads who then had to serve as warriors, such as the Qumāj emirs who gave pasture to the Ghuzz.⁴³

⁴⁰ The terms are *banda* (a *banda* is not necessarily legally a slave; see EILERS/HERRENSCHMIDT 1989, but also *mamlūk* and *‘abd* (in these cases, the persons in question legally were slaves). See PAUL 2015a, chapter 7, section 5.1 on “Sklaverei/Knechtschaft”.

⁴¹ *Aḥkām*, 116b, appointment deed for a *qādī* at Balkh; B. Juwaynī 1329, 35 and 39.

⁴² The term “military *iqṭā’*” has been coined by Ann Lambton for lesser *iqṭā’āt* which lesser emirs or even ordinary soldiers received instead of pay, e.g., LAMBTON 1998. They are not well attested in eastern Iran, whereas we have some reports for western Iran and the Iraqi lowlands showing emirs interested in getting to the regions where their *iqṭā’āt* were located in order to collect the revenue, e.g., Rāwandī 1921, 398; Bundārī 1889, 246.

⁴³ Ibn al-Athīr 1982, XI, 179, and PAUL 2015a, chapter 10, section 4.1 on “Vergabe von Weidegründen”.

The innermost core of the empire was Marw and other parts of central Khurāsān, which were not allotted to provincial governors but rather administered directly by the central *divan*. At least, we do not have any names of provincial governors for either Marw or Nishapur, and no appointment deeds for these provinces are extant, either. Moreover, when one of the Ghuzz leaders asked to be given Marw as an *iqṭāʿ*, Sanjar was not prepared to do so: Marw, he said, was the imperial capital and could not be given as *iqṭāʿ* to anybody.⁴⁴ Even if this report is not literally true, that is, if Sanjar never said such a thing, it means that people assumed that there must have been an area which was not allotted as *iqṭāʿ*. Marw (and parts of central Khurāsān) therefore presumably were what I would term an “imperial oasis”. The taxes of that region would have been used to pay the standing army of military slaves which formed the backbone of Sanjar’s military might (together with the provincial armies and the nomadic levies), the royal *mamlūks*, as it were.

Paying the army thus was still possible in Sanjar’s empire, even if only to a certain extent: the royal *mamlūks* were paid out of the tax proceedings of the imperial oasis, the provincial troops apparently were paid out of the tax yields of the corresponding provinces. On the other hand, some subordinate emirs in the provinces, in particular the more westerly ones of Gurgān and Jibāl, probably had land grants. Besides these troops, there were the Turkmen levies which must have been more important than was presumed in earlier research.⁴⁵ Some Turkmen groups also received “land grants”, that is, they were given pasture within a given province, and this also was called an *iqṭāʿ*.

Thus far, consequently, we have three zones, from the centre to the periphery: an imperial oasis directly administered by the imperial *divan*; a household zone where provincial governors ruled, most of them military slaves because there were no sons who otherwise would have been the evident choice for these positions; and a vassal zone where older dynasties continued to rule. This zone also included the regions where other branches of the Seljuq house were dominant.

Within the household zone and the vassal zone, the relationships between the sultan as overlord and the regional powerholders were ruled by *khidma*. This implied mutual obligations, a dynamic of benefit bestowed, of service rendered, of rights and increase earned. Ceremonies were held when the relationship was inaugurated, similar ceremonies were arranged to signal the reconciliation of lord and vassal after a “rebellion”. The solemnity of the relationship was further stressed by the frequent and even regular taking of

⁴⁴ Ibn al-Athīr 1982, XI, 177.

⁴⁵ The role of the nomads in the Seljuq empire has been reassessed over the last years, and notably by Andrew Peacock and David Durand-Guédy. See PEACOCK 2010 and 2013; DURAND-GUÉDY 2011a and 2011b.

oaths. Some of these are quite detailed and have come down to us in written form.⁴⁶

All that is indicative of the predominance of personal relationships in governance and even administration – instead of institutional relations. Most of these relationships were at least formulated as having their social space within the royal household. But some of the men in question in fact were not part of that household – the vassal kings: they owed their position to their ancestors. In a way, so did the hereditary provincial governors even if they still needed appointment deeds. In the next section, we will meet local power holders who sometimes could get on without such deeds.

Plain and Mountains

The division into three zones which I presented just now is not the only one which is relevant for Sanjar’s empire. Another one has to be added. Within all of the zones in question, a geographical distinction must be made between agricultural core areas, mostly situated in the plain, and densely populated thanks to irrigated agriculture: river oases in the case of Marw, Balkh and Herat, and a mixed form of river irrigation and *kārīz* irrigation in the case of Nishapur. In Transoxiana, the oases surrounding Bukhara and Samarqand also depended on river-fed irrigated agriculture. Khwārazm also is a large river oasis; in the 12th century CE, it developed into an imperial oasis. These river oases were large enough to produce sufficient surpluses for a larger state to base its power on the revenue derived from them. Many of them had been imperial oases at some point in their pre-modern history. In Khurāsān, smaller centres also have to be mentioned, such as Tūs, Nasā, Abīward and so forth, Bayhaq/Sabzawār, and many more.

These regions, the rich oases of Khurāsān, without doubt delivered the bulk of the agricultural taxes into both the central and the provincial coffers. There must have been an efficient tax extraction mechanism in place. But local administration in these areas is very difficult to assess for lack of sources, at least in the post-ʿAbbāsīd period. The best thesis so far is that the cities were the mainstay of what has been called the *a’yān-amīr*-system, with the urban notables having much influence in the cities, and the amirs sitting in the

⁴⁶ One of the most famous oaths is the one Atsız took in spring of 1141 CE, a few months before Qatwān (where he did not honour the obligations he contracted by this oath), PAUL 2013; text in *Aḥkām*, 124b-125b, printed in BARTOL’D 1900, 40-42. Other specimens are transmitted in Baghdādī 1385, 138-144; *Mukhtārāt* 1378, 206, 211, 255. Written oaths were known as *ʿahd-nāma* or *sawgand-nāma*. One of the quoted examples is an oath which a lord took for a retainer: *Mukhtārāt* 1378, 206-209. Discussion in PAUL 2015a, chapter 7, section 6.1 on “Die beschworene Übereinkunft (*ʿahd*), Eidbriefe”.

citadel.⁴⁷ The *a'yān-amīr*-system implied that the urban notables were indispensable for the good working of the system, including a decisive part in the running of the taxation system.⁴⁸

Outside the fertile, irrigated big oases, vast expanses of steppe, desert, and mountain held smaller settlements, part of them based on rain-fed plus *kārīz* agriculture, another part depending on small rivers and rivulets, others on *kārīz* alone. In some places, there were rather extended valleys in mountainous regions which offered sufficient water for agriculture. Some of the smaller oases, in particular in southern Khurāsān (Qūhistān), were rather isolated, so isolated that they do not fit into the provincial pattern.

In the steppes and in the mountains, nomads were raising livestock, sheep and goats mostly, but also horses, in some cases camels. Summer pasture tended to be uphill, winter pasture not rarely along the rivers, the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya, the Atrek, the Murghāb, the Tejen, the Balkhāb, and around the inland deltas of these and many other rivers.

Both types of area, the mountains as well as the steppes and deserts, had their own political and military leadership. This is quite evident for the nomads. Nomadic emirs were subject to certain obligations, such as military service or tribute, but most of the time, they had their own leaders (we have some names for Qarluq and Ghuzz leaders). I do not want to address the question of tribalism, which is irrelevant for my purpose here – the nomad leadership may have been tribal or not.⁴⁹ At any rate, we do not have reports stating that the imperial administration tried to impose leaders on the nomads. Besides the provincial governors such as the Qumāj emirs in Balkh province, there was a special office for the administration of nomads called the *shihna*.⁵⁰ Some of the nomadic groups were notoriously unruly, not only in Sanjar's empire, but also in the Qarākhānid state and later in the Ghūrid empire; the imperial administrations in 12th-century CE Khurāsān and Transoxiana surely had a “nomad problem”.⁵¹ The Khwārazmshāhs got along better with the nomads (mostly Qipchaq in their case), but they had problems, too.⁵²

⁴⁷ The term *a'yān-amīr*-system was coined by HODGSON 1974, II, 64-66. Hodgson's thought-provoking thesis has been confirmed by recent research on Iranian cities. For Isfahan, see DURAND-GUÉDY 2010; for Khurāsānian notables, the seminal work is BULLIET 1972 (without, however, addressing the *amīr* and the citadel). See also PAUL 1996.

⁴⁸ Again, this can best be seen for Qum, see DRECHSLER 1999. For eastern Iranian cities, the situation is less clear, but see PAUL 1996, 66-92.

⁴⁹ The question of tribalism has again been raised by David Sneath; SNEATH 2007. See also SNEATH 2013 for a review of the criticism.

⁵⁰ DURAND-GUÉDY 2011. In other cases, the *shihna* is a kind of military governor, a representative of the ruler in a given territory, frequently responsible for the upkeep of order.

⁵¹ Already noted by Bartol'd in his *Turkestan*, see BARTOL'D 1963, 396-399.

⁵² For the Qipchaq, see GOLDEN 2009. For an assessment of Qipchaq-Khwārazmian relations, see BARTOL'D 1963, 406-407.

On the more settled side of society, we find several types of local lords in the remoter areas, mostly mountains. The mountain ranges which run around the central Iranian plateau are all studded with castles, some of them very large and very famous. Castles were very numerous. Iṣṭakhrī – to quote just him – claims that there were 5000 castles in the mountains of Fārs, so he excuses himself for not giving a full description.⁵³ Ibn al-Balkhī gives 70 castles which were conquered by the Seljuq general Chawlī alone in the same province.⁵⁴ In the mountains of Ṭabaristān and Māzandarān, the Bāwandid king had more than 50 castles which he frequented on his tours, and all the nobles – numerous nobles – had at least one castle, some of them private property held on a hereditary basis.⁵⁵ The Bāwandids were a very old dynasty, its origins are lost in the mist of pre-Islamic history; many of the local lords appear to have been members of the Bāwandid clan, but there were other important aristocratic families.⁵⁶

In the region of Quhistān – southern Khurāsān – alone, there must be dozens if not hundreds of strong fortresses in the mountains.⁵⁷ I do not suggest that in every castle, there was a local lord – in some castles, there clearly were garrisons who had been sent there by the central government or by a provincial governor. But the sources are clear that in more than just a few exceptional cases, the castles indeed were the home base for local lordship: families who had been sitting there for generations without ever being appointed by a living sultan. Ismāʿīlis had set up a regional state in Quhistān, which in fact was a federation of castle lordships under the common umbrella of the Ismāʿīlī heterodoxy and a common submission to the “mother fortress” of Alamūt (in Rūdbār), far away.⁵⁸

In the mountains of what is today Afghanistan, Jūzjānī also mentions that there were “thousands” of castles.⁵⁹ In that region, the Ghūrīds emerged as the leading force, a dynasty of local lords who had succeeded in imposing their supremacy over the other castle lords.⁶⁰ This area also was home to some very ancient local dynasties who traced themselves back to pre-Islamic times. Also, the northern rim of Khurāsān seems to have held quite a number of such local lords; some of the families also traced their genealogies back to pre-Islamic

⁵³ Iṣṭakhrī 1870, 116.

⁵⁴ Ibn al-Balkhī 1921, 158.

⁵⁵ Ibn Isfandiyār 1389, II, 122.

⁵⁶ MADELUNG 1985.

⁵⁷ WILLEY 2005.

⁵⁸ It is no accident that the Ismāʿīlīs were frequently called “the fortress people” (*ahl-i qilāʿ*). In Quhistān, they held mountain fortresses as well as fortified small towns such as Ṭabas, Qāʿin, and others.

⁵⁹ Jūzjānī 1329, 410.

⁶⁰ For the Ghūrīds, see GHAFUR 1960.

times.⁶¹ ‘Aṭā Malik Juwaynī’s count – he has one hundred castles in the mountain ranges from Ṭārum in NW Iran to Sīstān in the SE – has therefore to be qualified: he probably speaks of particularly strong and famous fortresses, such as those which the Mongols could not take or took only after extended sieges.⁶²

The mountainous zones together with the steppes and the deserts thus form another zone. This zone is characterized by local lordship; some of the lordly families were very ancient in the area, for others, a pedigree of no more, but also no less, than a century or two can be proved.⁶³ For the nomadic lords, sometimes no genealogical details are given at all.⁶⁴ All these figures were not appointed, neither by the central government nor by a provincial governor. Since they had a hereditary position and were mostly large landowners (for the nomads: owners of livestock), and since they were not appointed, I would not hesitate to call them aristocrats.

A zone of “aristocratic” rule must therefore be added to the other three, the imperial oasis, the household zone and the vassal zone. The aristocratic zone is like a second grid superimposed on those zones – these therefore would have to be divided into a kind of “core” zone and this “aristocratic” zone, the “beyond” of direct rule and administration.

Curiously enough, the centre of administration, the sultan himself, more often than not seems to have lived in the “aristocratic” zone; it has been shown that the Seljuqs did not live in cities and palaces, but in tents and mostly in steppe and mountain.⁶⁵ Therefore, this is not a question of “centre” and “periphery”; it depends on the view taken which area is central and which one is peripheral. For the nomads, of course, the steppes and mountains, the pastureland was central and the agricultural oases were peripheral.

We therefore have different types of local and regional rulers. In the imperial oasis, we do not learn of local lords; this may be due to the silence of the sources – local lords can be identified in other areas and slightly earlier

⁶¹ The most striking example are the lords of Khurandiz, a fortress in the region of Nasā. This was the family of the author of the *Sīrat al-sultān Jalāl al-Dīn Mingburnī*, Muḥammad al-Nasawī. He claims that his family had been lords of Khurandiz at least since the coming of Islam to Khurāsān, that is, for at least six centuries. Nasawī/Buniatov 1996, 65 (Russian translation: p. 92). More examples are discussed in PAUL 2015a, chapter 2: “Die Erben der *dahāqīn*”.

⁶² A. Juwaynī 1916, II, 45.

⁶³ Such as certain families whose pedigrees Ibn Funduq describes (Ibn Funduq 1317), and the local lords of Ṭabas, who descended from the Banū Sīmjūr who had been governors in the area for the Sāmānids in the later 10th century CE. See Ibn al-Athīr 1982, X, 317, and PAUL 2015a, chapter 2, section on “Ismā‘īlītische Herrschaft in Quhistān”.

⁶⁴ For instance, the lords of the Ghuzz whose names are mentioned for the events of 1153 CE – Ṭūfī Bek, Qorqud Bek, Bakhtiyār, Malik Dīnār – are not presented with even their fathers’ names. KÖYMEN 1954, 422 and 426.

⁶⁵ DURAND-GUÉDY 2011b.

periods, for instance, in Fārs for the 10th century CE.⁶⁶ But for Sanjar’s time and the Marw oasis, nothing resembling local lordship could be shown to have existed.⁶⁷ In the other zones, there are firstly the vassal kings. They were not appointed by Sanjar’s *divan*, but Sanjar tried many times to put his candidates on the throne in case of a vacancy. Within the vassal kingdoms in turn, we might go down the social ladder and try to find local lords – in many cases, this would be easy indeed.⁶⁸

The provincial governors were appointed, and both family members and leaders of military slaves were part of Sanjar’s household. The aristocrats in the steppe and the mountainous regions were not appointed, however, and they were not part of Sanjar’s household, either. The local lords of Khuttalān,⁶⁹ to give an example, were such lords within the province of Balkh; the lords of Kabūdajāma, in western Khurāsān close to Gurgān, were within Nishapur province⁷⁰, and so were the lords of Khusrawjird, a fortified place in the district of Bayhaq⁷¹; the lords of Khurandiz, a castle close to Nasā, were subservient to the lords of that town and castle.⁷² There are some more cases, but not so many; the sources are not very forthcoming in that respect. Most of the time, the existence of such local lords has to be inferred from the sources when they mention emirs and strongmen, for instance when they go over to a rising star on the political scene of a given province.

Thus, there were two fundamentally different groups of local rulers in Sanjar’s empire: those who belonged to the royal household and those who did not. The question now is whether the sultan related differently to the household group and to the non-household group. And the answer is no, at least in those cases when we see the sultan coming into contact with the local lords at all. Most of the time, the local lords in question are nomad emirs.

In both cases, relations were of the *khidma* type. This means that a set of mutual obligations had to be observed, of course within a strictly defined hierarchy; mutual obligations do not mean symmetry in rights, of course. The retainer therefore had to behave in certain ways in order to get the rewards

⁶⁶ KENNEDY 2004, 232-234.

⁶⁷ This does not mean that there were no large landholders who also had castle-like residences. PAUL 2015b, 176.

⁶⁸ Most notably in the mountainous regions: Ṭabaristān for the Bāwandid rulers, and the entire Ghūrid domain.

⁶⁹ A lord named Farrukhshāh tried to take Tirmidh, a most important fortress, when Sanjar just had come free from Ghuzz captivity. Ibn al-Athīr 1982, XI, 235. Coinage from Khuttalān is on record (intermittently) until the mid-11th century CE; see SCHWARZ 2002, 136-138.

⁷⁰ Ibn Isfandiyār 1389, I, 152, lists them as a family whose pedigree goes back to pre-Islamic times. The lords of Kabūdajāma were important partners for the Bāwandids and later the Khwārazmshāhs. See PAUL 2015a, chapter 2: “Die Erben der dahāqīn”.

⁷¹ Ibn Funduq 1317, 96-97. The lords of Khusrawjird were called the Fulādwand family.

⁷² See above, note 61.

inherent in the relation, and to get the increase in rewards which also was part of the contract. Being faithful to the other man was an important quality; it has been said that there was no concept of fealty in the medieval Middle East, but I think I can prove that there was one. (The Arabic and Persian term *wafā* means keeping one's promises, being faithful to the contract, and fulfilling one's obligations *vis-à-vis* the sultan or, in the case of the sultan, the retainer.)

Khidma can be seen as a continuation and extension of the personal bonds of acquired loyalty discussed by Roy Mottahedeh more than thirty years ago.⁷³ Mottahedeh analyzed the Būyid period and the social bonds within the political and military elite, in particular between the Būyid rulers in western Iran and the Iraqi lowlands and the leaders of their military slave troops. Mottahedeh therefore concentrated on relations within the royal household. His conclusion was that the bonds of acquired loyalty known by such terms as *iṣṭinā* or *tarbiya*, both meaning “fostering”, obliged the retainer to service and gratitude (*shukr al-ni'ma*), whereas the ruler was obliged to heap ever more “benefit” (*ni'ma*) on his retainers. This is very close to the dynamics of *khidma* which also involved a process of “benefit” (*ni'ma*) – bestowing benefit on the retainers and future retainers is what starts the process - , of “service” owed for that benefit, and of “increase” and “rights” earned by that service. Careers were therefore made within the personal networks centered on the sultan. These dynamics of *khidma* and *ni'ma* were now extended far beyond the royal household so as to become pervasive within the military and political elites.

Conclusion

The transition from *divan* administration with its bureaucratic apparatus, the exact accounting of income and expenditure, to a more global assessment of taxes occurred in eastern Iran in the 11th century CE, probably beginning with the coming of the Seljuqs. But not everywhere: the core provinces, the imperial oasis, stayed the economic backbone of the imperial state, and its revenue must have made possible the payment of large bodies of military slaves during Sanjar's time. The “politics of land” therefore were not applied everywhere. The empire retained the ability to tax agriculture in these areas, and this was enough to make cash payments to the army possible to a degree unthinkable in Western Europe and around the Mediterranean (and in the Iraqi lowlands as well). As for the provinces, a number of them were given out as “administrative *iqtā*”, and apparently this meant that taxes were assessed and extracted on the provincial level and served mostly for the upkeep of the

⁷³ MOTTAAHEDEH 1981/2001.

provincial army. The imperial army thus was a composite force, uniting the royal *mamlūks*, the provincial armies, and large bodies of free Turkmen, with occasional detachments from vassal kings.

This situation does not tally exactly with what we see in the evolution of the relationship between the sultan and his most important retainers. All of these were seen as personal, with household terms prevailing for both the vassal kings and the provincial governors, and surely they had been perceived in such terms even earlier.

Three zones could be discerned in all: the peripheral realms of the vassal kings (including other members of the royal Seljuq house); a household zone where military slaves ruled, sometimes in cooperation with junior members of the royal family – family rule should have been the norm, but Sanjar had no sons, and therefore his military slaves took their place in many respects. Above all, the Qumāj emirs who held Balkh on a hereditary basis were elevated rhetorically to the rank of family members. At the very core of the empire lay the imperial oasis which was under the direct control of the central *divan*.

But the picture is further complicated by another type of distinction: aristocrats, local lords, were the main factor both on the sedentary and the nomadic side of society. Together, they controlled the entire space beyond the densely populated irrigated oases. The relationship between the sultan and these figures is less well described, but on the whole it seems to have been based on the same principles: we are looking at personal relations based on the rules of *khidma* regardless of whether the persons in question are part of the royal household or not.

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