Alka Patel. *Iran to India: The Shansabanis of Afghanistan, c. 1145–1190 CE*

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This “architectural biography” recounts the built heritage of the early Šansabānīs, widely but inaccurately known as the Ghūrids, a Mediaeval tribal confederacy from the mountainous region of Ghūr in what is now Afghanistan. Attempting a non-sectarian history of imperial expansion, Alka Patel traces Šansabānī building activity until the Ghūrids’ momentous march into the Indo-Gangetic plains, leaving the vestiges of their zenith and abrupt twilight for a forthcoming essay. It follows from this chronological division and the trajectory of Ghūrid conquests that the book concentrates on the Šansabānī legacy of Afghanistan and Pakistan (in this order), rather than on India. To achieve a balanced analysis and avoid the pitfalls of traditional dynastic histories, the author aims to examine the Šansabānīs as a kinship-based elite within the wider tribal society of Ghūr and, moreover, she expands the disciplinary boundaries of historiography and art history by corroborating initial conclusions, where applicable, with recent archaeological investigations, as well as anthropological surveys. Forays into anthropology are necessitated by the Šansabānīs’ gradual shift from pastoralist – and therefore tent-dweller – lifeways towards a sedentist polity, for it was precisely architectural display and the command over the required workforce through which they demonstrated their transformation, even though their subsistence pattern may have changed relatively little during the process.
Chapter 1 (Kingly trajectories, pp. 40-78), follows the initial Šansabānī incursion into Ghūr-Zamīndāwar, and the fracturing of the group into distinct lineages. Patel challenges habitual notions of the Ghūrid heartland as having been devoid of towns and industry, or, indeed, of anything other than troublemaking and banditry. On the contrary, later developments would suggest that local, pre-existing mining areas and active transregional trading contacts might have been the catalysts for the Šansabānīs’ early growth. The next chapter (Beginnings, pp. 79-131) provides an outline of the historical geography of Ghūr and its pre-Islamic monuments: it suggests that Sasanian–Hephthalite or Western Turk landmarks may have originally been built to project an increasingly ruinous state and functional difference – for subsequent elites of Ghūr to emulate them in their mosques, madrasas, and mausolea. This also applies to such early Šansabānī monuments, as the Da Qāzī mināra southwest of Jām (probably identifiable with a structure at Qala’-yi Zarmurgh, referred to by Minhāj al-Sirāj), or the fortified summer encampment of Āhangarān in the extreme north of Mediaeval Ghūr.

Chapter 3 (The early Šansabanis, pp. 132-189) attempts to identify and localise the sequence of Šansabānī palatial architecture, present it as a meaningful group, and contextualise written references on these palaces, including the residences at Fīrūzkūh, Warshada, Kāshī, and Wajīristān. These and other monuments, among them the famous mināra of Jām, are discussed with respect to their possible links with Šansabānī ascendency vis-à-vis their Ghaznavid opponents and the parting of the new masters of the region with their former spiritual advisers, the Karrāmiya order. Reuse and reoccupation by the formerly nomad Šansabānīs provide the main perspective for analysing post-Ghaznavid Bāmiyān (including sites like Šahr-i Zuhḥāk and Ġulḡula) and Tīḡānābād/Qandahār.

Chapter 4 (One and Several: Ġarjistān, Ġišt, and Imperial Fīrūzkūh, pp. 190-236) delves into the Fīrūzkūh Šansabānīs’ architectural production during the late 1160s–1170s at their main headquarters and further west towards Herat and Ġarjistān. Outstanding examples consist of the madrasa (and tomb?) known as Šāh-i Mašḥad, and the domed chambers at Ġišt. With respect to the epigraphic programmes of these buildings, their sophistication is contrasted with the moderate literacy of the patrons, bringing the Šansabānīs’ spiritual advisors into the forefront as the ultimate commissioners. In The “Ports of India”: Ghazna and Bust-Lashkari Bazar (Chapter 5, pp. 237-276), the main palace at Ghazna, and of many of the built remains at Bust and Laškari Bāzār are revisited: these complexes are shown to have been mostly renovated and “re-inscribed” but barely extended by the successors of the Ghaznavids, although a few significant Šansabānī contributions also exist, including the arch at Bust (dated by Patel to ca. 570/1175, thus coeval with the mināra of Jām).

Preceding the conclusion and an Appendix, the last chapter (Encountering the Many “Indias”, pp. 277-337) follows the Ghazna Šansabānīs’ eastwards movement into northern India during the late 6th/12th century, reaching as far as the rich Indian Ocean emporium of Dībul (Banbhore, 578/1182). At this stage, the Šansabānī empire-building strategy turns out to have been highly malleable and in favour of encouraging pre-existing local architectural practices, instead of imposing on the latter an imperial ideal. In Sindh, Baluchistan, and the Makrān coast (p. 289), these entailed the Maru-Gurjara style, which was employed for constructing mosques, funerary buildings, etc.. Conversely, the buildings along the Indus river and in the region of Multān, among
them a disproportionate preponderance of tombs for the newly arrived Sufi pīrs, witnessed the introduction of new technologies, like glazed tilework, into northern Hindustan.

6 The Appendix (pp. 342-356) lists all the known Šansabānī architectural inscriptions, conveying religious and/or historical content, in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

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