

Transoxiana under the Rule of Abbasid, Ghaznavid and Seljuk Empires: A Comparison of the Systems of Governance

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ABSTRACT Several empires which have ruled over Transoxiana since the advent of Islam include the empires built by the Arabs, the Turks, the Mughals, and the Russians. The Abbasid Empire lasted for several centuries, but in terms of actual running of the vast territories extending to eastern Iranian plateau, their rule ended after one and a half centuries. Gradually, independent rulers rose from the easternmost portion of the territories of the Abbasid Empire. The role of the Caliphate was then to lend legitimacy to the various local governments, many of which became powerful empires themselves. Our main objective here is to carefully compare the two types of bureaucracies (divans) of the kingdoms ruled by the Abbasids, Ghaznavids and Seljuks. The authors examine the main features of these systems of governance, and their similarities and differences regarding their ascendancy, degree of sophistication, centralization, efficiency, and military power.

Keywords Abbasids; Caliphate; Divan; Empire; Ghaznavids; Government Departments; Persian; Seljuks; Transoxiana

The Rise of Abbasid Empire[†]

Before the Abbasids, the Umayyad Caliphs ruled over the Islamic lands for 91 years between 661 and 750 A.D. They continued the conquests

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[†] Authors' Notes: A couple of points of clarification is in order: First, although the Abbasid movement against their predecessor, the Umayyads, began from the east of the empire in the great Khorasan and Transoxiana regions, the Abbasids center of government was located in Baghdad thousands of kilometers away from Transoxiana. This region, therefore, was only part of the vast territory under the Abbasid rule. In the case of the Ghaznavids and Seljuks, Transoxiana was the locus of their power and authority. Second, although at the head of the Abbasid empire was the Arab caliph and at the top of Ghaznavid and Seljuk empires were Turkic Sultans, the bureaucracy in these empires was managed by the Persians. This was a continuation of the pre-Islamic Persian imperial system of governance.

that had begun at the time of the first caliphs, Abu Bakr and Umar, immediately after the Prophet's passing (Eqbal Ashtiani, 1958: 77). The Umayyad caliphs considered their rule as pure Arab; and the Caliphate, the judiciary, and army were exclusively the prerogative of the Arabs. Furthermore, succession was hereditary unlike that in the Rashidun era (Zarrinkoob, 1994: 352). This created dissatisfaction, especially in the far-away province of Khorasan in the east, which along with other factors, led to the downfall of the Umayyads. Eventually, the Umayyads lost control of their eastern provinces and were overthrown by the Abbasid movement from Khorasan (Spuler, 1990: 61-62).

The Persian and non-Arab peoples of the eastern provinces were instrumental in the Abbasids' successful bid to overthrow the Umayyads. Therefore, unlike the Umayyads, the Abbasids based their administration on the skills of all the non-Arabs that were willing to serve the new Caliphate. From then on, the non-Arabs, including the Persians, were entitled to assuming positions of power in the empire. The Caliphate and the legal system remained the prerogative of the Arabs. Merit, rather than ethnicity, was the criterion for the allocation of jobs and privileges (Spuler, 1990: 75). The Abbasid Empire was an Islamic empire in which peoples of different ethnicities and nationalities were recruited (Klausner, 1984: 14). Thus, a coalition regime composed of Arabs and non-Arabs were formed (Lapidus, 2002: 120-121).

Unlike the Umayyads, the Abbasid were strongly influenced by the Iranian culture and civilization, and imitated Iranian customs and traditions (Zarrinkoob, 1994: 447). Once the Abbasids were securely established, they in effect declared the end of the conquests. It was then the time for efficient administration of their vast empire and creating what was dubbed the great Islamic civilization.

The Government Departments (*Divans*) of Abbasid Empire

The features of the government departments (divans) in the Abbasid administration will be examined. The Abbasids which were confronted with the enormous challenge of running the vast empire that extended from Transoxiana to North Africa, adopted the bureaucracy and the divan system. Iranian scribes and "technocrats" of the pre-Islamic Persian Empire were recruited for the creation and administration of the

bureaucracy. Under the Umayyads, there were no specialized institutions assigned for specific tasks. The Caliphate consulted his advisors/scribes when an issue came up and gave orders accordingly. Each of the *moshirs* acted like a minister (Ibn Taqtaqi, 1981: 206). In other words, with the conquest of Iran by the Arabs, the administrative system of the pre-Islamic Iranian empires was transferred to the post-Islamic era (Khosrobeigi, 2009: 158).

The Abbasids owed their ascension to power to the non-Arabs, especially the Iranians. They further used the abilities and expertise of the non-Arabs in running and preserving their empire. With the development of the government departments and divans, the power of the ministers also increased. The Barmakid family, that had been in the bureaucratic service for decades in the pre-Islamic Persian Empire rose to power and prominence under the Abbasids. Yahya Barmaki was one of the most powerful ministers at the service of the Abbasid Caliph Harun al-Rashid. Harun, who addressed him as father, entrusted the affairs of the Caliphate to him (Khosrobeigi, 2009: 159). A brief description of the various divans of the Abbasid period is provided in the following section:

1. *Divan al-Jaish*: This divan was more important during the time of the conquests of Omar, the second caliph and the Umayyad Empire. The importance of *Divan al-Jaish* somewhat diminished in the Abbasid era, and consisted of two Houses. One House assessed the status of the army, determined the salary of military personnel and ensured timely payments. The second one was responsible for inspecting and documenting the names of soldiers and their status (Mirahmadi, 1989: 54). The Abbasids abandoned the monopoly of Arabs in military affairs and their privileges. The new military force, which they created, was devoted to the interests of the empire instead of being loyal to tribal and group interests. The military under the Abbasids was composed of the *mawali*, the volunteers and soldiers from Khorasan, that helped them defeat the Umayyads and establish the new Caliphate (Lapidus, 2002: 121-122).

2. *Divan al-Barid*: This divan was one of the most important divans of the Abbasids, because it was essential to communicate with the vast territories and provinces of the Islamic realm in the empire. The imperial postal system was based on the examples of the Achaemenid era and was at the service of the government and its administrative system (Schpuller, 1990: 115). Its other task was to bring reports and news from the provinces to the *Dar*

al-Khilafa. In fact, it functioned as the “eyes and ears” of the government (Mirahmadi, 1989: 56-57).

3. *Divan al-'Ala*: The Supreme Court was the highest organ that had authority over the army and religious scholars. The divan was also called the Court of Justice or the Court of Appeals, and prepared the treaties and appointment letters of the officials and other military affairs (Kharazmi, 1983: 77). This institution was also responsible for registering documents and conducting correspondence (Lapidus, 2002: 123). The execution of daily court rulings was also the responsibility of the *divan al-'Ala*.

4. *Divan al-Kharaj*: This divan was the tax collection agency that was established during the Second Caliphate, and its branches were located throughout the empire. The execution of financial affairs that included determining salaries and collecting taxes was the main task of the divan. Since the time of Mansour Abbasi, the provincial governors were also charged with tax collection (Kanpoori, 1969: 134).

5. *Divan al-Ishraf and Istifa*: During the Abbasids, attention was directed at the administration of the empire that involved financial affairs and the promulgation of laws and regulations governing those affairs. There were numerous government departments in the field of finance, whose functions sometimes overlapped. Among them was *Divan al-Ishraf* that was responsible for overseeing the expenses of the court and cooperated closely with the *Divan al-Istifa*. On the other hand, *Divan al-Ishraf* had close cooperation with *Divan al-Barid* in connection with the reports and news from various parts of the empire. The duty of *Divan al-Istifa* was to regulate all the affairs and expenses of the state (Mirahmadi, 1989: 66-67).

6. *Divan al-Shortah and Ihdas* (Constabulary): This divan that was initially under the supervision of the Chief Qadi was responsible for internal security and protection of the lives and property of the people (Kanpoori, 1969: 137). It was also responsible for the enforcement of sentences passed by the *Divan al-Mosaderat* (confiscation of property) and *Divan al-Mazalim* (justice). *Divan Al-Mazalim* informed the Caliphate of the letters of complaint received from the people, and then issued orders. These were reported to the *Divan Al-Shorteh*, which was responsible for enforcing the orders. The *Mohtasib* was responsible for managing the affairs of the city, regulating businesses, prices, and public spaces (Mirahmadi, 1989: 66).

7. *Divan al-Ma'* (Water): This divan played an important role in the distribution of drinking water and the water needed for agricultural lands and gardens. It was involved in the construction of dams and regulation of water resources (Kanpoori, 1969: 139; Kharazmi, 1983: 69).

8. Other divans included the *Divan al-Toghi-wa-dar* (which chronicled the orders of the Caliphate), the *Divan al-Khatam* (which sealed and delivered all the signed letters of the caliph to their intended recipients), the *Divan al-Jahbazeh* (whose duties were education, auditing and banking), the *Divan al-Berr wa-Sadaghat* (which paid for charity and public benefits), the *Divan al-Oghaf* (which dealt with the endowed lands and mosques), and the *Divan al-Darb* (whose duty was to regulate the circulation of coins and facilitating trade) (Mirahmadi, 1989: 62-67).

The Abbasid Empire was a centralized one with the main government department based at the headquarters of the Caliphate. Since the caliph was no more engaged in conquests, he focused more on the divans, the mode of governance, and the ministers operating under his supervision. The caliph had the highest position in the Empire and enjoyed both spiritual and secular power. As a result, the caliph was the highest religious authority as well as the highest authority in the administration of the country. The ministers were accountable to him. The Abbasid Empire was at the height of power for only 150 years before it started to decline in 900 A.D.

Gradually, local governments emerged in the easternmost parts of the empire. The first one was Taherid Dynasty (821-873 A.D) that established an independent rule in Khorasan. The Saffarids (861-1003 A.D) that came to power in Sistan, established an independent government there, and conquered Neishabur. They overthrew the Taherids, and extended their territory to Shiraz, Ahvaz and Isfahan (Yaghoobi, 1964: 473; Gardizi, 1968: 131).

By the 10th century A.D, Khorasan and Transoxiana were under the rule of the Iranian Samanids, with their capital in Bukhara. Theirs was the first major Iranian empire after the Arab conquest. The Samanids employed Turkic slaves in their professional army. The young men that were bought as slaves for the army rose to be powerful army commanders and eventually established the Ghaznavid Dynasty in the eastern and central parts of the Iranian plateau (Bosworth, 1977: 25-26). The Ghaznavid Empire was governed by a Turkic military ruler as the Shah, who was assisted by his Turkic military commanders.

However, the bureaucracy and the running of the day-to-day affairs of the empire remained in the hands of Persian *viziers*, scribes, and men of the divan.

The Rise of the Ghaznavid Dynasty

In the early days of the Abbasids, the emirs that were granted governorship in the provinces rarely went to their designated provinces themselves. They remained at the Caliphate and sent their deputies to rule over their territory. Leaving Baghdad could mean losing their job due to intrigue and conspiracy of rivals while they were away. Gradually, those deputies assumed power and became independent rulers themselves. They honored the Caliph's nominal suzerainty, sent him gifts, and conducted the Friday prayers in his name. For all practical purposes, however, they were independent of Baghdad. This was especially true of the provinces farther away from the Capital, such as Khorasan, Egypt, and Andalusia (Zarrinkoob, 1994: 484).

Most of the Kingdoms of Iran were shaped in this way; and Ghaznavids and Seljuks were among these monarchies. Sebuktegin and Elptegin were Samanid military officers who came to power and established the Ghaznavid Empire. Mahmud of Ghazna succeeded them and became the powerful King of the dynasty. The vast empire that Mahmud created during his reign necessitated the creation of an efficient administrative apparatus to rule over those territories. Some of the departments were modeled after those of the Samanid empire, and others went back to the Sassanid era (Mirahmadi, 1989: 174-176).

The Ghaznavids owed their strength to military conquests and to the efficiency of their military. As the conquests wound down, so did their might and power (Zarrinkoob, 2000: 420-422). The post-Abbasid governments were created by the non-indigenous military elites (Lapidus, 2002: 223). Accomplished in the art of warfare, they nevertheless lacked the experience and knowhow for running an empire. Hence, as did the Abbasids, they employed the individuals with such expertise. Meanwhile, the military regime with nomadic background provided the needed security for the flourishing of trade and agriculture (Lapidus, 2002: 339). Once again, as during the Abbasids era, a non-indigenous military figurehead and his army headed a vast empire that ruled over the Iranian plateau. In this case, the non-indigenous ruler was a Turk, rather than an Arab. The

administration and actual running of the empire remained in the hands of the local Persians.

The Government Departments (Divans) of Ghaznavid Empire

The role of the viziers at the head of the administration of this empire was even more extensive and important than that of the Abbasids. In other words, the office of the vizier was the most important administrative authority. The appointment of a vizier at the head of the administrative body predated Islamic era in Iran (Khosrobeigi, 2009: 158). Even though, by definition, he was the second person after the Sultan, in practice he was the person in charge of running the empire. This is best demonstrated in *Abul-Fazl Bayhaqi's* narration of the Vizierate of Hasan Meymandi. "I entrusted in him all the affairs of the state, except wining and dining, the game of polo, and the business of war", said the King... "he [the vizier] is our 'caliph' and no one has the right to object to his opinion" (Bayhaqi, 1945: 152-155).

One reason for the highly privileged position of the vizierate in these types of governments was that the Sultans were either engaged in military campaigns or enjoyed hunting and feasting. Whereas the business of war was the Sultan's responsibility, the "army" of viziers, secretaries, and other "civil servants" ran the empire. Even the administrative and financial affairs of the troops were conducted through *Divan al-Araz*, that fell under the supervision of the vizier (Khosrobeigi, 2009: 160). We now review the most important divans of the Ghaznavid Empire:

1. *Army Affairs and Divan al-Araz*: All the affairs of the army and the troops were the responsibility of this divan, which was headed by a vizier (*Arez*). This divan's duty was to establish the rules and regulations of the army, to prepare statistical data, register the names of the army personnel and pay the salaries of the troops (Mirahmadi, 1989: 182). The Ghaznavids were an "imperialist" entity, i.e., the empire lived off the resources of the lands they continuously plundered and annexed to their kingdom. Hence, this divan was one of the most important divans in the Ghaznavid Empire. The core of the military force in this empire was comprised of the non-indigenous professional military slaves who were committed and loyal to the Sultan. The army enjoyed high social status (Bosworth, 1977: 96). Their status and privileges

made them efficient and effective. The army evolved from a coalition of tribes into a professional military force (Bosworth, 1977: 62). Beside the Vizier, that ran the *Divan al-Araz*, and was the highest military official after the Sultan, there was the great *Hajib*, the “Secretary of the Court”, who oversaw the military affairs. Also, there was a post titled *Salar-e Ghulaman-e Sarai*, or “the head of the special servants of the Sultan” (Khaje *Nezam-Al-Molk*, 1985: 130).

2. *Divan al-Rasa’el*: One interesting feature of the Ghaznavid administration was that the Court was always on the move. Apparently, this originated from the nomadic background of the Ghaznavids. This meant that the divan apparatus was not centralized in the Capital. Major divans, including *Divan al-Rasa’el*, moved with the Sultan during his military campaigns (Bosworth, 1977: 67). With its central position at the center of the Ghaznavid administration, this divan registered orders, sent letters, recorded provincial events, communicated with the provinces and issued royal and administrative orders (Mirahmadi, 1989: 203). *Divan al-Rasa’el* was “the repository of secrets” of the Empire (Jarfadeghani, 1978: 343).

3. *Divan al-Barid*: This divan acted as government postal service and was responsible for circulation of intelligence between the capital and provinces. It prepared reports on the performance of governors and other government agents in the provinces (Mirahmadi, 1989: 205).

4. *Divan al-Ishraf*: This divan was a supervisory organ for monitoring and inspecting the administrative and financial performance of other divans and their staff both in the Capital and in provinces (Khosrobeigi, 2009: 216). This divan also worked with the *Divan al-Barid* in intelligence gathering and counter-espionage operations throughout the empire (Bayhaqi, 1977: 221).

5. *Divan al-Estifa*: The main function of this divan as the “ministry of finance” was to manage revenues, expenses, and taxes. Presiding over this divan was the Chief *mostowfi*, who worked with an army of accountants and tax collectors. This divan had the same function as *Divan al-Kharaj* in other Islamic lands (Mirahmadi, 1989: 207-208).

Under the Ghaznavids, a new type of empire was created, dominated by a slave military elite and a sophisticated administrative system. The Seljuk Empire had three main characteristics:

1. A non-native professional army consisting of servants,

2. A mobile Court that was not necessarily based in the Capital, and an efficient administrative apparatus for running the Empire.
3. An ideological policy that led to the enhancement of the Islamic culture in the Empire (Lapidus, 2002: 213).

The Sultans were accomplished military men with no experience in the administration of their empire. That task was left to Iranians with experience in this field, which resulted in the elevated status and importance of the office of vizierate and the divan apparatus. The Ghaznavid era is one of the brightest periods in the history of vizierate and divans in Iran. In the next section, we will look at the divans under the Seljuks, which established another great empire headed by Turkic Sultans and military elite.

The Rise of the Seljuks

The Seljuks belonged to the Turkic Oghuz tribe that lived during the reign of the Samanids in the areas between Transoxiana and the eastern shores of the Caspian Sea and the upper valleys of the Syr and Amu rivers. In the early 12th century A.D, a number of them headed by Arsalan, the son of Seljuk, rose unsuccessfully to confront the powerful Sultan Mahmud Ghaznavid. Subsequently, some went to Khorasan and others to Isfahan and Azerbaijan, and eventually defeated the Ghaznavid army in the battle of the Dandanqan. By 1038 A.D., they established an independent state in Nishapur, that extended to western and central Iranian plateau (Helmi, 2005: 18).

The Seljuk government was the second grand state that controlled the eastern lands of the Islamic world. The Seljuks embraced the Caliph's Sunni ideology and enthusiastically implemented a heavy-handed religious policy throughout their empire (Eqbal Ashtiani, 1958: 17). Their rule led to the consolidation of temporal authority of the Sultan, the renewal of the link between state and religion, and the establishment of an extensive system of *madrāsas* (Islamic educational schools). This empire was greatly influenced by the bureaucratic traditions of the Samanids and the Ghaznavids (Klausner, 1984: 15-16). In many aspects, the Seljuk and Ghaznavid Empires were similar. In both cases, the military apparatus received priority to facilitate the conquest of the adjacent lands; a Turkic military elite headed the empire, and an Iranian administrative system ran it. Furthermore, the

viziers played the most important role in managing the empire; the Sultan's power was based on a slave military army; and the Court was mobile to accompany the Sultan on his military campaigns.

The Government Departments of the Seljuk Empire

The Seljuks' success in maintaining order and running their vast empire was due to their use of the Iranian divan system and the "bureaucrats" that managed it. This, in effect, ensured continuity in the way the empire was governed. With a few exceptions, the same institutions and traditions that existed during the Samanid and Ghaznavid rules remained in place under the Seljuks (Eqbal Ashtiani, 1958: 18-19). Presented below is a description of the major Seljuk divans:

1. *Divan al-Araz*: This divan oversaw the Seljuk military affairs, which included the recruitment of soldiers, the military's salary determination and payment, arms procurement and food provisions for the soldiers as well as preparations for the conduct of military campaigns. Like that of the Ghaznavids, this divan was one of the most important institutions for running the empire. The military commander that headed the divan was titled *Saheb-e Divan-e Araz* or *Arez-e Jaish* (Mirahmadi, 1989: 231; 251-252). The style of the Seljuk army was similar to that of the Ghaznavids, both in peacetime and during wars. The Sultan was the supreme commander of the entire military apparatus. The army was comprised of the original Turkmen tribes and the Turkic slaves. The latter were used by the first Seljuk Sultans to create a permanent professional army in order to reduce the state's reliance on Turkmen tribes. These slaves could reach the highest military positions in the hierarchy (Klausner, 1984: 25). At the same time, the Seljuk Sultans placed great emphasis on the military organizations and institutions as a means to keep in check the military commanders' ambitions (Klausner, 1984: 24).

2. *Divan al-Toghra*: In a way, the functions of the divans of *Rasa'el* and *Ensha* were incorporated into this institution. The head of this divan was a vizier, who bore the title of *Saheb-e Divan-e Rasa'el* and worked with many trusted clerks and scribes. They were occasionally sent on secret missions to various parts of the empire (Eqbal Ashtiani, 1958: 29-30). The duties of this divan, like *Divan al-Rasa'el* included sending orders and directives to provinces and receiving reports from them. The *Saheb-e Divan* had a sensitive and

critical position due to his permanent presence at the side of the Sultan. This meant that he would have access to the most sensitive secrets of the empire. Being present at such occasions, his views were sought on various matters of the government (Khosrobeigi, 2009: 197).

3. *Divan al-Barid*: This divan was charged with delivering news and government letters and local reports to the Capital. The title of the vizier in charge of the divan was *Saheb-e Barid*. Like the Ghaznavid Era, this Seljuk's significant divan was critical in the smooth management of the empire. Due to the decentralized style of the Seljuk government and the Court's requirement to be constantly on the move for military campaigns, the non-military affairs of the state were in danger of being neglected. This divan helped the government to stay in touch with the provinces and confront possible challenges and revolts throughout the Empire.

4. *Divan al-Ishraf*: This institution had a supervisory function and monitored the finances of the *Divan al-Istifa*. The vizier that was put in charge of this divan was called the *Moushref*. According to the talented Persian vizier of the Seljuks, Nezam-Al-Molk, the person entrusted with running this divan must have been completely trustworthy and well-informed, so as he could know what went on in the land and was able to present the needed information, when asked (Khaje Nezam-Al-Molk, 1985: 84). In order to prevent insurrection and corruption, he had to send his men to the districts and provinces to look after people and property (Mirahmadi, 1989: 254).

5. *Divan al-Istifa*: This divan headed by the *Mostowfi*, handled the empire's finances. There was a sophisticated system in place for assessing agricultural output every year, regulating and collecting taxes, and securing them in the treasury. *Divan al-Istifa* was similar to *Divan al-Kharaj* under the Abbasid Caliphs (Aghili, 1958: 153).

There are many similarities between the two empires of the Ghaznavids and the Seljuks. Therefore, they can be classified into one category. For example, in both cases, a Turkish military was at the head of the empire and governed a non-Turk majority. The official administrative language in both cases was Persian, and the language of the Court and the military was Turkish. The military in both empires consisted of the non-native slaves. Both Courts had a military character. The viziers that managed these empires had significant power and authority.

Conclusion

Comparing the empires of the Abbasids, the Ghaznavids, and the Seljuks, we observed that the first one was under Arab rule, and the latter was under Turkish military commanders. We demonstrated how the reliance of the Abbasids on the non-Arab Persians in gaining power led to the abandoning of the exclusive Arab rule by the Umayyads. It was also shown how the institution of vizierate gained prominence under the Abbasids who ran their vast empire with the help of their Iranian-modeled administrative system in which each vizier was directly responsible to the Caliph. It was further revealed that the conquests having come to an end after the Umayyids, the Abbasids could focus their attention on maintaining and running the empire. We discussed the emergence of independent Persian political entities at the easternmost regions of the Abbasid Empire, and how they became powerful independent empires themselves. Finally, we examined the emergence of new Ghaznavid and the Seljuk empires in Transoxiana that were headed by Turkic military rulers. There were both elements of continuity and change in the administration of the empires under the Arabs and the Turks. The three main similarities and differences between the two types of government were as follows:

First, the Abbasid Empire was a centralized one, meaning that the divan apparatus was centered in Baghdad. The empire was run from that central city, and provinces were directly managed by the center. The governor of each province was appointed for a specified period of time and was dependent on the Caliph's authority. The center controlled the provincial affairs with the help of *Divan al-Barid*. The actual ending of the conquests under the Abbasids afforded them the possibility of putting a sophisticated system of bureaucracy in place and the luxury of managing the empire in peacetime. In contrast, the empire under the Turks was a decentralized one. The nomadic tradition of both the Sultans and their military campaigns meant that the Court was regularly on the move and the administrative style of the empire was a decentralized one.

Second, another difference was the role and relative importance of the military in the two types of empires. Under the Abbasids, the end of the conquests meant the reduction in the size of the army and the retirement of the commanders and officers. This was in sharp contrast to the Ghaznavid and the Seljuk rule where the military aspect of the

empire gained prominence and the *Divan al-Araz* became the most important institution in the administrative system of the Turkic model.

Finally, there was a similarity between the two types of government. In both cases a non-indigenous military elite ruled the empire. The complex and efficient administrative system, however, was almost entirely manned by the indigenous peoples of the Iranian plateau. This seems to have been true in most of the history of this land. While foreign invaders and military commanders ruled the various empires in this vast territory, the actual administration of these empires remained in the hands of the local Iranian viziers, scribes, and workers of divan.

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