UNIVERSIDAD & SOCIEDAD
Presentation date: November, 2024
Date of acceptance: February, 2025
Publication date: April, 2025

OPPOSITION

TO THE CALIPHATE IN AZERBAIJAN IN THE FIRST CENTURY OF THE ABBASIDS: THE KHURAMI REBELLION (H.132–232/750–847)

OPOSICIÓN AL CALIFATO EN AZERBAIYÁN EN EL PRIMER SIGLO DE LOS ABASÍES: LA REBELIÓN DE KHURAMI (H.132-232/750-847)

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Suggested citation (APA, seventh ed.)

Gurbanov, G. (2025). Opposition to the caliphate in Azerbaijan in the first century of the Abbasids: The Khurami rebellion (h.132–232/750–847). ***Universidad y Sociedad, 17***(2), e5063.

ABSTRACT

The Khurramiyya Rebellion (c. 132–232/750–847), led by Babek Khorramdin in Azerbaijan under the Abbasid Caliphate, represents a critical milestone to understand the dynamics of resistance against oppressive imperial structures in the early Islamic world. Despite its relevance as a synthesis of religious, ethnic, and socioeconomic dissent, previous research has not gone deeper in its ideological connection to pre-Islamic Mazdakism and its role in articulating local identities against Arab hegemony, prioritizing military narratives over holistic analyses. This study seeks to fill this gap by examining the root causes of the rebellion—discrimination against the mawali, Abbasid fiscal exploitation, and Arab settlement policies—as well as its legacy as a continuation of Mazdakism, a proto-egalitarian movement of the Sassanian period. It is shown that the Khurramiyya fused Zoroastrian symbols with Islamic rhetoric to mobilize marginalized Persian peasants, artisans, and elites, challenging not only the caliphate but also claiming Azerbaijan's cultural autonomy. The findings reveal that the rebellion, although militarily suppressed, consolidated a framework of ethno-religious resistance that influenced later movements, such as the Safavids, evidencing how tensions between center and periphery in multicultural empires can catalyze dissident identities. This work provides a reappraisal of medieval rebellions as multifaceted phenomena, underlining the need to integrate socioeconomic, religious, and cultural perspectives in the study of Islamic history.

Keywords: Khurramiyya Rebellion, Babek Khorramdin, Mazdakism, Mawali Discrimination, Ethnic-Religious Resistance.

RESUMEN

La rebelión de Khurramiyya (c. 132-232/750-847), liderada por Babek Khorramdin en Azerbaiyán bajo el califato abasí, representa un hito crítico para comprender la dinámica de la resistencia contra las estructuras imperiales opresivas en el mundo islámico temprano. A pesar de su relevancia como síntesis de disenso religioso, étnico y socioeconómico, la investigación previa no ha profundizado en su conexión ideológica con el mazdakismo preislámico y su papel en la articulación de identidades locales contra la hegemonía árabe, priorizando las narrativas militares sobre los análisis holísticos. Este estudio busca llenar este vacío examinando las causas profundas de la rebelión (discriminación contra los mawali, explotación fiscal abasí y políticas de asentamiento árabes), así como su legado como continuación del mazdakismo, un movimiento proto-igualitario del período sasánida. Se demuestra que la Khurramiyya fusionó los símbolos zoroástricos con la retórica islámica para movilizar a los campesinos, artesanos y élites persas marginados, desafiando no solo al califato sino también reclamando la autonomía cultural de Azerbaiyán. Los hallazgos revelan que la rebelión, aunque reprimida militarmente, consolidó un marco de resistencia etnoreligiosa que influyó en movimientos posteriores, como los safávidas, lo que demuestra cómo las tensiones entre el centro y la periferia en los imperios multiculturales pueden catalizar identidades disidentes. Este trabajo ofrece una reevaluación de las rebeliones medievales como fenómenos multifacéticos, subrayando la necesidad de integrar perspectivas socioeconómicas, religiosas y culturales en el estudio de la historia islámica.

Palabras clave: Rebelión Khurramiyya, Babek Khorramdin, Mazdakismo, Discriminación Mawali, Resistencia Étnico-Religiosa.

INTRODUCTION

When we examine the historical dynamics of Azerbaijan during the early Islamic period (7th–9th centuries), it becomes clear that the region functioned as a crucible of cultural, religious, and social tensions. Strategically located at the crossroads of the Caucasus, the Caspian Sea, and the Iranian Plateau, Azerbaijan's geography has always been a nexus for imperial ambitions and trade routes, which has fostered interactions—and collisions—between diverse communities and political powers. In this regard, the Arab conquests of the 7th and 8th centuries, part of the broader Islamic expansion under the Rashidun and Umayyad caliphates, introduced notorious transformations in the region. These included the imposition of Islamic administrative frameworks, such as the diwan system for tax collection, and the gradual replacement of Zoroastrian fire temples with mosques. However, this integration was neither seamless nor peaceful. But as a consequence of these changes, society in Azerbaijan fractured into two primary groups: Muslim elites, predominantly Arab settlers and their descendants, and non-Muslim communities, who clung to Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Manichaeism, and indigenous cults. This dichotomy transcended religion, embedding itself in racial hierarchies and economic exploitation. Arab settlers monopolized fertile lands and trade networks, while non-Muslims faced the jizya (poll tax) and systemic marginalization, fueling resentment and social stratification (Crone, 2012; Daniel, 2001).

Native converts to Islam, termed mawali (clients), were relegated to second-class status despite their adherence to the faith. This systemic discrimination, institutionalized under the Umayyads (661–750 CE), excluded mawali from political office, equitable pay in the military, and intermarriage with Arab families. For instance, Caliph Umar II's (717–720 CE) short-lived reforms to abolish the jizya for converts were reversed by his successors, perpetuating a cycle of economic disenfranchisement (Kennedy, 2022; Madelung, 1996). The Arabs' self-perception as a divinely favored "Ummah" (community) further legitimized their supremacy, as articulated in texts like Ibn Qutaybah's Kitab al-Ma'arif, which framed non-Arabs as inferior (Yarshater & Gershevitch, 2008). These policies not only alienated the local population but also sowed the seeds of revolt, particularly among Persian-speaking elites and peasantry who resented Arab hegemony.

One of the most explosive manifestations of this discontent was the Khurramiyya rebellion (8th–9th centuries), a movement that synthesized socio-political dissent with religious heterodoxy. The Khurramiyya's ideological roots stretched back to the Mazdakite movement of the 5th–6th centuries. Mazdak, influenced by Zoroastrian dualism and egalitarian principles, advocated for the redistribution of wealth and communal ownership of property—ideas that directly challenged feudal hierarchies. Though suppressed by Emperor Khosrow I, Mazdakism survived in oral traditions and resurfaced during the Abbasid era (750–1258 CE) as the Khurramiyya (Daftary, 2007). The movement's name, derived from the Persian "khurram" (joyful), reflected its emphasis on earthly pleasures and social liberation, a stark contrast to the austere orthodoxy of the Abbasid caliphs. By the 9th century, the Khurramiyya had evolved into a potent anti-establishment force, blending Zoroastrian millenarianism with Islamic eschatology, as seen in their reverence for figures like Abu Muslim, the Persian revolutionary (Bosworth, 1996).

The rebellion reached its zenith under Babak Khorramdin (816–837 CE), a charismatic leader who transformed localized grievances into a sustained insurgency. Based in the impregnable fortress of Al-Badhdh in the Qaradagh Mountains, Babak employed guerrilla tactics and alliances with local Kurdish and Daylamite clans to resist Abbasid armies. His movement's appeal lay in its multifaceted agenda: it condemned Abbasid taxation, which drained resources from Azerbaijan to fund Baghdad's opulence; rejected Arab cultural dominance by reviving Persian customs; and promised social equity for peasants and artisans. Contemporary sources, such as Al-Tabari's Tarikh al-Rusul wa al-Muluk, depict Babak as a master strategist who defeated six Abbasid generals, including Hayyan ibn Jabalah, and inspired fear in Caliph al-Mu'tasim. The rebellion's longevity—over two decades—underscored its deep roots in regional identity and the Abbasids' inability to address systemic inequities (Minorsky, 1977; Təbəri, 1407).

The Khurramiyya's ideology was a syncretic mixture, weaving pre-Islamic Zoroastrian symbols (e.g., reverence for fire and the sun) with Islamic motifs like jihad against oppression. This synthesis resonated across class lines: peasants rallied against land confiscations, artisans protested monopolies by Arab merchants, and disaffected Persian nobles sought to reclaim political influence. Even women played notable roles, as evidenced by accounts of female warriors in Babak's ranks—a radical departure from Abbasid gender norms (Hodgson, 1977). The movement's red and white banners, contrasting with the Abbasids' black flags, symbolized both defiance and a revival of pre-Islamic Persian glory (Aliyev, 2023). It is recognized that the Khurramiyya rebellion was not merely

a regional uprising but a microcosm of the struggle against imperial domination and social inequality in the early Islamic world. Its legacy endured in later movements, such as the Safavid resistance against the Mongols and the Qizilbash rebellions, which similarly blended religious dissent with ethnic nationalism. When we analyzed the Khurramiyya, we uncover the intricate interplay of religion, identity, and power—a dynamic that continues to shape the modern Caucasus and Iran.

Considering the above, the aim of this paper is to analyze the Khurramiyya (also known as Babekiyya) rebellion in Azerbaijan during the first century of the Abbasid Caliphate, exploring its socioeconomic, religious and political causes. It seeks to demonstrate how this rebellion, led by Babek Khorramdin, was a response to systematic discrimination against non-Arab converts (mawali), fiscal exploitation and Arab cultural imposition, as well as to trace its ideological roots in pre-Islamic movements such as Mazdakism, which promoted social equality and resistance against oppressive hierarchies. To do so, a historical-critical approach was used based on the analysis of primary sources (chronicles of Al-Tabari, Abbasid documents) and secondary sources (modern academic works). A comparison of pre-Islamic and Islamic contexts was used, examining the ideological continuity between Mazdakism and Khurramiyya.

DEVELOPMENT

When we look at history, we can see that in every era, people have found time and space to express their objections, both as individuals and as societies, for various reasons. One such rebellion is the Khurramiyya movement, which was centered in Iran. The history of this long-lasting rebellion can be divided into two periods: before and after Islam. The pre-Islamic Khurramiyya movement emerged before the religion reached Iran and Azerbaijan and was known as Mazdakism. Mazdakism formed the ideological foundation for the later Khurramiyya rebellion.

This rebellion, which emerged during the reign of the Sassanid emperor Kubat, was particularly active between 488-498 AD and the rebellion was named after its initiator, Mazdak. He is recognized as the first person in history to propose socialist ideas. His ideas were accepted by Emperor Kubat and received substantial support (Qurbanov, 2009a, p. 3). According to Mazdak's ideology, property and women were the sources of hostility among people in society, and therefore, they should be considered common property. Through this approach, they believed it would be possible to end social objections and upheavals in society. They argued that people's primary goal was pleasure and satisfaction; consequently, they advocated for the communal use of food, drink, and women through coercive methods, and began implementing these practices.

Although Mazdakism was suppressed before the advent of Islam in Iran, it continued to exist and influence the region under different names. Historians generally assert that the Khurramiyya inherited the views of pre-Islamic Mazdakism. For this reason, they refer to the Khurramis as "New Mazdakis" or "Mazdakis after Islam." Similarly, just as the Mazdakis are called the "First Khurramis," the post-Islamic Khurramiyya movement is termed the "New Mazdakis" due to their similar ideological principles. This terminology emphasizes that the Khurramiyya movement was essentially a continuation and evolution of Mazdakism.

The Iranian people, who possessed a deep-rooted civilization and religion, maintained a longing for their past despite accepting Islam, as they struggled to fully internalize it. They continued their resistance, both covertly and overtly, against Islam for ending their ancient religion, Zoroastrianism, and against the Arabs for terminating their political dominance. While the clergy and nobles, who had lost their social and religious status, played the leading role in this resistance, the poor also voiced their objections due to political and economic grievances (Qurbanov, 2009b, p. 26).

Especially the people centered in Azerbaijan who supported Babek are known as Babekis or Babekiyye. However, Khurramiyya is considered the most well-known historical name for those who held and defended these same ideas both during and after Babek's time. It should be noted that the name Khurramiyya was given as a common designation to groups with different names, both before and after Islam. This was because they shared similar ideas and fought for the same ideology. Therefore, it is appropriate to first investigate the origin of the word Khurramiyya. We encounter different views in the sources about the origin of the word and the naming of these sects. Each source presents different reasons for this naming. Therefore, we will classify the available information into three groups (Tabari, 1939, p. 65).

First, historians claim this name was given in relation to geographical location. In their view, the word Khurramiyya, as a geographical place name, indicates the existence of the town of Khurram near Ardabil. It acquired this name because Ardabil was the first center of the Mazdak movement. This city is also called Khurramabad, and the Bezz Castle, used as a center by the Khurramids and Babek, is located very close to this area (Minorsky, 1986, p. 39). Second, some writers maintain that the ideology held and defended by the Khurramiyya was the factor that led to its

naming. According to them, the sect's view of women and property as common property of society was instrumental in this naming. In other words, the group received this name because of the meaning of the word Khurramiyya. The word is Persian and means "pleasant, beautiful, suitable for taste." The Khurramiyya sect adopted this name because it defended Mazdakian ideas and considered all kinds of pleasures appropriate (Has, 2004, p. 119). Third, some scholars accept Khurram as a personal name. For example, certain sources argue that the sect was named Khurramiyya after the person who facilitated its development. They attribute it to "Khurram," the wife of Mazdak (the pre-Islamic founder of the sect), who continued to defend and spread her husband's ideas after his death. In later years, this name was given to those who gathered around Khurram. According to alternative views, this name was given to them because of their ancestor "Husayn b. Idris el-Ansari el-Khurram," also known as "Ibn Khurram (Zorlu, 2001, p. 38)".

Azerbaijani historian Ziya Bunyadov divides the history of the Khurrami rebellion into two periods: the first being the pre-Islamic period in Iran, known as the Mazdakites, and the second being the period in Azerbaijan under Babek's leadership, hence calling the second period Babekiyya and its supporters Babekis. Regarding the Babekiyya rebellion in the Islamic period, Bunyadov argues that while women were considered common property among them, there was no collective intercourse. However, while Mazdak's ideas played a major role in the movement gaining this name, we should not disregard the other two reasons. It is worth noting that in medieval times, it was common practice to name people and sects after their birthplace, city, region, lineage, or community. Therefore, we believe that the first and third reasons were more influential.

As mentioned before, the Mazdaki movement, which first emerged in the Sassanid period, later continued as the Khurramiyya and then the Babekiyya. Although these movements occurred at different times and for different reasons, they share connections and similarities in terms of being specific to the people of the same region and geography. Therefore, we will examine the reasons for the emergence of the Babekiyya rebellion, which was known as the Khurramiyya after Islam.

Looking at the historical events of the period, we see that the first reason for the rebellions was the inconsistencies in conquests made at different times. Specifically, there were differences in aims and purposes between the conquest operations during the time of the Prophet, the Rightly-Guided Caliphs, the Umayyads, and the Abbasids. These differences revealed varying conquest motivations and led to the emergence of problems. The Prophet (pbuh) always prioritized the human element in wars, instructing his armies to exercise caution, avoid torture, and refrain from killing prisoners, demonstrating that winning people's hearts and preserving human life were paramount. For this reason, the Prophet (pbuh) complained to Allah about Khalid b. Walid killing Muslims from the Banu Jadhimah tribe and paid their blood money. In another incident, when the Messenger of Allah was angered by Usama's actions, he responded, "Did you cut his heart?", which confirms this principle (Guıdı, 1979, p. 78).

When examining Iranian history, the consistent support of the Iranian region and its people for opposition movements indicates that some errors were made from the beginning of the conquests. The Iranian people were forced to abandon their own historical development trajectory and adapt to values of a morality and culture that was foreign to them. Despite their rapid and voluntary acceptance of the new religion, this sudden transition between the two cultures led them to subconsciously interpret the victory of Islamic thought as Iran's national defeat.

The mawali problem, which began with the Umayyads' rise to power, was another factor that sparked rebellions. Rather than showing consideration to the mawali and alleviating their grievances, the Umayyad administration did the opposite. They went even further by implementing discriminatory policies against them under the term "mawali". Despite being the first community to accept Islam after the Arabs and constituting the second largest community in society, instead of leveraging their strength, the Umayyads alienated and became hostile toward them. The mawali who fought alongside the Arabs in the same wars received neither equal pay nor equal recognition from the caliphate. It is worth noting that during the time of Caliph Omar, in response to such discrimination, he declared that serious measures should be taken and emphasized that there was no difference between Arabs and non-Arabs.

Human psychology is such that when people are belittled and despised in any field, they tend to pay more attention to that area and strive to improve themselves. In this context, while the mawali constituted the majority of Muslim scholars during the Umayyad period, they were unfortunately barred from positions such as Imam and Judge, and the discrimination extended so far as to require separate mosques for them. They were forbidden from marrying Arab women, and those who did were subjected to torture and forced to divorce (Ibn-Nadim, 1997, p. 85). More significantly, the jizya tax continued to be collected from the mawali even after they had accepted Islam. When Omar ibn Abdulaziz, who was regarded as the fifth Rashidun

caliph, abolished this discriminatory practice, some Arabs claimed that the mawali were converting to Islam merely to avoid paying jizya, suggesting that their circumcision status should be verified. Omar ibn Abdulaziz firmly rejected this practice, stating, "Allah sent His Prophet as a preacher, not as a circumciser." However, after Caliph Omar's reign, the jizya tax was reimposed on the mawali and continued until the end of the Umayyad period.

This discriminatory attitude persisted into the Abbasid period. The mawali and local people experienced brief relief only during the initial phase of Abbasid rule, primarily because the Abbasid preachers had utilized their support to gain power. However, following the execution of Abu Muslim and the removal of the Barmaki family from state administration, the non-Arab majority felt betrayed. This sense of betrayal led to objections and rebellions, which expanded significantly under Babak's leadership.

It is important to note that while the people of the region, particularly those in Iran and the Caucasus, embraced Islam and became Muslims, they never became Arabs. This distinction arose because these people possessed an ancient lifestyle, a developed civilization, their own language, and administrative systems. They governed vast territories and maintained a strong nationalist spirit, similar to the Arabs. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, the ongoing power struggles at the Caliphate's center and resulting fragmentation increased military expenses. When combined with the palace's extravagant spending, these costs were offset by imposing unfair taxes in the regions. Taxes were collected arbitrarily, pushing people into debt. This situation forced local landowners to sell their properties to Arabs and flee to mountain regions beyond Arab reach. Consequently, the tax burden not only forced people into nomadic lifestyles but also created a disenfranchised population. Historical evidence shows that such conditions, particularly among mountain-dwelling populations, have typically been catalysts for rebellions.

The migration policy, which began during the Umayyad period and continued under the Abbasids, was another factor that fueled the rebellions. Both administrations relocated loyal Arab families, established them as administrators and landowners, and reduced the local population to servants or slaves, prompting legitimate objections from the people. This practice resembled colonization more than Islamization. Furthermore, there has always been a distinctive spirit of resistance among the people of the region. This can be observed in the symbols adopted by the Babekiyya. They used a white flag (earning them the name Mubayyazah) in opposition to the Abbasids' black flag, and a red flag (leading to the name Muhammira) in contrast to the Shiites' green flag. These choices represented another manifestation of their resistance to Arab dominance.

As evident from these factors, the reasons presented thus far can be considered the primary catalysts for the rebellion. Although the people initially sought accountability, they found their grievances went unanswered and could not find a governor who would address their problems and provide solutions. It was in this context that the Babek rebellion emerged, and for this reason alone, the people viewed him as a savior and defender of their rights. The injustices perpetrated by the caliphate ultimately culminated in the Babek rebellion, resulting in the deaths of thousands of soldiers and the depletion of the treasury (Aliyev, 2023, pp. 149–157).

CONCLUSIONS

At the root of every movement lies an idea and philosophy. Without these foundational elements, no movement can become active. In this context, the Khurramiyya movement, which originated in the Sassanid period and was later led by Babek during the Abbasid period, had its own distinct ideas and philosophies. However, since neither Mazdak, the founder of Khurramiyya, nor subsequent leaders left written works, it is challenging to fully evaluate their objectives. Babek, who is central to our subject, has been extensively discussed in Islamic historical sources. This extensive coverage stems from the fact that Babek led not an ideological rebellion but a political one, appealing to people's administrative and social concerns rather than their religious thoughts. Historical sources tend to be prejudiced against Babek's ideas and primarily focus on his military campaigns.

In this context, we can say that Khurramiyya's ideas and thoughts were initially influenced by the prevalent beliefs of their time, particularly Zoroastrianism, which was widespread during the Sassanid period. While there is abundant legendary information about Babek after he began leading the Khurramiyya rebellion, there is scarce information about his earlier life. As noted, Babek, who grew up fatherless, was supported by his mother's earnings as a wet nurse. Sources narrate that he worked as a shepherd in the Tabriz region for two years, where he learned to play the drum, before returning to his mother until he was eighteen.

From 201/816 onwards, the Khurramis gained a new leader, and with the resolution of previous leadership struggles, they entered a more powerful phase. The unification of forces under a more dynamic leader gave the rebellion a new identity. Consequently, the Khurramiyya movement became the largest and most formidable rebellion of its

time and came to be known as the Babekiyya, after its leader. Babek's ability to resist the Abbasid caliphate's regular armies for twenty years, defeat six armies sent against him, and challenge a great state clearly demonstrates his exceptional talent and skill. Sources describe him as a person of clear conviction, uncompromising nature, and great pride in his beliefs. Throughout these events, we witness Babek's extraordinarily strong-willed and determined character. He displayed superhuman resistance under severe torture, and when facing death, he smeared his face with his own blood to conceal any pallor. This demonstrates his unwavering belief in his mission and identity, proving him to be a resolute leader. Babek's strong will led him to reject Abbasid hegemony and sustain his struggle for an extended period.

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