

## 1092: A MURDEROUS YEAR

Carole Hillenbrand

*University of Edinburgh*

The year 485/1092 was a momentous one in Islamic history. It witnessed the deaths in quick succession of the two most famous men in the eastern Islamic world, in the great Seljuq empire which had flourished since the middle of the 5th/11th century. Those two men, as any student of Islamic history knows, were the great vizier, Niẓām al-Mulk and the Seljuq sultan himself Malikšāh. The received version of events goes as follows: Niẓām al-Mulk was the first important victim of the Assassin sect who as the avowed enemies of the Sunnī Seljuq world aimed at the removal of major political and religious figures in their attempt to topple the Sunnis and usher in the Ismā‘īlī imamate. Niẓām al-Mulk fell, then, slain by an Assassin’s knife. Shortly afterwards the sultan Malikšāh went hunting outside Baġdād, ate some rotten meat and died a few days later. With the removal of these two key figures, the Seljuq empire fell into disarray and was never again to enjoy the unity and prosperity of the two decades of Malikšāh’s rule (1072-92). As for the Assassins, the impetus of their movement had been lost by the middle of the 5th/12th century, not before.

This received version of the deaths of Niẓām al-Mulk and Malikšāh is very difficult to dislodge from one’s mind. As Bernard Lewis writes:

“Tactical and propagandist motives combine in the murder of major figures such as the great vizier Niẓām al-Mulk”<sup>1</sup>. As if to confirm this point, the illustration of Niẓām al-Mulk’s death on the front cover of the recent reprint of his book *The Assassins*, confidently juxtaposes the Assassin group with the actual murder. As for the death of Malikšāh,

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Assassins*, London, 1985, p. 134. For a similar view, cf. D. Morgan, *Medieval Persia*, London, 1988, p. 32.

this is tacitly accepted by most modern scholars as having been due to natural causes<sup>2</sup>.

Some scholars have already cast tentative doubts on whether Nizām al-Mulk's assassination was indeed perpetrated by the Assassins<sup>3</sup> and a few have also questioned, still more haltingly, the circumstances surrounding the death of Malikšāh<sup>4</sup>. They have not, however, scrutinised all the evidence and allowed it to lead them away from the well-trodden path. That will be the aim of this paper.

But first a few words to set the scene. Throughout the reign of Malikšāh and earlier, during the time of his father Alp Arslān, the Seljuq empire had been ruled by the vizier, Nizām al-Mulk. Inevitably, such a man would attract rivals who would try regularly to unseat him. It is reasonable to assume that Nizām al-Mulk had reached supreme

<sup>2</sup> Morgan, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. C.E. Bosworth, "The political and dynastic history of the Iranian world (AD 1000-1217)" in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, Cambridge, 1968, V, p. 101. C. Cahen, "The Turkish invasion: the Selchūkids" in M. W. Baldwin and K. M. Setton, *A History of the Crusades*, Wisconsin, 1969, I, p. 154. Cahen's phrasing on this point is somewhat confusing: "The Assassins, whose first victim of note - if indeed they were the perpetrators of the crime which was incited by his other foes - was the vizier, Nizām al-Mulk" (*ibid.*, p. 161). Bowen, (following Rašīd ad-Dīn) tentatively suggests that Nizām al-Mulk was killed by a combination of the vizier's enemies at court and the Assassins. Cf. *EP*, s.v. Cf. also K. Rippe, "Über den Sturz Nizām-ul-Mulks" in *Fuad Köprülü Armağanı*, Istanbul, 1953, p. 428.

<sup>4</sup> For a recent treatment cf. *EP*, Malik-Shāh (C.E. Bosworth). Although Houtsma draws on only a few sources, he firmly believes that Malikšāh was murdered at the instigation of the caliph. He does not, however, employ the identical critical faculty when discussing the murder of Nizām al-Mulk which he attributes in too facile a manner to the Assassins. Other possibilities mentioned in the sources (such as the involvement of Tāğ al-Mulk and Malikšāh in Nizām al-Mulk's murder) are dismissed by Houtsma as unsubstantiated rumours. He prefers instead to rely on some of the evidence of Ibn al-Aṭīr (X, pp. 213 and 216). If the stories about the caliph's rôle in the death of Malikšāh merit credence, so too do the other anecdotes about Tāğ al-Mulk and Malikšāh; it is illogical in this mass of rumours to select only a few. Cf. M.T. Houtsma, "The death of Nizām al-Mulk and its consequences", *Journal of Indian History*, 1924, Vol. II, Series 3, pp. 147-60.

power by masterminding the grisly<sup>5</sup> demise of his predecessor, al-Kundurī, who is alleged to have warned Nizām al-Mulk that a similar fate awaited him<sup>6</sup>. Once in power, Nizām al-Mulk stayed there by filling a vast network of administrative posts with his sons, grandsons, sons-in-law and other relations and by surrounding himself with a sizeable personal army of Turkish *mamlūks*, the *Nizāmiyya*<sup>7</sup>.

The young sultan Malikšāh who came to power in his late teens does not seem to have found the authority of Nizām al-Mulk irksome, at least at the beginning of his reign, but the longer the great vizier lived (and he lived a long time) the more likely it became that Malikšāh might wish to involve himself more personally in governing the empire and the more likely it would also be that other ambitious and talented rivals would wish that the vizier would retire and leave room for younger men. If he would not fall, perhaps he might need to be pushed.

Let us now examine the events of the three years 485-7 and see where such an examination leads us. In Ramaḍān 485/October 1092 Malikšāh and his court, including Nizām al-Mulk with his entourage, were on their way from Iṣfahān to Baġdād. They stopped at a place called Saḥna, near Nihāwand, and Nizām al-Mulk, en route in a large mêlée of people to his women's quarters, was struck down and killed by an assailant's dagger. The date was probably 10 Ramaḍān/14 October 1092<sup>8</sup>. The assassin himself was killed at once. Malikšāh continued his journey, arriving in Baġdād in Šawwāl 485/November

---

<sup>5</sup> al-Kundurī died in 456/1064. His scrotum was stuffed with straw and sent to Nizām al-Mulk at Kirmān, where it was committed to the earth. (Ibn Ḥallikān, III, p. 295).

<sup>6</sup> "You have acted wrongly in teaching the Turks to put to death their *wazīrs* and the chiefs of the civil administration: he that digs a pit shall fall into it" (*ibid.*, p. 294).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *as-Subkī*, III, p. 144; *Aḥbār*, p. 67. According to *Aḥbār*, Nizām al-Mulk had more than 20,000 *mamlūks*.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Aḥbār*, pp. 66-7; Ḥ. Mustawfī, pp. 459-60; Ibn al-Qalānisī, p. 121; Ibn al-Aṭīr, X, p. 137; *as-Subkī*, III, p. 142; Ibn Ḥallikān, pp. 414-5; Ibn al-Azraq, p. 229. Rāwandī p. 135; Rašīd ad-Dīn, under year 485; Bundārī, p. 62; Ibn al-Ġawzī, IX, pp. 66-7.

1092. En route he appointed as his vizier Tāğ al-Mulk, a long-standing rival of Niẓām al-Mulk. Malikšāh became ill after a hunting trip outside Baġdād and died, probably on the 16 Šawwāl 485/19 November 1092<sup>9</sup>. Shortly afterwards, his widow Terken Hātūn persuaded the ‘Abbāsīd caliph, al-Muqtadī, to pronounce the *ḥutba* in the name of her young son, Maḥmūd. She then went back to Persia to bury Malikšāh<sup>10</sup>. The next year, 486/1093, began with the savage murder by the *Niẓāmiyya* of Tāğ al-Mulk on 12 Muḥarram/12 February. These *mamlūks* espoused the cause of Barkyāruq, Malikšāh’s son from another wife, Zubayda Hātūn and, according to some sources, they actually pronounced the *ḥutba* in Barkyāruq’s name<sup>11</sup>. Meanwhile in Baġdād the young son of the marriage between the caliph and Malikšāh’s daughter died some time in Ġumādā I/June 1093<sup>12</sup>. The catalogue of deaths continued into 487/1094. Barkyāruq arrived in Baġdād in Muḥarram and had the caliph pronounce the *ḥutba* in his name on 14 Muḥarram/3 February 1094. The following day, 15 Muḥarram/4 February 1094 the caliph al-Muqtadī was dead<sup>13</sup>. Later that year, in Ramaḍān/September-October 1094 Terken Hātūn, Malikšāh’s widow, and her young son, Maḥmūd, also died. Barkyāruq was now Seljuq sultan and his appointee, al-Mustazhir, was the new ‘Abbāsīd caliph<sup>14</sup>.

Even if this catalogue of names and events is difficult to follow, it will be obvious that almost all the prominent figures in this drama had died during the short space of under three years. This chain of events

---

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *Aḥbār*, p. 71; H. Mustawfī, p. 461; Ibn al-Qalānisi, p. 121; Bundārī, p. 70; Ibn Hallikān, III, pp. 444-5; Ibn al-Azraq, p. 229; Ibn al-Aṭīr, X, p. 142; Rašīd ad-Dīn, under year 485; Ibn al-Ġawzī, IX, p. 62.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. H. Mustawfī, p. 462; Rašīd ad-Dīn, under year 485; Ibn al-Aṭīr, X, n. 145; Rāwandī, pp. 139-40.

<sup>11</sup> Ibn al-Aṭīr, X, p. 145; Rašīd ad-Dīn, under year 485.

<sup>12</sup> Ibn al-Aṭīr, X, p. 154.

<sup>13</sup> Ibn al-Aṭīr, X, p. 154; *Aḥbār*, p. 75; Bundārī, p. 68.

<sup>14</sup> *Aḥbār*, p. 75; Ibn al-Aṭīr, X, 154.

had begun with the two most important deaths, those of Nizām al-Mulk and Malikšāh, and it is to those that we now return.

*Who killed Nizām al-Mulk?*

Let us examine the various possibilities.

1. *The Assassins*

By this I mean the Assassins acting independently out of political motives and not being hired out by any other party. What is the evidence for the Assassins' perpetrating the deed? Firstly, all the primary sources say that Nizām al-Mulk was murdered by a Daylamī youth, most of them adding that he was from the Assassins (*bātiniyya*) at Alamūt<sup>15</sup>. Moreover, the Mongol historians, al-Ġuwaynī and Rašīd ad-Dīn, had access to Assassin sources at the time of the Mongol sacking of Alamūt and above all to the life of Ḥasan-i Šabbāh, the *Sarguzašt-i Sayyidnā*, which they allegedly quote<sup>16</sup>. These two authors state firmly that it was the Assassins who carried out the murder. al-Ġuwaynī no doubt quoting or misquoting his Ismā'īlī source, writes: "Ḥasan-i Šabbāh spread the snare of artifices in order at the first opportunity to catch some splendid game, such as Nizām al-Mulk, in the net of destruction and increase thereby his own reputation."

He then goes on to name the assassin, Bū Ṭāhir Arrānī, who came to his victim in the guise of a Šūfī, and confidently concludes: "He (Nizām al-Mulk) was the first person to be killed by the *fidā'īs*"<sup>17</sup>.

It is true moreover that Nizām al-Mulk had fought long and hard against the Assassins, that earlier in 485/1092 two expeditions had been sent out against them by Malikšāh, one to Alamūt and the other to Qūhīstān<sup>18</sup>, and that Nizām al-Mulk's own obsession with the Assassins'

<sup>15</sup> Cf. note 8.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. the discussion by Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

<sup>17</sup> Ġuwaynī, pp. 676-7.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

threat to the Sunnī world had led him to vituperate against them in his *Siyāsatnāma* and to encourage al-Ġazālī to write a refutation of their doctrines<sup>19</sup>. As al-Ġuwaynī put it: "He (Nizām al-Mulk) ... strove to excise the pus of the Sabbahian rebellion"<sup>20</sup>. So, the Assassins, it could he argued, needed to rid themselves of this dangerous enemy of theirs<sup>21</sup>.

## 2. *Malikšāh*

There is evidence in the sources which could be interpreted as suggesting Malikšāh's deep complicity in Nizām al-Mulk's murder. As he was the supreme sultan, his complicity should mean that he instigated the murder himself. Malikšāh had good reason to wish to be rid of Nizām al-Mulk. Nizām al-Mulk had waxed exceedingly proud. According to as-Subkī, "Nizām al-Mulk's vizierate was not a vizierate; on the contrary, it was above the sultanate"<sup>22</sup>. A number of the sources cite various, probably semi-apocryphal stories of Malikšāh's resentment at sharing his throne with Nizām al-Mulk and his family network<sup>23</sup>. Nizām al-Mulk had allegedly courted the caliph, al-Muqtadī, on Malikšāh's first visit to Baġdād (in 480/1087) and Nizām al-Mulk had even been invited to be seated in the caliph's presence<sup>24</sup>. Ibn Ḥallikān states explicitly that some reports said that the assassin of Nizām al-Mulk had been hired by Malikšāh who was tired of seeing Nizām al-

---

<sup>19</sup> For a recent comprehensive treatment of the intellectual life of Baġdād in the time of al-Ġazālī and Nizām al-Mulk, cf. E. Glassen, *Der Mittlere Weg. Studien zur Religionspolitik und Religiosität der späten Abbasiden-Zeit*, Wiesbaden, 1981, pp. 63-84, 131-176.

<sup>20</sup> Ġuwaynī, pp. 676-7.

<sup>21</sup> This is the view accepted by as-Subkī, who does, however, present other possible suspects (*op. cit.*, p. 143).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>23</sup> H. Mustawfī, pp. 457-8, 461; Rāwandī, p. 134; Ibn al-Aḡīr, X, p. 138.

<sup>24</sup> as-Subkī, III, p. 142; Ibn Ḥallikān, I, p. 413.

Mulk live so long<sup>25</sup>. Ḥamdallāh Mustawfī alleges that Malikšāh had actually gone so far as to dismiss Nizām al-Mulk<sup>26</sup>. Other sources, however, mention that Malikšāh had decided to remove Nizām al-Mulk from office but that he could not do it because of the immense military strength of Nizām al-Mulk's entourage<sup>27</sup>. The only alternative therefore was to kill him. The timing was also crucial. It would appear that Malikšāh was resolved, on arrival at Baġdād, to bring the caliphate more firmly under his own control. This he would do by deposing the caliph, al-Muqtadī, and appointing in his place his own grandson, Ġa<sup>c</sup>far, who was the offspring of the unhappy marriage between al-Muqtadī and Malikšāh's daughter, Mah Malik Hātūn<sup>28</sup>. This course of action was strongly opposed by Nizām al-Mulk. So Nizām al-Mulk had to be disposed of before the Seljuq court reached Baġdād. Bundārī on the authority of ʿImād al-Dīn al-Iṣfahānī from the Seljuq vizier Anūširwān b. Hālīd writes cryptically: "It was as if Nizām al-Mulk's assassination was secretly authorised by the sultan and was a matter which had been plotted and pre-arranged"<sup>29</sup>.

### 3. *Tāġ al-Mulk*

This man, the avowed enemy of Nizām al-Mulk and Nizām al-Mulk's short-lived successor in the vizierate, certainly stood to gain by Nizām al-Mulk's death<sup>30</sup>. Nizām al-Mulk blocked his path, just as al-Kundurī had blocked that of Nizām al-Mulk many years earlier, in 456/1064. Tāġ al-Mulk is explicitly mentioned by some sources as being

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> H. Mustawfī, p. 458. For a long discussion of this whole question, cf. Rippe, *op. cit.*

<sup>27</sup> *Aḥbār*, p. 67; as-Subkī, III, p. 142.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>29</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 63.

<sup>30</sup> For details on the life of Tāġ al-Mulk, cf. Bundārī, p. 61; Ibn al-Ġawzī, IX, 46, 62-3, 74; Rāwandī, pp. 133-5; Ibn al-Aṭīr, X, 120, 142, 145-7.

involved in Nizām al-Mulk's murder<sup>31</sup>. He is seen either as being directly responsible or as the one who poisoned Malikšāh's mind against Nizām al-Mulk. Perhaps the most telling evidence against him is his own violent death, only two months or so later, which, according to most of the sources, was at the hand of the *mamlūks* of Nizām al-Mulk, who wished to avenge the death of their master by killing the man who had been responsible for Nizām al-Mulk's death<sup>32</sup>. And the plot thickens still further, for it was even said that they were incited by Terken Hātūn's rival, Zubayda Hātūn<sup>33</sup>.

#### 4. Terken Hātūn

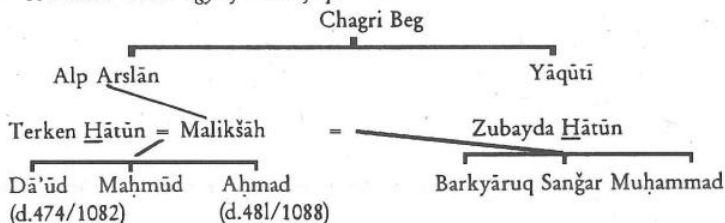
This Karahānid princess, one of Malikšāh's wives, is seen by most of the sources as playing a major role in the events of 485/1092 and thereafter. As will be seen from the genealogical table<sup>34</sup>, two of her sons from Malikšāh had predeceased their father. The only hope of power for this *valide sultān* lay in her third son, the young boy, Maḥmūd. Before Nizām al-Mulk's murder Terken Hātūn had tried to persuade Malikšāh to declare Maḥmūd his heir instead of Barkyāruq, the elder son of Malikšāh by another wife, the Seljuq princess, Zubayda Hātūn. These attempts by Terken Hātūn had been foiled, largely because of Nizām al-Mulk's continuing support of Barkyāruq and his firm opposition to Terken Hātūn and her young son Maḥmūd. Not surpris-

<sup>31</sup> Ibn al-Aṭīr, X, p. 145; Ibn Hallikān, I, p. 415.

<sup>32</sup> Ibn al-Aṭīr, X, p. 147; Ibn Hallikān, I, p. 415; Bundārī, pp. 62-3; *Abḥār*, p. 67.

<sup>33</sup> Rašīd ad-Dīn, under year 485.

<sup>34</sup> *A Partial Genealogy of the Seljuqs*



ingly, Terken Hātūn harboured a violent animosity towards Nizām al-Mulk<sup>35</sup>.

These four, then, are the major murder suspects. What may be concluded from the evidence, detailed very fully in the sources and summarised here? All the primary sources, including al-Ġuwaynī and Rašīd ad-Dīn, are Sunnī and heavily biased against the Assassins. Yet there is something half-hearted, tame and inconsistent about their stereotyped phrases attributing Nizām al-Mulk's murder to the Assassins. The only sources which attribute the murder *solely* to the Assassins are the Ismā'īlī ones, doctored or not by Rašīd ad-Dīn and al-Ġuwaynī, and certain early Sunnī accounts such as those of Ibn al-Qalānisi<sup>36</sup> and Ibn al-Azraq in *Mayyāfāriqīn*<sup>37</sup> which do not emanate directly from the eastern Islamic world. All the other sources, although they say almost perfunctorily and certainly elliptically that the Assassins were responsible for the murder, go on to mention in detail one person or several people from amongst the suspects already discussed above and to implicate them.

One may safely infer that the Assassins were not the instigators of Nizām al-Mulk's murder, especially since - as will be argued shortly - it was followed by a spate of other most opportunely timed deaths for which no source at all blames the Assassins.

What of the other three major suspects? With or without hiring an actual Assassin from Alamūt, it would appear that all three had good motives. Of course it is quite conceivable that no single person was exclusively responsible and that two or even three of these suspects conspired together to get rid of Nizām al-Mulk. The duo of Tāġ al-Mulk and Terken Hātūn are probable culprits although Malikšāh himself cannot be excluded. Such personages did not need to hire a heretic from Alamūt to perform the crime. Indeed, the sultan had only just sent armies there to attack the citadel and contact with Alamūt

---

<sup>35</sup> H. Mustawfi, p. 456; Rāwandī, p. 134.

<sup>36</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 121.

<sup>37</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 229.

asking for assistance in Nizām al-Mulk's murder just after the Seljuqs' ignominious retreat from Alamūt that same year<sup>38</sup> seems unlikely.

*Who killed Malikšāh?*

1. Terken Hātūn

Telltale evidence for her possible involvement in the killing of Malikšāh may be found in her actions after Malikšāh's death. Her cajoling and bribes to induce Malikšāh's troops to support her, and her persuading the caliph to pronounce the *ḥutba* in favour of her infant son, Maḥmūd, could be construed as the actions of someone who, even after the death of Nizām al-Mulk, had not been able to persuade her husband to change his mind about his heir. She therefore decided to dispose of Malikšāh too, at a time when he was far from his home base in Iṣfahān and when the only one of his sons who had accompanied him to Baġdād was her own son Maḥmūd. Alternatively, she may have planned to murder both Nizām al-Mulk and Malikšāh all along. The method of murder is significant. Very few Seljuq sources are close to the events they record: a relatively early account, that of Ibn al-Azraq<sup>39</sup> writing in the second half of the sixth/twelfth century, mentions elliptically that Malikšāh was poisoned. A century or more later, the historians of Iraq and Syria<sup>40</sup> relate an elaborate story of rotten meat and a fever, details quite compatible with poisoning although Ibn Hallikān gives one account of Malikšāh's being poisoned with a toothpick<sup>41</sup>. Terken Hātūn is reported by some sources as having behaved suspiciously after Malikšāh's death. Ibn Hallikān notes that Malikšāh's funeral was conducted in a most private manner, no prayer said over the grave, no condolences paid, no hair cut off the tails of horses.

---

<sup>38</sup> Ğuwaynī, pp. 674-5.

<sup>39</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 229.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. the sources quoted in n. 9.

<sup>41</sup> Ibn Hallikān, III, p. 445.

Indeed, "one would have thought he had been snatched bodily from this world"<sup>42</sup>. Ibn al-Aṭīr reports that Terken Hātūn took Malikšāh's body to Iṣfahān having won over Malikšāh's soldiers with money, and having concealed the news of his death until she had arrived safely and secured her position there<sup>43</sup>.

## 2. *Tāğ al-Mulk*

It is conceivable that this man, either single-handedly or in conspiracy with Terken Hātūn, brought about Malikšāh's murder. It is possible that just as Nizām al-Mulk had acquired his unassailable hold of the Seljuq empire when Malikšāh was in his teens, so too Tāğ al-Mulk hoped to be the *de facto* ruler under cover of Terken Hātūn's son, Maḥmūd.

## 3. *The 'Abbāsīd caliph al-Muqtadī*

Whilst it is extremely unlikely that al-Muqtadī would have been involved in the murder of his ally and supporter, Nizām al-Mulk, there are, however, stories of his complicity in Malikšāh's sudden death. The details vary but the general impression is that Malikšāh was in Baġdād on extremely serious business, namely to oust al-Muqtadī from the caliphal office and to make his (Malikšāh) own grandson, Ġaʿfar, caliph. This demarche was the last in a series of acrimonious exchanges between the caliph and the sultan which had occurred when Malikšāh visited Baġdād. Malikšāh's daughter had married the caliph, al-Muqtadī, in 480/1087, and had borne him a son<sup>44</sup> but she had soon complained of bad treatment from her husband and had gone back to her father in Iṣfahān, where she died in 482/1090<sup>45</sup>. This can scarcely have improved

---

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Ibn al-Aṭīr, X, pp. 142-3.

<sup>44</sup> Ibn Hallikān, III, p. 444.

<sup>45</sup> as-Subkī, III, p. 143.

Malikšāh's feelings towards the caliph. According to as-Subkī<sup>46</sup>, Malikšāh left Iṣfahān for Baġdād in Ramaḍān 485, determined to remove the caliph. On arrival in Baġdād he found that al-Muqtadī had already appointed another son of his, al-Mustaẓhir, as his *walī ʿabd*. Thereafter, a violent row must have erupted. Malikšāh demanded that al-Muqtadī should remove himself as soon as possible from Baġdād, leaving the way clear for Seljuq control of the caliphate within the Seljuq family. This was indeed a momentous design. According to some sources, Malikšāh contemptuously asked the caliph to vacate Baġdād and go wherever he chose. Having failed to dissuade Malikšāh from this course of action, the caliph asked for a period of ten days in which to prepare his departure<sup>47</sup>. Before that elapsed, Malikšāh was dead, at the tender age of 38.

These three people, Terken Hātūn, Tāġ al-Mulk and al-Muqtadī, are the three major suspects in the murder of Malikšāh. It is an open question which one person or combination of people performed the deed. One thing is clear: Malikšāh died in his prime and not of natural causes.

#### *Postscript*

Within two years of the violent deaths of Nizām al-Mulk and Malikšāh most of the key figures in this power struggle had also been removed. By 487/1094, Barkyāruq no doubt with the support of his mother Zubayda Hātūn and the *mamlūks* and family of Nizām al-Mulk, had disposed of al-Muqtadī, Ġaʿfar, Tāġ al-Mulk, Terken Hātūn and Maḥmūd. The way was now clear, for a short time at least, for

---

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Bundārī, p. 70; Ibn Hallikān, III, p. 445; as-Subkī, III, p. 144; Ibn al-Ġawzī, IX, p. 62.

Barkyāruq to assume the sultanate, supported by the scions of Nizām al-Mulk<sup>48</sup>.

This bloodbath heralded the shattering of the tenuous unity built up within the Seljuq empire not by the first three sultans but by the personal empire of Nizām al-Mulk himself.

#### *General observations*

As well as being an episode full of interesting historiographical problems and unanswered questions, the events surrounding the deaths of Nizām al-Mulk and Malikšāh raise a number of important issues.

It would appear likely that the Assassins were not involved in Nizām al-Mulk's murder. Later, Sunnī writers from a milieu ruled by staunchly Sunnī Turkish dynasties such as the Ayyūbids would wish to shift the blame for Nizām al-Mulk's murder squarely onto the Assassins. Yet, the practice of such writers of compiling reports from earlier historians, reports which modify or contradict Assassin involvement in Nizām al-Mulk's murder, led them, in spite of themselves, to give a truer picture of the events. As for Assassin sources quoted by Mongol historians - if indeed they are cited correctly - it is highly probable that the Assassins would wish to claim credit for the most devastating blow to Seljuq power, namely, the murder of Nizām al-Mulk. It is even more possible that Mongol Sunnī historians doctored Assassin accounts.

As for the thorny question of who killed Nizām al-Mulk, the burden of evidence from the sources points to Tāğ al-Mulk, especially

---

<sup>48</sup> The chronology of deaths may be tabulated as follows:

485/1092		
10 Ramadān/14 October	...	Nizām al-Mulk murdered
16 Šawwāl/19 November	...	Malikšāh murdered
		} 36 days
486/1093		
12 Muḥarram/12 February	...	Tāğ al-Mulk murdered, aged 47
Ġumādā I/30 May-28 June	...	Ġa'far died, aged 6
487/1094		
15 Muḥarram/4 February	...	al-Muqtadī murdered, aged 38
Ramadān/14 Sept.-13 Oct.	...	Terken Hātūn and Maḥmūd died. Maḥmūd was aged 7; Terken Hātūn's age is unknown.

since the Nizāmiyya murdered him as soon as they could lay their hands on him after his return to Persia from Baġdād. Tāġ al-Mulk may well have been aided and abetted by Terken Hātūn who also wanted Nizām al-Mulk out of the way. As for Malikšāh's demise, this was probably at the instigation of the caliph, although once again the complicity of Terken Hātūn cannot be ruled out.

This episode demonstrates clearly the strong pressures working against any attempt at centralised government in the Seljuq empire, even in its heyday. The thirty-year rule of one man, Nizām al-Mulk, was a remarkable achievement, made possible only by his own subtle and ruthless personality and by a Mafia-type family network. And it is all too often the fate of a Godfather to die a violent death.

It is also apparent from this episode that the usual generalisation that the Seljuqs elevated the status of the caliphate from its humiliation under the Būyids requires modification, even during the heyday of Seljuq power, which is generally accepted as being the twenty years of Malikšāh's rule. Considerable tensions between caliph and sultan complicated the task of Nizām al-Mulk whose own attitude towards the caliph in the latter part of his life seems to have been one of alliance and conciliation, perhaps in part as a response to his awareness of Malikšāh's increasing resentment at being under the thumb of his vizier. The caliph's own attitude remains unclear but it is certainly likely that al-Muqtadī may well already have had the same political and territorial aspirations as were to become apparent in his successors in the caliphal office, al-Mustazhir, al-Mustaršid and above all al-Muqtafī.

As for Malikšāh's intentions vis-a-vis the caliphate, it would appear possible that he had intended to bring it definitively under sultanal control, within the Seljuq family itself, through his own grandson, the ʿAbbāsīd Ġaʿfar<sup>49</sup>; indeed, it is possible to postulate that he was aiming at merging the two institutions, or even at abolishing the caliphate

---

<sup>49</sup> It is tempting to read too much into as-Subkī's words on this subject. What is clear, however, is that there was considerable tension between Malikšāh and al-Muqtadī (*op. cit.*, p. 143).

altogether. This is a timely reminder of the high stakes for which the various suspects in this drama were playing.

1092 was therefore not only the year in which two violent murders, emanating from within the Seljuq court itself, swiftly removed the two most powerful men in the Islamic world. 1092 also heralded the rapid disintegration of the Seljuq empire and revealed clear signs that the Seljuq sultans and the caliphs were on a collision course which was further to weaken the unity of the eastern Islamic world.

To conclude, I will return to the question I originally posed: "Who killed Nizām al-Mulk and Malikšāh?" As already mentioned, Malikšāh was probably murdered by the caliph. His manner of death, whether of natural causes or from poisoning, did not fit well with the Assassins' methods - violent death in public places - and his murder was not attributed later on to the Assassin sect. As for the assassination of Nizām al-Mulk this is a more weighty problem. It is of course conceivable that he was murdered by a member of the Assassin sect acting on the instructions of Hasan-i Sabbāh, as the sources state. I hope, however, that some doubts have been aroused about this. The event certainly does not deserve the confident generalisations which have surrounded it and have endowed it with the status of the first important political act of terrorism perpetrated by the Assassins. al-Kundurī, the man whom Nizām al-Mulk ousted to reach supreme power, was right to predict that Nizām al-Mulk would fall into the pit which he himself had dug.

*Key to abbreviations used in the footnotes*

*Ahbār* = al-Ḥusaynī, *Ahbār ad-dawla as-salġūqiyya*, ed. M. Iqbāl, Lahore, 1933.

al-Bundārī = al-Bundārī, *Zubdat an-nuṣra wa-nuḥbat al-ʿusra*, ed. M.T. Houtsma in *Recueil de Textes relatifs à l'Histoire des Seljoucides II*, Leiden, 1889.

*EI*<sup>2</sup> = *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edition.

- H. Mustawfī = Ḥamdallāh Mustawfī, *Tārīh-i Guzīda*, tr. C. Defrémery, *Journal Asiatique*, April-May 1848, pp. 417-63; September 1848, pp. 259-79.
- Ibn al-Aṭīr = Ibn al-Aṭīr, *al-Kāmil fī t-tārīh*, ed. C. J. Tornberg, Leiden and Uppsala, 1851-76.
- Ibn al-Azraq = Ibn al-Azraq, *Tārīh al-Fāriqī*, ed. B. A. L. 'Awad, Cairo, 1959.
- Ibn al-Ġawzī = Ibn al-Ġawzī, *al-Muntaẓam fī tārīh al-mulūk wa-l-umam*, Hyderabad, 1938-41 (editor unidentified).
- Ibn Ḥallikān, *Kitāb wafayāt al-a'yān: Ibn Khallikan's Biographical Dictionary*, tr. Baron W. M. de Slane, Paris, 1843-71.
- Ibn al-Qalānisī, *Dayl Tārīh Dimašq*, ed. H.F. Amedroz, Leiden, 1908.
- Ġuwaynī = al-Ġuwaynī, *Tārīh Ġahān Gūšā*, tr. J.A. Boyle, *The History of the World Conqueror*, Manchester, 1958.
- Rašīd ad-Dīn = Rašīd ad-Dīn, *Ġāmi' at-tawārīh*, Edinburgh University Library, Ms. Arab.20.
- Rāwandī = ar-Rāwandī, *Rāḥat aṣ-ṣudūr wa-āyat as-surūr*, ed. M. Iqbāl, London, 1921.
- as-Subkī = as-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt aš-šāfi'iyya al-kubrā*, Cairo, 1905-6.