THE ‘ABBĀSID REVOLUTION
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To my teacher

Professor Sir Hamilton Gibb
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PREFACE

The genesis of this book was a doctoral thesis, The social and political background of the Abbasid Revolution in Khurasan, submitted to Harvard University in 1960. I am very grateful to Professor Sir Hamilton Gibb who taught me the art of using source material, an art of which he is the undisputed master. I am equally grateful to Professor Richard Frye for his unfailing help, guidance and much needed encouragement over a period of several years. Professor Charles Beckingham was kind enough to read the typescript of this book with his usual thoroughness and made many invaluable suggestions for which I must acknowledge my deep gratitude. I am similarly indebted to Professor John A. Boyle and Professor Bernard Lewis for their encouragement and help. I am also grateful to Mr Hugh Kennedy for compiling the index of this book. My special thanks go to Miss Carolyn Cross of Cambridge, Mass. and Mrs Dawn Hubbard of Cambridge, England for their skillful typing of a fairly difficult manuscript. Mr Kenneth Hubbard, also of Cambridge, England, was kind enough to help in the preparation of the typescript. My thanks are due to the Cambridge University Press for the publication of the book. I am particularly indebted to the editorial staff and to the printers for the great care they have taken and the patience they have shown in the production of the book.

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M.A.S.
INTRODUCTION

Over thirty years ago, Daniel C. Dennett decided that the time had come to challenge the general conclusions of J. Wellhausen about Umayyad history. He explained that although subsequent researches had added an immense amount of detail to our information, they had done so without a critical examination of the principal theses advanced in Das Arabische Reich. Furthermore, it had become necessary to revise these conclusions in the light of new material which Wellhausen did not have at his disposal.¹ Dennett made a good start in this direction, but his untimely death deprived us of the full benefit of his efforts.

Almost ten years ago, I made a similar attempt to draw attention to the dangers of following Wellhausen’s outdated conclusions.² In recent years, a number of studies have been published concerned with various aspects of Umayyad history. One striking feature in all these studies is their unquestioning acceptance of Wellhausen’s conclusions. It is indeed surprising to find Professor W. Montgomery Watt, with his continuously enquiring mind, and Professor Claude Cahen, with his keen historical sense, accepting many of these conclusions without any argument.³ Starting from the same premises, Professor Bernard Lewis referred us to the “well-known” conclusions of Wellhausen, but again without questioning them.⁴ Professor C. E. Bosworth realized that “a reinterpretation of events in Khurāsān during the decades preceding the ‘Abbāsid Revolution is given by M. A. Shaban, correcting many of the views of Van Vloten, Wellhausen, etc.”⁵ Nevertheless he continued to rely on these erroneous conclusions.

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In considering the situation of the Arabs in Khurāsān, and the ‘Abbāsid Revolution, Wellhausen was greatly influenced by the racial interpretation of G. van Vloten. The latter’s opinion was that “the inveterate hatred of the subject population against its oppressor of a foreign race, Shi‘ism, and the expectation of a liberator or a Messiah caused the Khurāsānians to embrace the cause of the House of the Prophet”.¹ He explained that it was all the fault of the Arab rulers who failed to treat their conquered subjects in Khurāsān, who embraced Islam, as equals of their fellow Arab Muslims. This discrimination produced the renaissance of Iranian nationalism as a measure of self defence of the oppressed people against their oppressors. Van Vloten’s main fault was that he made practically no attempt to understand the developments in Khurāsān before the ‘Abbāsid Revolution, and therefore based his thesis on false assumptions which, naturally, lead to false conclusions.

Although Wellhausen accepted Van Vloten’s conclusions without much argument, he did try to be more systematic about his work. He devoted a long chapter of his Arab Kingdom to the Arab tribes in Khurāsān and tried to explain their situation in that province.² Wellhausen’s failure was due to the fact that he saw the Arab tribesmen only as influenced and motivated by their pre-Islamic tribal traditions and completely absorbed in an endless tribal strife. He neglected altogether the effect of the new circumstances of these tribesmen in the conquered land, particularly in Khurāsān. With this fixed idea in mind, Wellhausen could not see or understand the implications of the source material he himself utilized. In short, he tried to support Van Vloten’s conclusions rather than to correct them.

D. C. Dennett recognized the failure of Van Vloten and Wellhausen and disagreed with their conclusions about the background and nature of the ‘Abbāsid Revolution, but he himself failed to offer any explanation. Instead, he presented a rather confused account of the reign of Marwān ibn Muḥammad, the last of the Umayyads.³

In the new edition of the Encyclopaedia of Islam, Bernard Lewis followed the outdated conclusions of Van Vloten and Wellhausen,

¹ G. van Vloten, Recherches sur la Domination Arabe, Amsterdam, 1894, p. 1.
² Wellhausen, Ch. 8, pp. 396–491.
³ Dennett, “Marwān”.

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although one cannot help feeling that he himself was not completely convinced by their arguments.¹

Professor S. A. al-‘Ali in an article about the settlement of the Arabs in Khurāsān and Professor A. al-Dūrī, writing about the taxation system there, could not completely free themselves from Wellhausen’s influence. Although they tried to correct some of the details of his exposition, they generally accepted his main thesis.²

Dr F. Omar agreed with Dennett on “refuting the outdated ideas of Van Vloten and Wellhausen”. Furthermore, he accepted my interpretation of the developments in Khurāsān which led to the Revolution. But strangely enough he added, “what remains to be done is to reconstruct and clarify the political nature of the ‘Abbāsid movement and expose the important role played by the Arabs in the revolution”³. In this attempt he reverted to Wellhausen’s position and, in one contradiction after another, he based his argument on endless tribal strife among the Arabs all over the empire.

In my opinion the ‘Abbāsid Revolution had as its objective the assimilation of all Muslims, Arabs and non-Arabs, in the empire into one Muslim community with equal rights for every member of this community. Those who took part in this Revolution certainly had a more universal interpretation of Islam than the relatively limited Umayyad Arab view. This Revolution took place in Khurāsān, more specifically in Merv, whose colonization, and the subsequent developments, led to the assimilation of many of the Arab tribesmen in the Merv oasis into the local Iranian population. It was these assimilated Arabs, who had lost their privileges as members of the Arab ruling class and who were also aggrieved by their subjection to the non-Muslim aristocracy of Merv, who were the main support of the ‘Abbāsid Revolution. They were joined by some of the local Islamized population, mawālī, who could not have been very numerous since Islam was not yet widespread even in Merv itself. These two groups were in the same position and had no grievances against each other. Moreover, they were both from the section of the population that

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would benefit most from the success of the Revolution and the demolition of the social structure in which all the privileges went to the Arab muqātila, who formed the ruling class, and to the predominantly non-Muslim Iranian aristocracy, who formed the local administration and continued to enjoy their pre-Islamic privileges under Arab rule. Undoubtedly, the Hāshimiyya secret organization and its persistent propaganda, in addition to the division and struggle for power between the Arab ruling classes, also contributed to the success of the Revolution, but any revolutionary movement in such circumstances could hardly have failed.

In this book I have tried to analyse the social and political background of the ‘Abbāsid Revolution in Khurāsān in order to achieve a better understanding of this real Revolution which was, certainly, a turning point in the history of the development of the Islamic society. First, I have presented a picture of the situation in the East at the time of the Arab conquest. Secondly, I have tried to follow, as closely as possible, the Arab tribesmen in Khurāsān—the way they settled there; their relationship with the conquered people; their relationship with the central government; their activities, interests and their internal rivalries—from the time they arrived in Khurāsān until the Revolution. Finally I have discussed the Revolution, the nature and development of the ideology it adopted and the extent of its success in achieving its objectives. I have not attempted to discuss the arguments put forward by Van Vloten, Wellhausen and Dennett, because from the very beginning of this work I adopted a different approach, based on the sources, and it would have only confused the issues if I had tried to incorporate such a discussion.
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Abu al-Hasan ‘Ali ibn Muḥammad al-Madā‘īnī, a client of Quraysh, 135–223/752–839, is the undisputed authority on the early history of the Arabs in Khurāsān. Although he is quoted in many Arabic sources, the most complete version concerning the events in Khurāsān is that preserved by Ṭabarī. Since the latter was not a contemporary of Madā‘īnī, he quoted him through different rāwīs. Among many others, the most frequently quoted were ‘Umar ibn Shabbah and Aḥmad ibn Zuhayr ibn Ḥarb. Though Ṭabarī in most cases is careful about mentioning the ismād through which these particular traditions were related to him, he sometimes omits it altogether.¹ The authorities of Madā‘īnī are often mentioned in the traditions ascribed to him, but again sometimes, apparently when the different versions of the particular traditions were in agreement, the authorities of Madā‘īnī are not mentioned and instead the tradition is related to Madā‘īnī, “after his teachers”.² In some cases Madā‘īnī named some of his authorities but did not specify others.³ If there was any doubt about the reliability of a certain tradition, for example when it was of exaggerated tribal origin, this tradition was traced to its origin, and other versions of the same tradition were given in addition, in such a way that it is clear to the reader why a certain version is the most reliable.⁴ When these tribal versions were of any value, Madā‘īnī himself combined them with other versions, in order to give a complete picture of the event related in these traditions.⁵ However, “by applying to the mass of Iraqi traditions the sound methods of criticism associated with the Medinan school, he [Madā‘īnī] gained for his work such a reputation for trustworthiness that it became the principal source for the compilations of the succeeding period, and one whose general accuracy has been confirmed by modern investigation”.⁶

A great number of the traditions related by Madā‘īnī have reached us through another important source. This is the Kitāb

² Ibid., pp. 1430, 1436. ⁳ Ibid., p. 1286.
⁴ Ibid., p. 1240. ⁵ Ibid., pp. 1204–5.

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There is no doubt that the first name was that of Abū al-Ḥasan Muḥammad ibn ‘Ali al-Madāʿīnī al-Qurashi, who was a client of Quraysh. The reading Abū al-Ḥusayn is a mistake of the scribe. During the course of the narrative the name always occurs in its proper form as one of the most frequently mentioned authorities for significant traditions. Ibn Aṭham states clearly that “He [Madāʿīnī] told me” (ḥaddathānī), which means that he was a contemporary of Madāʿīnī (135–225/752–839). We find another confirmation of this in a note written by Muḥammad ibn Ḥṣam al-Mustawfī al-Harawi who translated _al-Futūḥ_ into Persian in 596/1199. In this note he states clearly that the _Kitāb al-Futūḥ_ was composed by Ibn Aṭham al-Kūfī in 204/819. This leaves no doubt about the date of Ibn Aṭham and confirms that he was able to quote directly from the highest authority on the history of Khurāsān, Madāʿīnī, in his lifetime. This also makes Ibn Aṭham a predecessor of al-Balāḍhurī (d. 279/892), thought to be the earliest writer to attempt to combine the materials derived from the _sīra_, the monographs and other sources into a connected historical narrative. Thus Balāḍhurī did not introduce a new method but merely imitated the earlier work of Ibn Aṭham.


3 Gibb, “Ṭārikh”.

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As for the value of the material related by Ibn A’tham (we are concerned here with the early history of Khurāsān), his claim to be the earliest known source is very strong. Comparing the narrative of Ibn A’tham with the traditions of Madā’īnī as related by Ṭabarī, we find further proof that Ibn A’tham was quoting the same authority. Although Ṭabarī gives us a more complete picture of the early history of Khurāsān, Ibn A’tham not only provides us with a means of checking the traditions related by the former, but also adds some additional details in his Kitāb al-Futūḥ. In most cases these details are of the utmost importance because they are concerned with the fiscal arrangements in Khurāsān, and in this work I have tried to make use of such new material. It should be mentioned that, apart from the new material derived from Ibn A’tham, the rest of the material concerning the early history of Khurāsān does not contradict the traditions of Madā’īnī as related by Ṭabarī. However, we must not forget that Ibn A’tham was writing a “Book of Conquests”, in contrast with Ṭabarī who was writing history proper; thus the latter’s scope was wider in many respects and he remains the major source for the early history of Khurāsān, to which the Futūḥ of Ibn A’tham serves as a complementary source.¹

The Futūḥ of Balādhurī serves us in the same way as the Futūḥ of Ibn A’tham, but, in addition to Madā’īnī, it quotes other authorities, such as Abū ‘Ubayda, who are not quoted by the latter, thus adding new material and valuable remarks about the history of this period. Moreover, the discovery of the Futūḥ of Ibn A’tham does not detract from the value of the Futūḥ of Balādhurī as one of the most important sources for the history of the Arab conquests.² Undoubtedly Balādhurī gives the most comprehensive account of the advance of the Arab armies in the Sāsānian domains.

The Ansāb al-Ashrāf of Balādhurī is a unique source. Its value

¹ For further information on this source see M. A. Shaban, “Ibn A’tham al-Kūfī”, Encyclopaedia of Islam, New Edition, Leiden, 1954–. In addition to the Istanbul manuscript there is a copy of only the first volume (327 Ar.) in the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin. Although it is badly worn in many places, it is of value because it contains a great deal of poetry not included in the Istanbul manuscript. Another copy of the first volume is No. 918 (572) in the Mingana collection at Selly Oak Colleges Library, Birmingham. It is in good condition although a few folios are missing from the beginning and the end. It is hoped that a critical edition, prepared by myself, will be published in the near future.

for early Islamic history has been widely recognized. In contrast to other biographical collections it contains a wealth of historical information. In many cases, like that of the revolt of al-Mukhtār in Kūfa, it gives fuller traditions and more details than other sources.¹

Ya‘qūbī, in his history, tells us about his sources at the beginning of the second part, but he hardly ever mentions them in the narrative. In the case of Ya‘qūbī this is a disadvantage, because he apparently quoted sources unknown to us, probably because he spent his youth in Khurāsān. However, the little additional information in Ya‘qūbī does not contradict the material which we have from Ṭabarī, Baḥalānī and Ibn A‘tham, and in general Ya‘qūbī confirms the traditions related by these authorities. It is to the credit of both Ibn A‘tham and Ya‘qūbī that, in spite of their Shi’a tendency, they did not attempt to present a biased picture of events in the early history of Khurāsān.²

Another source, which has recently come to light, is Tārikh al-Khulafāʾ by an anonymous author of the eleventh century. Although the editor, P. Griyaznevitich, believes that it was written about 409–10/1015–17, there is a note in the book which reveals that it must have been written after 480/1087.³ In spite of the author’s repeated insistence that it is a concise, abridged account, the book contains a considerable number of traditions which correspond to those found in other proven sources. Its account of the revolt of al-Mukhtār is very similar to Baḥalānī’s account, and the traditions about the downfall of Qutayba are almost identical with those related by Ṭabarī and Ibn A‘tham.⁴ There is no doubt that the anonymous author relies on the same trustworthy authorities as his predecessors, and indeed this is clearly stated in the book. On the other hand, his eagerness to be concise is a serious shortcoming. His account of Qutayba’s campaigns in central Asia is too brief to be of much use.⁵ His narrative of the

¹ Al-Baḥalānī, Anṣāb al-Aṣḥāb, vol. v, ed. S. D. Goitein, Jerusalem, 1936, pp. 215–73. This source is still largely in manuscript form preserved in Suleymanniye Küttüphanesi, Reisulkuttab, in two big volumes no. 597–8.
⁴ Ibid., pp. 104 A–104 B, 164 A–B.
⁵ Ibid., pp. 151 A–153 B.
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The reign of Hishâm contains many mistakes due to his careless abridgement. It is difficult to understand what is meant by the statement that the book “contains an independent version of the history of the Umayyads”, unless it means that it has its own distinctive mistakes. Furthermore, there is little justification for the assertion of the “general anti-Shi‘ite trend of the work”. Also, one cannot fully agree with Griyaznevitch that it contains “fresh material of the utmost importance reflecting a peculiar tradition coming through a number of generations from a narrow circle of conspirers, ring leaders and active participants of the ‘Abbāsid Revolution’. This is in fact an exaggerated statement, since all traditions in our sources claim to originate from eye-witnesses, if not from active participants in the event concerned and the ‘Abbāsid Revolution is no different in this respect; in their accounts Ṭabarī and Mas‘ūdi also quote active participants in the Revolution. Ṭakhir al-Khulafa’ does add a little additional information about the organization of the Revolution, but even then, for the sake of brevity, it gives only the bare facts and omits vital details revealed elsewhere.

In the library of the Institute of Higher Islamic Studies in Baghdād, there is a manuscript of a work entitled Akhbār al-‘Abbās wa Waladibi, also by an anonymous author. According to Professor al-Dūrī it was composed around the middle of the ninth century. I have been able to see only a part of this manuscript. Dr F. Omar tells us that it is “an annalistical work in biographical form concerned, as the title indicates, with al-‘Abbās and his descendants”. He also believes that the part of Ṭakhir al-Khulafa’ concerned with the ‘Abbāsids is a brief adaptation of the Akhbār al-‘Abbās achieved by “quoting only the main authority instead of the whole chain of transmitters, and by combining different accounts and giving one well-digested account”. However, Dr Omar’s statement that Akhbār al-‘Abbās is “invaluable for the understanding of the organization of the ‘Abbāsid movement in Khurāsān” is extravagant. He himself had to rely on

1 Ibid., pp. 197–214.
2 Ibid., p. 53.
3 Ibid., p. 52.
4 Ibid., p. 53.
6 Omar, “‘Abbāsid Caliphate”, p. 23.
8 Omar, “‘Abbāsid Caliphate”, p. 21.
9 Ibid., p. 23.
10 Ibid., p. 20.
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Ṭabarī to give us the list of the naqīhs of the Hāshimiyya in Merv, about which Akhbār al-‘Abbār is not so reliable.¹ The most that can be said is that this source, like Tārikh al-Khulafā’, gives some additional information about the organization of the ‘Abbāsid Revolution.

Unfortunately, neither the Rijāl books nor the Adab books supply us with much information about this early period in Khurāsān. They are mostly concerned with the rest of the Umayyad empire and do not say much about Khurāsān except under the ‘Abbāsids.

The Persian sources with regard to this period, namely the Tārikh-i-Sistān and the Zayn al-Akhbār of Gardīzī, are merely corrupt translations of Arabic sources. However, Gardīzī seems to have had access to an unknown valuable source which could have brought to light some new material, but he was hopelessly confused and confusing and it is almost impossible to make use of any of his material. The Tārikh-i-Sistān is a little better in this respect, particularly about the early Arab campaigns in this region and, as expected, agrees with the Arabic sources, adding very little to our knowledge of this early period. Finally, the Tārikh-i-Qumm of Qummi is of value with regard to western Iran but, because of the unique development in Khurāsān, is not of much use for our purposes.

¹ Ibid., pp. 89–90.