The history of the early ʿAbbāsid caliphate in the eighth and ninth centuries has long been studied as a factual or interpretive synthesis of various accounts preserved in the medieval chronicles. Tayeb El-Hibri’s book breaks with the traditional approach, applying a literary-critical reading to examine the lives of the caliphs. By focusing on the reigns of Hārūn al-Rashīd and his successors, al-Amīn and al-Maʾmūn, as well as on the early Sāmarra period, the study demonstrates how the various historical accounts were not in fact intended as faithful portraits of the past, but as allusive devices used to shed light on controversial religious, political, and social issues of the period, as well as on more abstract themes such as behaviour, morality, and human destiny. The tragedy of the Barmakids, the great civil war between the brothers, and the mihna of al-Maʾmūn are examined as key historical moments which were debated obliquely and in dialogue with the earlier Islamic past. The analysis also reveals how the exercise of decoding Islamic historiography, through an investigation of the narrative strategies and thematic motifs used in the chronicles, can uncover new layers of meaning and even identify the early narrators. This is an important book which represents a landmark in the field of early Islamic historiography.

Tayeb El-Hibri is Assistant Professor of Near Eastern Studies at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.
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Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography
Hārūn al-Rashīd and the Narrative of the ‘Abbāsid Caliphate

TAYEB EL-HIBRI

University of Massachusetts, Amherst
Contents

Acknowledgments ......................... page viii
List of abbreviations and note on the dates ix
Genealogical table: the line of the early ‘Abbāsid caliphs xi

1 Historical background and introduction 1
2 Hārūn al-Rashīd: where it all started or ended 17
3 Al-Amīn: the challenge of regicide in Islamic memory 59
4 Al-Ma‘mūn: the heretic Caliph 95
5 The structure of civil war narratives 143
6 Al-Mutawakkil: an encore of the family tragedy 178
Conclusion 216

Select bibliography 221
Index 230
Acknowledgments

This book began as a study of the reign of the ‘Abbāsid caliph al-Ma’ūn and the pivotal political and religious transitions that accompanied his rise to power. Since its completion, however, the original objective which centered on biographical and historical goals has gradually changed toward the historiographical, exploring how medieval narrators constructed a particular memory of the early ‘Abbāsid caliphate within the broader frame of early Islamic history. I would like to thank various scholars who commented on the project in its initial stage, and showed wholehearted interest in the topic. Professor Peter Awn, Caroline Bynum, Olivia R. Constable, Nina Garsoian, and Mohammad Mbodj provided many useful and diverse comments. The late professor Jeanette Wakin took a special interest in the project, and carefully read a draft of the manuscript, with her customary refinements of style, and was very eager to see it in print. Colleagues at the University of Massachusetts, especially Drs. Jay Berkovitz, Robert Sullivan, and Mary Wilson also provided encouragement and offered thoughtprovoking questions in various seminars. Conservations with Professor Lawrence Conrad on Islamic historiography were always especially enlightening and corroborated several tentative venues for evaluating the ‘Abbāsid texts. Equally important were discussions with Professor Elton Daniel on the relation between Arabic and Persian historiography and the state of the field. Dr. Ayman Fu’ad Sayyid saved me enormous time by clarifying from early on the state of publication of hitherto manuscript works, and pointed to different editions. On the frontiers of style, thanks go to Ms. Janet Benton and Mary Starkey for copyediting the manuscript with care and interest. The prime debt, however, goes to professor Richard W. Bulliet who read and critiqued the work in various drafts, and was a source of continuous support. His thoughtful historical questions on a broad range of issues were especially inspiring, and convinced me that early Islamic history is far from being a closed topic.
### Abbreviations

<table>
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<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EI</td>
<td>Encyclopaedia of Islam (new ed.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HT</td>
<td>History of al-Ṭabarî (SUNY translation; in bibliography under translators’ names)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IJMES</td>
<td>International Journal of Middle East Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jahshiyārī</td>
<td>al-Jahshiyārī, al-Wazarā’ wa’l-Kuttāb</td>
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<tr>
<td>al-Kāmil</td>
<td>Ibn al-Athīr, al-Kāmil fi’l-Ta’rīkh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khaṭīb</td>
<td>al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, Ta’rīkh Baghda’d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murūj</td>
<td>al-Mas’ūdī, Murūj al-Dhahab wa Ma’ādin al-Jawhar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muwaffaqiyāt</td>
<td>al-Zubayr b. Bakkār, al-Akhbār al-Muwaffaqiyāt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RMM</td>
<td>Revue du Monde Musulman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSO</td>
<td>Rivista degli Studi Orientali</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siyar</td>
<td>al-Dhahabī, Siyar A’lām al-Nubalā’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ṭabarī</td>
<td>al-Ṭabarī, Ta’rīkh al-Rusul wa’l-Mulūk (de Goeje ed.)</td>
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### Note on the dates

The dates given in this study are primarily common-era dates. Whenever relevant, hijrī dates are also given in brackets and occasionally relied on in light of the context of analysis, as in chapter 5.
The line of the early ʿAbbasid caliphs

al-ʿAbbās b. ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib, uncle of the Prophet

ʿAbdallāh

ʿAlī

Muḥammad (d. 743)

Abūʾl-ʿAbbās AL-SAFFĀḤ (750–754)

Abū Jaʿfar AL-MANSŪR (754–774)

Muḥammad AL-MAHDĪ (775–785)

Mūsā AL-HĀDI (785–786)

Hārūn AL-RASHĪD (786–809)

Muḥammad AL-AMĪN (809–813)

ʿAbdallāh AL-MAʿMŪN (813–833)

Abū Ḯishāq AL-MUṬAṢĪM (833–842)

Muḥammad

AL-WĀTCHA (842–847)

AL-MUṬAWAKKIL (847–861)

AL-MUSTAʿĪN (862–866)

AL-MUḤTADĪ (869–870)

AL-MUNTAṢĪR (861–862)

AL-MUṬAZZ (866–869)

AL-MUṬAMID (870–892)