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978-0-521-29453-9 - Islamic History: A New Interpretation 2, A.D. 750-1055
(A.H. 132-448)

M. A. Shaban

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ISLAMIC HISTORY

A NEW INTERPRETATION

2

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*To my friend
Shaykh Ahmad Zakī Yamānī
a modern waẓīr whose statesmanship brings to life
many of the qualities of his great predecessors*

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PREFACE

This work is a continuation of my attempt to present a new interpretation of Islamic history. It deals with the three centuries between the rise of the 'Abbāsids and the Saljūq invasion. This period witnessed the establishment of a new regime, its failure to live up to its revolutionary ideals and the gradual dissolution of a vast empire into lesser political entities. The 'Abbāsids failed to establish a political structure supported by viable institutions to rule their domains. They also failed to take measures to accomplish the economic integration of their empire because they could not comprehend nor were they able to cope with the rapid expansion of trade. This problem was the more baffling to them for it demanded fundamental changes in the structure of the basically agricultural economy they had inherited to allow for an economic structure in which trade could be exploited to the advantage of all concerned. New taxation systems were required to divide the burden of taxes equitably between the prosperous inhabitants of the urban trade centres and the long-suffering agricultural communities. The entrenched vested interests in the cities took advantage of their political power to oppose such measures and the rural communities had no alternative but to revolt in the face of this continued injustice.

The impact of the vast increase in the volume of trade went far beyond the purely economic front, for it was not only internal trade that was involved but also an international trade of unprecedented dimensions. The wealth of the empire attracted trade in all sorts of goods, especially luxuries, from all parts of the world, and every region of the empire became interested in being an intermediary for importing such trade as well as for exporting the industrial output of the empire. Each region devised its economic policies and its attitude towards its neighbours within and outside the empire in accordance with its own interests. This economic cacophony was another major cause for the eventual political disintegration of the 'Abbāsīd regime because without a harmonizing influence from the centre, the competition of the regions for a bigger share in trade soon developed into uncontrollable inter-regional strife.

Lacking the political and economic organization to maintain its integrity the regime resorted to military power to control its domains. The recruitment of military forces to defend the empire

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P R E F A C E

against external enemies was in itself a continual problem for successive 'Abbāsīd rulers. Now the need for and the use of the military to control the civilian population became the cause of further major crises for the 'Abbāsīds. More men were needed to subdue more revolts and the military leaders came to occupy the centre of the political stage in the provinces as well as in the capital,

In some provinces military leaders were able to establish their own rule in place of 'Abbāsīd misgovernment. But in the outer provinces neither the 'Abbāsīds nor their military representatives were capable of maintaining their rule in the face of the aggressive opposition of the local populations under their own leaders. The Fāṭimīds were the exception because they established themselves in Tunisia and then in Egypt, with the support of a Berber minority, to replace the crumbling rule of dynasties of military leaders in both provinces. However the revolutionary idealism of the Fāṭimīds and their detailed planning failed to take into consideration the vital interests of the majority of their subjects whose support was indispensable for the survival of their regime in Egypt.

There has been a conspicuous lack of a comprehensive study of the history of the period under discussion. The existing studies deal only with limited aspects of this eventful era. Some writers have satisfied themselves with rehashing the stale conclusions reached in the nineteenth century. More earnest scholars, who have applied themselves to serious research on subjects such as the Ghaznavīds, the Būyīds, the Fāṭimīds or the 'Abbāsīd *wazīrs*, have laboured in vain. In most cases they have treated their subjects in isolation from other issues of the time and therefore have failed to examine and explain the interaction of these complex issues. Such studies have reached conclusions much the same as those of the proverbial four blind men who felt an elephant's leg, tail, ear and body respectively and concluded that it was like a log, a rope, a fan and something without beginning or end.

In this study an effort has been made to maintain a constant surveillance of the main events in the Islamic domains and to explain them in relation to each other, without being side-tracked by insignificant occurrences, in order to present a clear analysis of the history of the period as a whole. A deliberate attempt has also been made to keep to a minimum the infinite number of names of personages involved, for to have put down the names and the titles of all the Būyīds, Ḥamdānīds and 'Uqaylīds would have served no

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purpose, and the close similarity of these names would only have confused the reader. As in my previous works considerable care has been taken to ascertain the exact meaning and to define the precise use of important terms used in the sources. The meaning of such terms varied from place to place and often enough changed over the centuries; and it is of vital importance to examine systematically these changes in order to obtain proper understanding of the source material.

Finally, I have left out, as much as possible, the discussion of developments in North Africa and Spain because from the beginning the 'Abbāsids themselves did not concern themselves much with these regions. Furthermore, the history of North Africa and Muslim Spain warrant a separate study which I am now preparing in collaboration with Dr Richard Hitchcock. I hope it will not be long before its appearance.

*Exeter**December, 1975*