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THE 'ABBĀSID REVOLUTION



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*Reader in Arabic and Islamic Studies
at the University of Exeter*

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Frontmatter
[More information](#)

To my teacher
Professor Sir Hamilton Gibb

CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page xi</i>
<i>Introduction</i>	xiii
<i>Sources</i>	xvii
1 The political geography of Khurāsān and the East	1
1 <i>Khurāsān of the Sāsānians</i>	3
2 <i>The Hephthalites ("Hayāḡila")</i>	6
3 <i>The Principalities of Ṭukhāristān</i>	9
4 <i>Soghdiana</i>	14
2 The Arab conquest of Khurāsān	16
1 <i>'Abdullah ibn 'Amir</i>	16
2 <i>Peace treaties</i>	19
3 <i>The structure of the Arab army</i>	24
4 <i>Uprisings in Khurāsān</i>	26
5 <i>Re-establishment of Arab authority</i>	27
6 <i>The plan of Ziyād ibn Abī-Sufyān</i>	29
3 The central government and the tribesmen	35
1 <i>Khurāsān, a separate governorship</i>	35
2 <i>Aslam ibn Zur'a, a representative of the tribesmen</i>	37
3 <i>Attempts to reconcile the tribesmen to the growing power of the central government</i>	39
4 <i>The situation in Sīstān</i>	40
5 <i>Khurāsān during the second civil war</i>	41
6 <i>Tamīm gains supremacy in Khurāsān</i>	44
7 <i>Seeds of assimilation</i>	46
8 <i>Mūsā ibn 'Abdillab ibn Khāẓim</i>	48
9 <i>Unrest spreads to Sīstān</i>	49
10 <i>The need for a new policy in the East</i>	50
4 Al-Ḥajjāj and the East	53
1 <i>Al-Muhallab's Aẓḡ to balance Tamīm</i>	53
2 <i>Thābit and Ḥurayth ibn Quṭba, representatives of the Soghdian traders in Merv</i>	58

CONTENTS

3	<i>Al-Mufaddal ibn al-Muhallab, a transitional governor</i>	page 61
4	<i>Qutayba ibn Muslim, an empire builder</i>	63
5	<i>Downfall of Qutayba</i>	72
5	Sulaymān and 'Umar II, the opposition in power	76
1	<i>Sulaymān, precursor of 'Umar II</i>	76
2	<i>Yazīd ibn al-Muhallab, governor of the East and Iraq</i>	77
3	<i>The distribution of the revenues from Khurāsān</i>	81
4	<i>'Umar II, a Muslim statesman</i>	86
6	Victory for the imperialists	93
1	<i>The revolt of Yazīd ibn al-Muhallab</i>	93
2	<i>The varying interests of the Arabs and the Iranians in the east</i>	95
3	<i>Sa'īd Khudhayna: conciliation or expansion?</i>	99
4	<i>Sa'īd al-Ḥarashī and Muslim ibn Sa'īd: more assertion of the powers of the central government</i>	101
7	The Turgesh threat	106
1	<i>The Day of Thirst</i>	106
2	<i>Asad al-Qasrī: an unsuccessful attempt at an alliance with the Hephthalites against the Turgesh</i>	107
3	<i>Ashras al-Sulamī, a good general but a poor governor</i>	109
4	<i>Al-Junayd al-Murrī: the Battle of the Pass</i>	112
8	The reorganization of Hishām	114
1	<i>The Arab Settlers in Khurāsān</i>	114
2	<i>The revolt of al-Ḥārith ibn Surayj</i>	118
3	<i>Asad al-Qasrī moves to Balkh</i>	121
4	<i>Asad al-Qasrī and the Hephthalites end the Turgesh threat</i>	124
5	<i>Naṣr ibn Sayyār and the return to Merv</i>	127
6	<i>The fiscal reform of Naṣr ibn Sayyār</i>	129
7	<i>The death of Hishām, and the ensuing struggle in Khurāsān</i>	131
9	The Revolution	138
1	<i>The nature of the movement</i>	138
2	<i>Machinations of the conspirators</i>	149

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-29534-5 - The 'Abbasid Revolution
M. A. Shaban
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CONTENTS

3	<i>Abū Muslim 'Abdurrahmna ibn Muslim al-Khurāsānī</i>	page 153
4	<i>The revolutionary army</i>	155
5	<i>The victory of the Revolution</i>	159
6	<i>The 'Abbāsids in power</i>	163
	<i>Bibliography</i>	169
	<i>Index</i>	177

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-29534-5 - The 'Abbasid Revolution
M. A. Shaban
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

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 skilful 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. Shaban
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

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 'Abbāsīd 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.

¹ D. C. Dennett, "Marwān ibn Muḥammad; The passing of the Umayyad Caliphate", unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Harvard University, 1939, p. 3; J. Wellhausen, *Das Arabische Reich und sein Sturz*, Berlin, 1902, tr. *The Arab Kingdom and its Fall*, G. Weir, Calcutta, 1927.

² M. A. Shaban, "The Social and Political Background of the 'Abbāsīd Revolution in Khurāsān", unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Harvard University, 1960.

³ W. M. Watt, "Shī'ism under the Umayyads", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1960), pp. 158–72; *idem*, "Khārijite thought in the Umayyad Period", *Der Islam*, vol. 36, part 3 (1961), pp. 215–31; *idem*, *Islamic Political Thought*, Edinburgh, 1968. Cahen, "Points de vue sur la Révolution abbaside", *Revue Historique*, 1963, pp. 295–338.

⁴ B. Lewis, "The Regnal Titles of the First 'Abbāsīd Caliphs", *Dr Zabir Husain Presentation Volume*, New Delhi, 1968, p. 17.

⁵ C. E. Bosworth, *Sīstān under the Arabs*, Rome, 1968, p. 48.

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 978-0-521-29534-5 - The 'Abbasid Revolution
 M. A. Shaban
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

In considering the situation of the Arabs in Khurāsān, and the 'Abbāsīd 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 'Abbāsīd 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 'Abbāsīd 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".

INTRODUCTION

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

Professor S. A. al-'Alī 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 'Abbāsīd 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 'Abbāsīd 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 'Abbāsīd 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

¹ B. Lewis, "'Abbāsīds", *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, New Edition, Leiden, 1954-.

² S. A. al-'Alī, "Istīṭān al-'Arab fī Khurāsān", *Bulletin of the College of Arts and Sciences*, Bagdād, 1958, pp. 36-83; A. al-Dūrī, "Nizām al-Darā'ib fī Khurāsān", *Majallat al-Majma' al-'Ilmī al-'Irāqī*, vol. XI, 1964, pp. 75-87.

³ F. Omar, "The 'Abbāsīd Caliphate, 132-70/750-86", unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1967, pp. 72-4.

INTRODUCTION

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 'Abbāsīd 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.

SOURCES

Abu al-Ḥasan 'Alī ibn Muḥammad al-Madā'inī, a client of Quraysh, 135–225/752–839, 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'inī, 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 *isnād* through which these particular traditions were related to him, he sometimes omits it altogether.¹ The authorities of Madā'inī 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'inī are not mentioned and instead the tradition is related to Madā'inī, “after his teachers”.² In some cases Madā'inī 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'inī 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 Medinian school, he [Madā'inī] 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'inī have reached us through another important source. This is the *Kitāb*

¹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Annales quos scripsit Abū Ja'far... at-Ṭabarī*, ed. M. J. de Goeje *et al.*, Leiden, 1879–1901, vol. II, pp. 1432, 1492.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 1430, 1436.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 1286.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1240.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 1204–5.

⁶ H. A. R. Gibb, “Tārīkh”, supplement of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Leiden, 1939.

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 M. A. Shaban
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

SOURCES

al-Futūḥ of Abū Muḥammad Aḥmad ibn A'tham al-Kūfī al-Kindī, preserved in two volumes in the Library of Ahmet III, Istanbul.

In the very first paragraph of the first volume, Ibn A'tham tells us about his authorities and then proceeds to tell us that he has combined all the traditions together in one single narrative. The paragraph begins, "Qāla Abū Muḥammad ibn A'tham al-Kūfī, ḥaddathani Abū al-Ḥusayn 'Alī ibn Muḥammad al-Qurashī, qāla ḥaddathani 'Uthmān ibn Sulaym 'an Mujāhid 'an al-Sha'bī, wa Abī Miḥṣan 'an Abī Wa'il, wa 'Alī ibn Mujāhid 'an Abī Ishāq. Qāla wa ḥaddathani Nu'aym ibn Muzāḥim qāla ḥaddathani Abū 'Abdillah Muḥammad ibn 'Umar al-Wāqidi al-Aslamī."¹ Then Ibn A'tham continues, in the same way, to enumerate his authorities, who were al-Zuhri, Abū Mikhnaf, Ṣāliḥ ibn Ibrāhīm, Zayd ibn 'Abdirrahman al-Wāqifi, and 'Alī ibn Ḥanzala al-Shāmī.

There is no doubt that the first name was that of Abū al-Ḥasan Muḥammad ibn 'Alī al-Madā'inī al-Qurashī, 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 A'tham states clearly that "He [Madā'inī] told me" (ḥaddathani), which means that he was a contemporary of Madā'inī (135–225/752–839). We find another confirmation of this in a note written by Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Mustawfī al-Harawī who translated *al-Futūḥ* into Persian in 596/1199. In this note he states clearly that the *Kitāb al-Futūḥ* was composed by Ibn A'tham al-Kūfī in 204/819.² This leaves no doubt about the date of Ibn A'tham and confirms that he was able to quote directly from the highest authority on the history of Khurāsān, Madā'inī, in his lifetime. This also makes Ibn A'tham a predecessor of al-Balādhurī (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.³ Thus Balādhurī did not introduce a new method but merely imitated the earlier work of Ibn A'tham.

¹ Ibn A'tham, *Kitāb al-Futūḥ*, Istanbul manuscript, Library of Ahmet III, No. 2956, Vol. 1, p. 1A.

² Ibn A'tham, *al-Futūḥ*, Persian translation by Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Mustawfī al-Harawī, Bombay, 1300/1882, p. 3; 'Abdullah Mukhlis, "Tārīkh Ibn A'tham al-Kūfī", *Majallat al-Majma' al-'Ilmī al-'Arabī*, vol. vi, part 3, March 1926, pp. 142–3.

³ Gibb, "Tārīkh".

SOURCES

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-Ashraf* 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.

² F. Rosenthal, "Balādhurī", *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, New Edition, Leiden, 1954-.

SOURCES

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, Balādhurī 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 Shī'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 *Tāriḫ al-Khulafā'* by an anonymous author of the eleventh century. Although the editor, P. Griyaznevitch, 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 Balādhurī'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-Balādhurī, *Ansāb al-Asbrāf*, vol. v, ed. S. D. Goitein, Jerusalem, 1936, pp. 215-73. This source is still largely in manuscript form preserved in Suleymanniye Kütüphanesi, Reisulkuttap, in two big volumes no. 597-8.

² See C. Brockelmann, article "Ya'qūbī", in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, New Edition, Leiden, 1954-; H. A. R. Gibb, *The Arab Conquests in Central Asia*, London, 1923, pp. 11-14; also "Tāriḫ"; F. Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography*, Leiden, 1952, pp. 114-16.

³ *Tāriḫ al-Khulafā'*, anon., ed. P. Griyaznevitch, Moscow, 1967, p. 52 of the introduction and p. 53 A.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 101 A-104 B, 164 A-B.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 151 A-153 B.

SOURCES

reign of Hishām contains many mistakes due to his careless abridgement.¹ 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.² Furthermore, there is little justification for the assertion of the “general anti-Shī‘ite trend of the work”.³ 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 ‘Abbāsīd Revolution”.⁴ 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 ‘Abbāsīd Revolution is no different in this respect; in their accounts Ṭabarī and Mas‘ūdī also quote active participants in the Revolution.⁵ *Tārikh al-Khulafā’* 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.⁶

In the library of the Institute of Higher Islamic Studies in Baghdād, there is a manuscript of a work entitled *Akbbār al-‘Abbās wa Waladibi*, also by an anonymous author. According to Professor al-Dūri it was composed around the middle of the ninth century.⁷ 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”.⁸ He also believes that the part of *Tārikh al-Khulafā’* concerned with the ‘Abbāsīds is a brief adaptation of the *Akbbār 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”.⁹ However, Dr Omar’s statement that *Akbbār al-‘Abbās* is “invaluable for the understanding of the organization of the ‘Abbāsīd movement in Khurāsān” is extravagant.¹⁰ He himself had to rely on

¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 197B–214A.

² *Ibid.*, p. 53.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁵ Ṭabarī, vol. III, pp. 49–50; al-Mas‘ūdī, *Murūj al-Dhahab*, ed. C. Barbier de Meynard and P. de Courteille, Paris, 1861–77, vol. V, pp. 4–5.

⁶ Omar, “‘Abbāsīd Caliphate”, p. 23.

⁷ A. al-Dūri, “Ḍaw jadīd ‘alā al-da‘wa al-‘Abbāsiyya”, *Bulletin of the College of Arts and Sciences*, Baghdād, 1960, pp. 64–82.

⁸ Omar, “‘Abbāsīd Caliphate”, p. 21.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

SOURCES

Ṭabarī to give us the list of the *naqībs* of the Hāshimiyya in Merv, about which *Akbbār al-'Abbās* is not so reliable.¹ The most that can be said is that this source, like *Tārīkh al-Kbulafā'*, gives some additional information about the organization of the 'Abbāsīd 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 'Abbāsīds.

The Persian sources with regard to this period, namely the *Tārīkh-i-Sīstān* and the *Zayn al-Akbbār* 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 *Tārīkh-i-Sīstān* 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 *Tārīkh-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.