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0521650232 - Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography: Harun al-Rashid and the Narrative of the Abbasid Caliphate

Tayeb El-Hibri

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## Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography

Hārūn al-Rashīd and the Narrative of the ‘Abbāsīd Caliphate

The history of the early ‘Abbāsīd 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-Ma’mūn, as well as on the early Sāmarran 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 *miḥna* of al-Ma’mūn 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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TAYEB EL-HIBRI

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## Acknowledgments

This book began as a study of the reign of the ‘Abbāsīd caliph al-Ma’mūn 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 ‘Abbāsīd 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. Conversations with Professor Lawrence Conrad on Islamic historiography were always especially enlightening and corroborated several tentative venues for evaluating the ‘Abbāsīd 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

<i>EI</i>	<i>Encyclopaedia of Islam</i> (new ed.)
<i>HT</i>	<i>History of al-Ṭabarī</i> (SUNY translation; in bibliography under translators' names)
<i>IJMES</i>	<i>International Journal of Middle East Studies</i>
Jahshiyārī	al-Jahshiyārī, <i>al-Wuzarāʾ waʾl-Kuttāb</i>
<i>al-Kāmil</i>	Ibn al-Athīr, <i>al-Kāmil fiʾl-Taʾrīkh</i>
Khaṭīb	al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, <i>Taʾrīkh Baghdād</i>
<i>Murūj</i>	al-Masʿūdī, <i>Murūj al-Dhahab wa Maʿādin al-Jawhar</i>
<i>Muwaffaqiyyāt</i>	al-Zubayr b. Bakkār, <i>al-Akhbār al-Muwaffaqiyyāt</i>
<i>RMM</i>	<i>Revue du Monde Musulman</i>
<i>RSO</i>	<i>Rivista degli Studi Orientali</i>
<i>Siyar</i>	al-Dhahabī, <i>Siyar Aʿlām al-Nubalāʾ</i>
Ṭabarī	al-Ṭabarī, <i>Taʾrīkh al-Rusul waʾl-Mulūk</i> (de Goeje ed.)

## 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 ʿAbbāsīd caliphs

