

Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography

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

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Historical background and introduction

At its height in the ninth century AD, the ‘Abbāsīd caliphate covered an extensive realm that stretched across the African and Asian continents, from the western reaches of Carthage on the Mediterranean to the Indus River Valley in the east, spanning prime regions over which the Greeks, Romans, Persians, and Turks had gone to war during the previous thousand years. This empire had come into existence as a result of conquests that began under the early Islamic caliphate centered in Medina and its successor dynasty of the Umayyads (AD 661–750). But it was with the ‘Abbāsīds that the process of social and cultural symbiosis and economic integration began to take root in this new state, giving shape to a new society characterized by the cohesive powers of a common language and currency and a unifying religio-political center.

The ‘Abbāsīds, partly due to their rise as a religious millennial movement, were more conscious of their universal pretensions to power than their predecessors had been. The new caliphs, kinsmen to the Prophet through the line of his uncle al-‘Abbās, held messianic titles that pointed to their spiritual gifts as *imāms* and underlined their distinct historical role in guiding the mission of government. Titles such as al-Manṣūr, al-Mahdī, al-Hādī, and al-Rashīd were variant expressions of their claims to a divine right to rule, as well as to their charismatic power, and this message was given poetic expression in the shape and definition that the ‘Abbāsīds gave to their new capital. Baghdad, better known as “the City of Peace” (*madīnat al-salām*) in the official parlance of the day, was built to be the ideal city of the new state. At the time of its origin in 762, it was built in a round shape with four gates, pointing midway between the cardinal directions, in a layout intended to reconcile cosmological conceptions of the disc of the heavens with the vision of the four quarters of the known world. The Round City encircling the palace of the caliph mirrored the rotation of the constellations about the fate of the world, making Baghdad a new symbolic center in political and religious terms.¹

¹ J. Lassner, *The Shaping of ‘Abbāsīd Rule* (Princeton, 1980), 169–75; C. Wendell, “Baghdad: *Imago Mundi* and Other Foundation-Lore,” *IJMES* 2 (1971), 99–128.

As great an impact as this empire had on the fortunes of peoples and regions it ruled, however, we know few details about how it was administered and defended, what shaped the policies and motives of its caliphs, and how its subjects viewed their rulers. Medieval Arabic chronicles and literary sources provide us today with abundant anecdotal and narrative material about the lives of the caliphs, and historians have used these sources repeatedly to construct biographies of the caliphs. However, the intertwining lines of fiction and fact in these works have never been clearly separated. What did the narratives about the caliphs signify in their times? How did anecdotes convey various levels of thematic meaning? To what extent were literary tropes appreciated and detected by the medieval audience? These are some of the questions that the study of medieval Islamic historiography will gradually have to answer. This study represents an attempt in that direction. It explores the elusive nature of medieval Islamic narratives, and tries through a new reading of the sources to reposition our view of the classical intention behind the literary accounts, moving that intention from one providing direct chronology to one offering historical commentary and seeking the active engagement of readers and narrators, listeners and dramatizers. To set the stage, we shall examine here the historical background of the ‘Abbāsīd caliphate, and survey those significant moments in its history that would color the memory of later historical narrative and contribute to the crafting of a particular spectrum of themes. We will then sketch in broad terms the method and approach of the present critique.

Historical overview

The ‘Abbāsīd dynasty has traditionally been seen as arising immediately following the fall of the Umayyad caliphate in Damascus in the year 750. The Umayyad caliphate fell in the face of a popular revolution that swept its way from Khurāsān, the frontier province on the north-eastern border of the Islamic empire. Yet in reality it took the ‘Abbāsīd family until at least the year 762 to consolidate its hold on power and push out other contenders to the throne. In the years that led up to the revolution the ‘Abbāsīds had been one among several branches of the Prophet’s family in whose name the revolt was made that had seemed likely candidates for the new caliphate. Throughout the years of organizing the revolution the leadership issue remained open, partly because participants in the movement were united behind a slogan that ambiguously called for the succession of “one agreed upon [or worthy] of the house of Muḥammad” (“*al-riḍā min āl-Muḥammad*”).²

Socially this was a complex revolutionary movement, for it brought together diverse segments of Khurāsānī opposition, each harboring various

² P. Crone, “On the Meaning of the Abbāsīd Call to al-Riḍā,” *The Islamic World from Classical to Modern Times: Essays in Honor of Bernard Lewis*, ed. C. E. Bosworth et al. (Darwin, N. J., 1989), 98–99.

reasons for challenging the Umayyads. The rebels were, however, united on at least two important points, which lent them unity until the moment of victory. The first was their deep sympathy for the plight of the Hashemite family, long persecuted at the hands of the Umayyads, and an attendant desire to vindicate the memory of the family's fallen leaders; the second was their vision that this mobilization from Khurāsān was going to be a messianic movement that would usher in a new, righteous age, heralding both a political and a religious rebirth for the faith. Once chosen, the new Hashemite caliph was to preside over a millennial age that would bring about justice and prosperity.

Various signs leading up to the revolution lent confidence that an age of religious redemption was destined to concur with that political change: the fact that the first call for this movement had taken place at the turn of the first Islamic century, a moment bearing significant cyclical connotation; and that members of the Hashemite family, thought of as holding the key to an esoteric religious knowledge, handed down in the Prophetic family, had been observing cosmic signs and finally determined that the hour had arrived for making the call (or *da'wa*) for the revolution. These occurrences gave a unique dimension to the religious expectations of various followers. Further adding to these beliefs was a set of other portents that enhanced the followers' commitment to their new cause. In the way the Hashemite family set about organizing the new religious-political mission, there seemed to be signs reminiscent of the early days of the Islamic faith. The Hashemites – from their distant bases in the western provinces, Kūfa, Medina, and Mecca, and the 'Abbāsids, from al-Ḥumayma – had entrusted the responsibility for propagating the mission to a delegation of seventy Khurāsānī deputies and propagandists. This evoked memories of the time when the Prophet received the loyalty of seventy followers in Medina, who came to form the kernel community of the new religion that eventually conquered Mecca. Just as the Prophet had once turned outside Mecca for supporters, his Hashemite descendants were now seen turning outside Arabia for new supporters. And the Qur'ānic verse that spoke of the Prophet's preaching to Umm al-Qurā (“mother of cities”),³ once understood as referring to Mecca, was understood in the climate of the new times as a reference to the town of Marw, capital of the province of Khurāsān.⁴ Marw had become the organizing ground of the new *imāms*, and the Khurāsānīs were now viewed as the new Anṣār.⁵ Geographical significance played a role as well. The fact that the new *da'wa* (“the call”) was initiated in Khurāsān, a region whose name meant “the land of the rising sun” and which was historically known as the area from which political movements were

³ The Qur'ānic verse reads: “And so We have revealed to you an Arabic Qur'ān, [that you may] warn the Mother of Cities and those who dwell about it” (Qur'ān 62:7). A. J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted*, 2 vols. (London, 1955), II, 192.

⁴ Ibn al-Faḡīh al-Hamadhānī, *Kitāb al-Buldān*, ed. M. J. de Goeje (Leiden, 1885), 369. Abū Maṣṣūr 'Abd al-Malik b. Muḥammad al-Tha'ālibī, *Laṭā'if al-Ma'ārif*, ed. P. de Jong (Leiden, 1867), 119.

⁵ Al-Jāhīz, “Manāqib,” *Rasā'il al-Jāhīz*, ed. A. M. Hārūn (Cairo, 1963–65), 15.

launched to revive the Iranian kingdom, now gave the enterprise an added symbolism. This encouraged the vision that the hour had finally arrived for a new dawn in Islamic history.⁶

The ‘Abbāsid claim for the imāmate on the grounds of kinship to the Prophet, however, was never secure. The ‘Alids, direct descendants of the Prophet through his daughter Fāṭima and her husband ‘Alī (the Prophet’s cousin), were their constant rivals. The ‘Alids had even been the focus of opposition movements, during the first schism that brought the founder of the Umayyad dynasty, Mu‘āwiya, in conflict with the fourth caliph, ‘Alī. The conflict between Mu‘āwiya’s descendants in Damascus and ‘Alī’s sympathizers in Kūfa and Ḥijāz continued for decades afterwards, producing the famous tragedy of Ḥusayn in 661 at Kerbalā and later the fall of his grandson, Zayd b. ‘Alī, at Kūfa in 740, and the fall of his son Yaḥyā in Marw in 743. These were not events easily forgotten, and they continued to resonate with bitter memories across the provinces and were of primary importance in turning the Hashemite family into a magnet for various social and political oppositions ranged across the east.

Therefore the ‘Alid family could, when it so desired, also call on a wide following of Arab and Iranian sympathizers. In 762, when the ‘Abbāsid caliph al-Manṣūr, believing the dust had settled and all was secure, set about sketching the perimeter of Baghdad, the ‘Alids raised the most massive revolt they had ever organized. Muḥammad al-Nafs al-Zakīyya (“the Pure Soul”), a descendant of al-Ḥasan who had long evaded accepting the ‘Abbāsid claim to power after the Umayyad fall, now came out in the open, rallied popular support in Medina, and claimed the caliphal title for himself. In a series of letters to al-Manṣūr, al-Nafs al-Zakīyya accused al-Manṣūr of having reneged on a *bay‘a*, an oath of allegiance, that he, along with the leadership of the movement, had once given to the ‘Alids during the underground phase of the revolution, and demanded al-Manṣūr’s allegiance. Muḥammad al-Nafs al-Zakīyya, whose name, Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh, reminded many of the Prophet’s name and led some to claim that he physically resembled the Prophet, was still a child when the Hashemite patriarchs met in secret just outside Medina a few years after 719 (AH 100) to decide on their strategy, and reportedly swore allegiance to al-Nafs al-Zakīyya. Firm evidence that can corroborate the ‘Alid claim on this *bay‘a* is lacking, but the ‘Abbāsid arguments claiming an early right to the succession are no less a matter of debate.

This said, one is inclined to suspect that the ‘Abbāsids may indeed have double-crossed the ‘Alids. To appreciate the potential for confusion on this issue, one need only imagine the loose structure that characterized the forma-

⁶ As the ‘Abbāsid Dāwūd b. ‘Alī put it in his inaugural speech for the caliph al-Saffāh, “Now authority has finally been put in order (*āda al-amru ilā niṣābihi*). Now the sun has again risen from the East . . . and now the legitimate rights have been returned to where they should belong.” Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā Balādhuri, *Ansāb al-Ashrāf*, vol. III, *Banū al-‘Abbās*, ed. A. A. al-Dūrī (Wiesbaden, 1978), 140; Aḥmad b. Abī Ya‘qūb al-Ya‘qūbī, *Ta’rīkh* (Beirut, 1960), II, 350.

tive years of the revolution. Spread out between Khurāsān, Irāq, and Arabia, the details of the propaganda were subject to miscommunication, as news was relayed in a secretive environment among various parties: from the Hashemite *imām* to his chief propagandist in Khurāsān, on to a team of deputies who preached vague interpretations of the messianic *da'wa*, and finally to a public that blurred the differences between 'Alid, 'Abbāsīd, and other family branches under the name of the eponymous ancestor of the Prophet's family, Hāshim.⁷

How the 'Abbāsīds came to channel the loyalty of the Khurāsānīs to their branch is a complex topic whose details lie outside the purview of the present study. Suffice it to say that the 'Abbāsīds, with their strategic skill and cohesive relations with the Khurāsānīs in the early days of their rule, proved able to circumvent 'Alid political threats. Still, the revolt of Muḥammad al-Nafs al-Zakīyya marked a turning point by showing a continuing contest over the goals and original intentions of the revolution. In Medina, it also showed the emergence of new levels of affinity between the leading descendants of the city's traditional elite (members of the families of the early companions of the Prophet, 'Umar, 'Uthmān, and al-Zubayr) and the 'Alid rebel,⁸ as well as the affinity between religious traditionalists, such as the scholar Mālik b. Anas, and this particular 'Alid movement.⁹ In Baṣra, al-Nafs al-Zakīyya's brother, Ibrāhīm, who raised another revolt almost simultaneously against the 'Abbāsīds, was to rally an even greater following and find similar support among jurists such as Abū Ḥanīfa.¹⁰ Whether these new alliances in Medina and Baṣra were indicative of broader regional and new social affinities is not clear from the sources. Yet despite these alliances the 'Abbāsīds were able to prevail, albeit with difficulty. The new regime, it had become clear, was able to marshal military and economic resources in this critical contest with the 'Alids, and the Khurāsānīs were, for the moment, largely backing the 'Abbāsīd cause in a way that tilted the balance.

These tensions between the 'Alids and the 'Abbāsīds formed one of many challenges that plagued the rise of the 'Abbāsīds. Others included an internal debate within the 'Abbāsīd family over questions of succession, as the caliph al-Manṣūr pressured his cousin, 'Isā b. Mūsā, to give up his claims for succession in favor of al-Manṣūr's son, al-Mahdī, on whom the caliph placed great hopes of consolidating the line of succession and stabilizing 'Abbāsīd rule. Another even more menacing issue was the resurgence of some Iranian eschatological currents, which started to surface following the arrest and downfall of the famous commander Abū Muslim. Abū Muslim, a Khurāsānī commander in charge of the 'Abbāsīd military apparatus in Khurāsān early in the

⁷ H. Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphate* (London, 1986), 124–25; W. Madelung, "The *Hāshimīyyāt* of al-Kumayt and Hāshimī Shī'ism," *Studia Islamica* 70 (1990), 9–10.

⁸ H. Kennedy, *The Early Abbasid Caliphate: A Political History* (London, 1981), 201.

⁹ F. Buhl, "Muḥammad al-Nafs al-Zakīyya," *EI*, VII, 389; Ṭabarī, III, 200.

¹⁰ J. Schacht, "Abū Ḥanīfa al-Nu'mān," *EI*, I, 123.

ʿAbbāsīd era, had played a key role in mobilizing Iranian support in the years leading up to the revolution. His identity and roots are shrouded with a terrific aura of myth and legend, but much of this is indicative of the enormous impact he had on the success of the revolution. Although to the Arab supporters of the revolution he represented an efficient military commander, in the east Abū Muslim seems to have been himself a center of religious and political gravity among Khurāsānīs, who saw in him a regional political champion and even a prophetic reincarnation of earlier messianic figures. All this was a source of anxiety for the absolutist caliph al-Manṣūr, who feared that the commander might either break away or support another pretender to the throne, whether an ʿAlid or an ʿAbbāsīd. Abū Muslim was thus removed from the scene through a careful plot that lured that commander from the east to Baghdad. In the period that immediately followed, the fall of Abū Muslim passed without repercussions. However, in Khurāsān several years afterward, a new wave of rebels, known as the Abū Muslimiyya, emerged, harboring a great reverence for the memory of Abū Muslim and challenging the caliphate. Combining a yearning for messianic renewal with social and cultural visions of change that centered on Iran, the rebels seemed to threaten both the caliphate and Islam itself. The lost Iranian commander, these movements asserted, had gone into occultation and would later reemerge in a messianic movement. Others believed that Abū Muslim's soul had transmigrated to another messianic figure, who was going to lead another Khurāsānī rising against the ʿAbbāsīds in due course.¹¹ There is no definitive religious label for the ideologies of these movements, except to say that they were a reflection of syncretistic traditions that blended ideas from Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and Islam, and were still fermenting in the unstable social and political climate of the post-revolutionary era.¹²

In many ways, these political challenges to ʿAbbāsīd rule were conflicts not just over the definition of legitimization, but over the ability of a central authority located in one city, Baghdad, to exercise control over the social, economic, and religious life of the provinces. Questions about how the provinces were to be internally ruled, where the tax revenues would go, and whether the caliph could extend a single set of laws to all the provinces, kept flaring up in new ways and expressions. In this regard, the challenge to the ʿAbbāsīd was no different from those facing other dynasties to establish central rule, whether before or after them, in the Near East. Despite the challenges, the ʿAbbāsīds proved to be resilient survivors. As a family they succeeded in developing solidarity and commitment to defending their collective interest against their opponents, such as the ʿAlids. Various family members accepted the succession line drawn by al-Manṣūr down to his son, al-Mahdī, and to the latter's

¹¹ E. Daniel, *The Political and Social History of Khurasan under Abbasid Rule, 747–820* (Minneapolis and Chicago, 1979), 125–47.

¹² B. S. Amoretti, "Sects and Heresies," *Cambridge History of Iran*, IV, ed. R. N. Frye (Cambridge, 1975), 494–98.

sons, al-Hādī and al-Rashīd. In turn, the caliphs always trusted members of their family to assume the most sensitive political and gubernatorial responsibilities. Ruling positions in provinces such as Egypt, Syria, Ḥijāz, Baṣra, Kūfa, and Jazīra were routinely assigned to members of the family, and their privileges also included occupying the ceremonial office of leading the pilgrimage caravan to Mecca. This new pattern of administration showed a marked departure from the Umayyads, who had relied mostly on tribal allies and protégés to assume a variety of posts.

Beyond their internal affairs, the ‘Abbāsids concentrated their efforts on building a cohesive monarchical institution based on a structured hierarchy of political and military clientage rooted in the memory of the revolution. The revolution not only marked the beginning of a political era, but also defined a moral and historical link among the empire’s political elite. Descendants of those who had participated in the revolution now formed a socio-political class referred to as either *Abnā’ al-Dawla*, *Abnā’ al-Da‘wa*, or *al-Abnā’* (the sons). Their loyalty to the regime was based not merely on economic privilege or expectations of military advantage, but on a shared relation to a key historical moment, and from that to a direct affinity to the state. This was a new experiment in Islamic political history whose roots cannot be traced to any similar model from the Byzantines or Sasanians. But although it seems to have fostered strong bonds of military loyalty, it may have had the disadvantage in the long run of drawing sharp lines between itself and other military and administrative classes and groups (particularly in the provinces) that sought to assimilate in the political rubric of the dynasty, but could not because they lacked this historical linkage with the revolution.

These problems of social assimilation, provincial control, and millennial effervescence were felt most severely by the ‘Abbāsids in Khurāsān, where political expressions took a range of forms and came in varying intensity. However, the roots of Khurāsān’s religio-political challenge and complexity stretch farther back than the ‘Abbāsids, into Sasanid times, and have a lot to do with the frontier nature of this region, straddling the borders of several empires and a range of autonomous principalities around the Oxus River Valley (Transoxiana). Locked in a diverse geo-political zone, Khurāsān faced the influence of its neighbors on social, economic, and religious levels. Alliances between Khurāsānīs and the Central Asian principalities were therefore not uncommon, and could at any time accelerate into a conflict among greater powers. In 751, when the region of Ferghāna went to war with the province of al-Shāsh (Tashkent), Ferghāna turned to China for help, while the ruler of al-Shāsh turned to the ‘Abbāsīd governor of Khurāsān. The incident escalated into a military confrontation between the Abbāsids and the Chinese along the Ṭaraz River. This was the episode usually remembered as the occasion on which the Arabs obtained the secret of papermaking from Chinese prisoners and transmitted it to the west. The battle that took place had gone in favor of the ‘Abbāsids, which put an end to Chinese influence in

the area,¹³ but in later years, particularly in the reigns of al-Amīn and al-Ma'mūn, new actors, such as Tibet, were to appear on the scene again.¹⁴

Buddhism may also have played a major role in bringing about this cultural affinity between Khurāsān and Transoxiana. Buddhism, a religion that went through phases of wide support in Sasanid Persia and the Fertile Crescent from the third century AD, had strongly colored the ethical worldview of Manichaeism. Furthermore, we know that a number of Buddhist religious centers had flourished in Khurāsān, the most important of which was the Nawbahār ("New Temple") near the town of Balkh, which evidently served as a pilgrimage center for political leaders, who came from far and wide to pay homage to it.¹⁵ The Barmakid family, which took a role in the dissemination of the Hashemite *da'wa* in Khurāsān during the revolution and later occupied center stage as vizirs and bureaucrats in the court of the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd, were originally the chief priests of the Nawbahār of Balkh, and were connected through marriage ties with neighboring princes in Transoxiana.¹⁶ The religious, social, and political prestige that the Barmakids commanded, therefore, were a key reason why the 'Abbāsids turned to them for support. And this cooperation was cemented when the caliph al-Mahdī and his vizir Yaḥyā al-Barmakī each had his son nursed by his opposite number's wife. As a result Hārūn al-Rashīd and Ja'far al-Barmakī became milk brothers, a bond that affirmed a Perso-Arab partnership in power.

The east continued to command the greatest share of 'Abbāsīd attention, and the caliphs attempted various experiments for establishing effective administration over Khurāsān, including a strict phase under the Abnā' commander, 'Alī b. 'Īsā b. Māhān, and a lenient phase under the stewardship of al-Faḍl b. Yaḥyā al-Barmakī, both during the reign of al-Rashīd. Our evidence is sparse about the details of various 'Abbāsīd administrations in Khurāsān, but toward the end of his life, al-Rashīd appointed his son al-Ma'mūn as governor of Khurāsān. The caliph's idea was a new method in 'Abbāsīd government, and the rationale behind it lay in al-Ma'mūn's ties to maternal kin in the east. Al-Ma'mūn was the son of a Persian concubine, and the caliph hoped this could appeal in due course to Persian cultural and political sensitivities while al-Ma'mūn could bridge Khurāsān's administration under the direct control of Baghdad. There was little time to judge the efficacy of this new experiment, since the caliph al-Rashīd soon died, in 809, while on a campaign in Khurāsān. He left behind al-Ma'mūn in Marw, and another son, al-Amīn, who now acceded to the caliphate in Baghdad.

The events that soon followed the death of al-Rashīd were to be of critical

¹³ H. A. R. Gibb, *The Arab Conquests in Central Asia* (New York, 1970), 96.

¹⁴ C. Beckwith, *The Tibetan Empire in Central Asia* (Princeton, 1987), 157–60.

¹⁵ W. Barthold, *Turkestan down to the Mongol Invasion* (London, 1928), 77; L. Bouvat, "Les Barmécides d'après les historiens Arabes et Persans," *RMM* 20 (1912), 26; R. W. Bulliet, "Naw Bahar and the Survival of Iranian Buddhism," *Iran* 14 (1976), 140–5.

¹⁶ Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-A'yān*, ed. I. 'Abbās, 8 vols. (Beirut, 1968), VI, 219.

importance in ‘Abbāsīd history, as a conflict ensued between the brothers al-Amīn and al-Ma’mūn. As relations deteriorated and the crisis over succession escalated into a civil war, al-Amīn found support among the Abnā’, while al-Ma’mūn was aided by a new group of Khurāsānī supporters led by the Sahlids, former protégés of the Barmakids, and the Tāhirids, a leading family in the area of Būshanj and Herāt. The overarching dispute over the throne also parted sympathies down the provinces, as various towns declared their loyalty to one of the brothers, thereby leading to a conflict within the provinces too. Al-Amīn’s forces gradually lost ground to al-Ma’mūn’s armies and, in 813, Ṭāhir b. al-Ḥusayn, al-Ma’mūn’s commander, advanced on Baghdad. After a siege that lasted nearly a year, his troops took the city by force. In the midst of the chaos and turmoil that followed, al-Amīn was taken prisoner and, probably at Ṭāhir’s command, was secretly put to death, an event that would have lingering political ramifications. Al-Ma’mūn, meanwhile, was declared caliph in Marw and continued to reside in Khurāsān, giving no indication of a desire to return to Baghdad. It was only years later, in 819, when he found conditions of protracted political chaos and instability still brewing in Irāq, that he returned with his entourage, reestablished the old capital as his center, and set about reorganizing the foundations of the state and reuniting its fragmented authority in the provinces. Al-Ma’mūn proved to be a far more systematic planner of policies in Baghdad than he was in Khurāsān. He carefully pursued a policy of recentralization, revived ‘Abbāsīd defenses on the Byzantine frontier, and reorganized the military in a way that diversified the state army to include more Persian troops, and later included the beginning of a Turkish-slave military system. But by far the policy that has been most associated with his name is known as the *miḥna*, or religious trial/inquisition, when he tried to impose the doctrine of the createdness of the Qur’ān espoused by the Mu‘tazila school of speculative theology on the traditional circle of ḥadīth scholars.

Al-Ma’mūn died in 833, in the midst of a Byzantine campaign. His successor, al-Mu‘taṣim, continued many of his policies. He kept up state support for the *miḥna*, maintained a substantial role for the Persian political elite (such as the Ṭāhirids in the east), and further expanded the Turkish-slave military system. He also founded the city of Sāmarrā’ which, as his new capital, was intended to accommodate the burgeoning Turkish army, but which may also have been meant to distance the caliphal court from the traditionalist opposition of Baghdad as the new regime pursued a controversial religious policy. Baghdad had been a city of the Abnā’ and maintained residues of political hostility to the successors of al-Amīn.

In Sāmarrā’, al-Mu‘taṣim (833–842) maintained a strong grip on his new military elite, as did his son and short-lived successor, al-Wāthiq (842–47). But soon after, the authority of the caliphate began to give way to an assertive and factional military. The Turkish-slave military system had been founded to serve the function of directly guarding the caliph’s political interest. In

particular, al-Ma'mūn had drawn on their support, after the erosion of Arab tribal military support in the western provinces during the civil war, to recentralize the provinces and cope with new threats cropping up on the empire's borders, such as the syncretistic Mazdakite revolt of Bābak al-Khurramī in Azerbaijan and the Byzantines in Asia Minor. Having served its original purposes, the Turkish military now became an idle army, with a layer of officer-aristocracy that lived off its vast estates in Sāmarrā' and Mesopotamia and turned to manipulating the caliphs and state policy. The succession of al-Mutawakkil, the inexperienced son of al-Mu'tašim, indicated a suspicious shift from al-Wāthiq's succession line that was brought about purely by court intrigue. It was a sign of things to come.

Al-Mutawakkil tried various methods to alleviate the caliphate's political weakness, the most notable of which was to end the *miḥna* program and realign state affinity with the traditionalist orthodox scholars; at one point he even contemplated shifting the capital to Damascus to escape the local military strongmen. Although a major achievement, the caliph's new religious policy failed to gain the caliphate the popular political support al-Mutawakkil had hoped for. Over the course of the *miḥna*, the traditionalist scholars had gradually developed a degree of social solidarity. As they found themselves threatened by the state and by other religious ideas, they set themselves apart from the caliphate, forming a new focal point of religious legitimization. The caliphate, having lost the meaning of its original political legitimization – which dated to the revolutionary era – through years of civil war and stormy arguments over the *miḥna*, could claim only a vague and shadowy credibility with the public. And it had become deeply vulnerable to military manipulation in Sāmarrā'. The massive amounts the caliphs expended on building the city, the plans for which apparently continued to multiply because of a colossal mistake made in the original urban planning,¹⁷ along with the need to keep the salaried troops content, eventually broke the caliphate's finances, leaving al-Mutawakkil and successive caliphs vulnerable.

Al-Mutawakkil's assassination in 861 by a military clique of palace conspirators paved the way for a stream of weak caliphs, mostly his children, who tried various alliances with military strongmen to extend some semblance of new political authority. In the end their efforts proved futile. Scarcely would a caliph, such as al-Musta'in or al-Mu'tazz, succeed in eliminating the dominance of one commander when a new pattern of alliance among other commanders would force him to give in to their influence. The tragedies of these caliphs have been commemorated in a singularly detailed fashion in the accounts of Ṭabarī. Intensely vivid and focused on intrigues within the palace, the story harbors a breath of suspense that is all its own, as we see one caliph's (al-Muhtadī's) last attempt to escape the palace and rally public support, then

¹⁷ J. M. Rogers, "Samarra, a Study in Medieval Town-Planning," *The Islamic City: A Colloquium*, ed. A. Hourani and S. M. Stern (Oxford, 1970), 145.

pursued by his military commanders, he is shown scaling buildings and jumping across rooftops to hang on to his life. Hārūn's days were now gone and forgotten. With Sāmarrā' we face a scene of chaos and political decline, a tragic story whose picture is magnified in the weathered outlines and ruins of that city on the Tigris today.

The story of the early 'Abbāsīd caliphate has been the subject of extensive examination in recent years, with most tending to focus on the social background of the 'Abbāsīd revolution and the era of consolidation of 'Abbāsīd rule.¹⁸ Since the extant accounts on the caliphate date to a period after the 'Abbāsīd rise to power – indeed, after a series of critical transitions had occurred, including the civil war, the *miḥna*, and the return from Sāmarrā' to Baghdad – historians repeatedly find themselves facing the multiple challenge of trying to read through biases that accumulated over time, with successive episodes tinging the original memory of how things really happened. Official 'Abbāsīd tampering with the representation of the events that paved their rise to power, for example, makes the story of the family's emergence seem like a tendentious one. Hagiographic prophecies surrounding their rise, sympathetic portrayals of leading family members, and the forging of historical legitimization through linkages with pious and prophetic ancestors are some of the factors that cloud the historian's path of analysis. The fact that the 'Abbāsīds had to go through great trouble to argue their claims against the 'Alids and to defend al-Manṣūr's consolidation of the succession within his family, for example, shows us that they were responding to other historical voices that have long since vanished, but not before leaving their mark on the process of historical formulation. In this context, the recent research of J. Lassner is particularly noteworthy for the way it has uncovered various forms of 'Abbāsīd hagiography that show an active 'Abbāsīd propagandistic position in the narration of the revolution's history.¹⁹

Most of our accounts on the 'Abbāsīds, however, are not specifically hagiographic, and neither are they always linked to the revolution. In such a situation, narratives, with their matter-of-fact tenor, can seem to reflect the survival of an original historical account, one that was either too great to be forgotten

¹⁸ The historical literature on the 'Abbāsīds is over a century old now, if we reckon at outset of these analytic studies the works of Van Vloten around the 1890s. The most notable contributions down this lineage are those of: F. Gabrieli, "La Successione di Hārūn ar-Raṣīd e la guerra fra al-Amīn e al-Ma'mūn," *RSO*, 11 (1926–28), 341–97; J. Wellhausen, *The Arab Kingdom and its Fall* (Calcutta, 1927); A. Dūrī, *al-'Asr al-'Abbāsī al-'Awwal* (Baghdad, 1945); N. Abbott, *Two Queens of Baghdad* (Chicago, 1946); D. Sourdel, *Le Vizirat abbaside de 749 à 936*, 2 vols. (Damascus, 1959–60); C. Cahen, "Points de vue sur la 'Révolution abbaside,'" *Revue Historique*, 202 (1963), 295–335; F. Omar, *The 'Abbasid Caliphate* (Baghdad, 1969); M. A. Shaban, *The 'Abbasid Revolution* (Cambridge, 1970); Daniel, *Political and Social History*; Lassner, *'Abbasid Rule*; Kennedy, *Early Abbasid Caliphate*; P. Crone and M. Hinds, *God's Caliph* (Cambridge, 1987). A fuller list of other contributions and studies by some of the above authors and others will be found in the bibliography.

¹⁹ J. Lassner, *Islamic Revolution and Historical Memory*, American Oriental Society Series, 66 (New Haven, 1986).

or somehow that seeped through the wreckage of wars, allowing us the odd testimony of a surviving member of the former political elite, a wandering palace guard, or a retired singer. It is not surprising, in such an atmosphere, that many have found it both plausible and feasible to sift through the corpus of medieval Islamic narratives and come out with a range of historical studies. The way that historical accounts were often reported in chains of transmission, in the *isnād* model, further strengthened the image of reporters' reliability. Sources as varied as Ṭabarī, Ya'qūbī, Jahshiyārī, and Mas'ūdī have therefore been plundered for information about the political, economic, and administrative affairs of the empire. Based on data from narratives preserved in these sources, historians have built elaborate historical syntheses, ranging from political histories to studies of the 'Abbāsīd bureaucracy or the economic history of the caliphate. Implicitly, however, all of these efforts have rested on the unstated methodological assumption that we have reliable criteria for separating myth from fact, which in fact we do not. Such schools as those of J. Wellhausen and L. Caetani, which debated the veracity of the historical reporting in the first century of Islam on the basis of regional currents of historical transmission, based on critiques of the testimonies of such well-known narrators as Sayf b. 'Umar (d. 796), Abū Mikhnaf (d. 774), 'Umar b. Shabba (d. 812), and al-Madā'īnī (d. 839),²⁰ become somewhat obsolete when we come to the 'Abbāsīd narratives, because the pool of narrators becomes entirely different.

The problem of 'Abbāsīd narrators lies in the fact that they were largely a group of people not well known for their scholarly role in historical transmission or redaction. Accounts of the reigns of al-Rashīd, al-Ma'mūn, and al-Mutawakkil, for example, are usually based on the testimony of people associated with the court in each of these eras. This consistent dependence on contemporary reporters makes for a rapid shift in the identity of reporters from one reign to the next and undermines the approach that emphasizes schools of transmission. The notion that Ṭabarī's chronicle preserves within it "books" of former scholars who transmitted accounts orally and eventually surfaced disparately in Ṭabarī's text can scarcely be substantiated from the vantage point of 'Abbāsīd historiography. Indeed, the mystery of historical reporting is further compounded by the fact that, although the above-mentioned list of scholars, who are best known for their accounts about the era of the Rāshidūn, shows that they lived well into the 'Abbāsīd period and were contemporary with its events – with some even having been associated with the 'Abbāsīd court – they seem completely absent from the circle of historical reporters. The absence of these scholars from the ranks of 'Abbāsīd narrators, combined with the nature of the reports attributed to a diverse range of new figures, impels one to theorize that these names were on occasion contrived,

²⁰ A. Noth and L. Conrad, *The Early Arabic Historical Tradition, A Source-Critical Study*, trans. M. Bonner (Princeton, 1994), 14. A. A. Dūrī, *The Rise of Historical Writing among the Arabs*, ed. and trans. L. Conrad (Princeton, 1983).

as an extension to the literary-tropological puzzle carried out mostly within the narrative content itself, as we shall see below.

The present study breaks with contemporary studies on the ‘Abbāsids in that it is not concerned with establishing one or another picture of historical fact. Nor does it seek to build social, political, and religious interpretations on the basis of the chronicle’s information. Rather, it adopts a literary-critical approach to reading the sources, based on a new set of propositions and assumptions aimed at establishing an originally intended meaning in the narratives. The starting point of the discussion rests on the view that the extant ‘Abbāsīd historical narratives were not intended originally to tell facts, but rather to provide commentary on a certain political, religious, social, or cultural issue that may have derived from a real and controversial historical episode. Narrators writing before and during the era of Ṭabarī crafted the literary form of *qiṣṣa* or *khbar* (narrative report), often with the intention of discussing the controversial results of a political, social, or moral point.²¹

As noted in the earlier sketch of the background of ‘Abbāsīd rule, there were numerous issues that would have opened up to a plethora of opinions: the relation between the ‘Abbāsids and the ‘Alids, between Khurāsān and Baghdad, questions over dynastic succession, and, later, religious problems associated with the policies of the caliph al-Ma’mūn, and political problems connected with the rise of the Turkish military system in Sāmarrā’. This is in addition to discussions of ideals of political rule, ethical behavior, and theoretical questions about the nature and direction of historical change. Discussion of these issues took place in conjunction with the focus that narrators accorded to analyzing human behavior. There is an intricate detail that we sometimes see in the portraits of certain historical personages which highlights the existence of a historiographic current that is not merely descriptive. The transformation of the human condition, mood, and beliefs were questions that were discussed, both within the scope of religious parameters and with attention to secular moral values, two spheres that were seen as interacting in shaping the plot of human history. Important political and military personalities, such as the caliphs, did get extra attention in many stories in the chronicles, but this focus was related not to their political importance as much as to their individual characters, and to how they dealt with a range of ethical, political, and historical challenges. There were complex considerations involved in the choice of historical characters, and this subject was intimately tied to the dramaturgical roles these actors assumed in the sweep of various plots that made up ‘Abbāsīd history. The drama of personal lives was

²¹ For a new reading within this framework, applied to the Rāshidūn period, see, S. Leder, “The Literary Use of the Khabar: A Basic Form of Historical Writing,” *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East*, vol. I, *Problems in the Literary Source Material*, ed. Averil Cameron and L. I. Conrad (Princeton, 1992), 277–315. And as applied to Persian historiography, M. Waldman, *Towards a Theory of Historical Narrative: A Case Study in Perso-Islamicate Historiography* (Columbus, 1980). Also the suggestive essay by B. Radtke, “Towards a Typology of ‘Abbāsīd Universal Chronicles,” *Occasional Papers of the School of Abbāsīd Studies* 3 (1990), 1–14.

intertwined with the political prospects of the state, and the former had as much influence as the latter in signaling the fortunes of the caliphate and the fate of the community, and in setting the stage for diverse trajectories of historical tragedy.

From an initial glance, the surviving corpus of ‘Abbāsīd narratives already reveals a number of curious aspects that invite suspicion. One unusual aspect in the structure of these narratives is the disproportionate emphasis given to the discussion of the affairs of Khurāsān. The interaction between Baghdad and Khurāsān is a story told in far greater length than is anything involving other provinces, such as Syria, Egypt, or Arabia. Other oddities include the disproportionate emphasis on certain conflicts. The four years of the succession crisis between the children of Hārūn al-Rashīd, al-Amīn and al-Ma’mūn, for example, are recounted in rich, anecdotal detail. Yet numerous years in the chronicles get no more than a scanty page of annalistic points on the appointments of governors and brief mentions of certain rebellions and wars. The relationship between the ‘Alids and the ‘Abbāsīds is also recounted with particular interest by reporters, and we are often guided through tragic moments of ‘Alid rebellion in a way that reflects a distinct melancholic mood.

Against the backdrop of such a carefully structured agenda of topics laden with intentional historical views, one grows suspicious of an even wider spectrum of narratives. The extensive discussions accorded to the relations between the caliph and his vizirs, between vizirs and commanders, and between commanders and rebels invite one’s suspicion about their motives, even if independently these discussions may not have seemed to be fictional fields of historical play. In this regard, the career of the Barmakids and their tragedy in the reign of al-Rashīd have long loomed large in the imagination of modern scholars. What lay behind their initial favor with the court, and how they later came to be estranged from the caliph so quickly, have never ceased to be a mystery. This unevenness in the historical material cannot be justified as accidental or as the result of the survival of those reports deemed most worthy as historical documents. There surely must be a logic behind the choices made some time in the ninth century to transmit records about certain issues and controversies, to provide a range of reports about those moments and not others. The successive chapters of this book will be devoted to exploring the motives and intentions that lay behind the composition of these narratives.

Complicating the reader’s ability to discern the various sources of voices in the text is the way narrators of different persuasions chose to articulate their views. In an attempt to restrict the scope of circulation of these messages and commentaries, narrators often resorted to complex stylistic forms to express their views. Figurative language and patterns of allusion involving pun, metaphor, irony, symbolism, and symmetrical construction seem pervasive in the text and underscore one’s sense of a conscious historical intention. Our focus on unlocking these stylistic forms, however, will not aim solely at probing the

medieval aesthetic of literary composition. Rather, we shall focus on the nuances of the text and its broader organization, in the hope of gauging broader systems of historical interpretation that are anchored in the vital issues of the time, and of determining how these interpretations cut across the disparate narratives.

Decoding the historical texts, as this study will show, involves the dual task of tracing the line of meaning and establishing linkages across eras, regions, and systems of thought. The plot of certain stories occasionally penetrates, sequentially or sporadically, within a coherent historical phase across fragmented narratives. Equally, however, the line of meaning tends to break out of the anticipated historical order, intruding in an intertextual manner on other histories (biblical, Sasanid, Rāshidūn, or Umayyad), depending on a linkage of character, motif, moral, or puzzle. Such elliptical potentialities, although hypothetical from a modern perspective, would have been intelligible to a classical audience. With the appropriate level of immersion into the cultural, political, and religious signs of the age, and with a sensitivity to the issue of debate and a feel for the fabric of expression, one can recognize the intended roads of meaning. Although on occasion ambiguous, these texts do form a cohesive array of narratives that were meant to be read in a specific way, even when that way is in itself indeterminate.

An additional issue one needs to account for is that of multiple narrative references. One frequently finds that different accounts bear different levels of literary and thematic suggestiveness. The same anecdote or narrative could form an anchor for several more limited compositions. Readers attuned to the hierarchy of meaning committed all these accounts to memory and probably reflected on them as a vital and immediate literary culture. Repetition of exposure to particular texts was therefore as expected as was the crafting of newer pieces of historical representation. Since the ‘Abbāsīd narratives no longer hold the photographic spot in collective memory that they once did, and since the present approach will require repeated reference to certain narratives to show the various types of suggestiveness, I have given certain names to specific narratives deemed central in the order of the ‘Abbāsīd historical material. By referring the reader to the anecdote title, I have hoped to avoid repeating the description of the anecdote involved. Anecdotes and narratives as such will function as tableaux of personalities, events, and settings. Their importance lies as much in their central theme as in their detail and in subsequent responsive attempts at dialogue and rearrangement.

Since this approach has the tendency to gravitate more to a literary framework, one that would make stylistic aspects predominate as the guiding categories of analysis, and as a result may compromise its historical framework, I have chosen to make the historical personalities or families the focus of the study: the caliphs as texts, as it were. This method is guided partly by the fact that the sources focus on individuals and their behavior more systematically than on any other angle, and also by the fact that the progress of their plots

(i.e., the temporal realization of certain goals within the stories) is bound, sooner or later, to be reflected in ways affecting the lives of others (although more abstract concepts such as the state, the community, or the spirit of an institution can also form likely targets). The reader will come to notice how this approach is applied as we focus on the portraits of the caliphs. The conceptual frame of the study will emerge in the conclusions drawn from this new reading of the problematic narratives.