

The Political Culture of the Abbasid Court

(279–324 AH/
892–936 CE)



By David Marmer

Resources in Arabic and Islamic Studies

THE POLITICAL CULTURE
OF THE ABBASID COURT
(279–324 AH/892–936 CE)

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DAVID MARMER

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Series Editors' Preface

In July 2022, at the Fifteenth Meeting of The School of 'Abbasid Studies (hosted at St John's College Oxford), David Marmer, someone we were meeting for the first time, presented the paper, "Greed is Good: A Look at the Mercantile World of Third/Ninth Century Baghdad." We were impressed with the research, the analysis, and the conclusions and urged him to submit it to the *Journal of Abbasid Studies*. While it was being refereed (and it has since appeared), Monique Bernards—a director of the school, managing editor of the *Journal*, and RAIS advisory board member—contacted us and suggested David Marmer's unpublished 1994 Princeton dissertation, "The Political Culture of the Abbasid Court, 279–324 A.H." for our series. We found it to be as compelling as the presentation we'd heard and asked David if he would be interested in having it published. To our delight, he agreed, and we decided that it would appear under the same title.

In the time since he undertook his research for the dissertation, one very significant work has been published about the period 279–324/892–936, namely, *Crisis and Continuity at the Abbasid Court: Formal and Informal Politics in the Caliphate of al-Muqtadir (295–320/908–32)*, coauthored by Maaike van Berkel, Nadia El Cheikh, Hugh Kennedy, and Letizia Osti (Leiden: Brill, 2013). Many of the conclusions they draw concur with the findings of David Marmer from twenty years earlier, a testament to his acumen when reading the sources, something on display also in his paper, "Financial Risk Assessment and Investment Management in Third/Ninth Century Baghdad," delivered at the Sixteenth Meeting of the School of Abbasid Studies (hosted at Università Cà Foscari, Venice) in July 2024, and soon to appear also in the *Journal of Abbasid Studies*. As these articles reveal, David knows about finance. A successful banker and financial consultant, he only recently decided to return to his research. We are very pleased indeed that it is through our series that his first major work will be broadly disseminated.

As always, we are grateful to the Lockwood and ISD team—Billie Jean Collins, Ian Stevens, and Susanne Wilhelm—who are always a joy to work with.

Joseph E. Lowry
Devin J. Stewart
Shawkat M. Toorawa

Preface

This publication is a lightly edited version of the dissertation I wrote thirty years ago, under the supervision of Professor Michael Cook at Princeton University. I did not publish any version of that research until now, for multiple reasons: I was exhausted from the writing process and could not imagine undertaking any serious editing at the time; I also instinctively believed I needed distance from the material—and a little more intellectual maturity—before making necessary improvements. Most importantly: I wanted to explore a career in financial markets, which led to a twenty-five-year professional detour, and corresponding hiatus from academic research. I have finally rediscovered my love for research in Islamic history, and thankfully have been granted the opportunity—much delayed by my own decisions—to finally publish this research.

I should immediately address one obvious question: is this text still relevant? I was originally inspired by Roy Mottahedeh's *Loyalty and Leadership in an Early Islamic Society* (1980), which explores the structure of relationships in a premodern Islamic society: I was fascinated by the attempt to understand human connections and societal patterns, which would both humanize a society distant in time, and also illuminate mechanisms that facilitate comparisons with other societies. In my doctoral research, I endeavored to capture the variety of such relationships, in one specific location during a short period of significant stress, as a once-flourishing empire, the Abbasid Empire of the ninth–tenth centuries CE, centered in Baghdad, was in the process of collapse. At the time, my dissertation was one of the few pieces of research from early Islamic history to view and analyze the imperial court elite as a collection of individuals forming social groups and alliances, reacting to conditions of dramatic change. To the best of my knowledge, this remains one of the few pieces of research to look at one element of early Islamic society holistically—certainly for the Abbasid period.

I also endeavored to provide copious translations from a variety of original sources; my intention was to give a sense of texture to sociopolitical interactions and to reflect the individuality, personality, and character of historical figures. In reading the original sources, I always found the people of ninth-century Baghdad to be remarkable, and they were described as such by many eloquent and clever authors. I accordingly wanted to make a sampling of this material within its historical context available to a broader audience. I believe that this close interpretation of original texts—and the admiration for the people who appear and are memorialized in them—provides a strong sense of how the people of Baghdad thought, felt, and interacted.

For this publication, I decided to make a minimum of changes: I have cleaned up the language, such as removing unnecessary repetition and exaggeration, or sharpening word choice, and corrected several mistakes in the footnotes; but I have not altered the argumentation or evidence, as I want to be faithful to my thoughts at the time of origi-

nal writing. Although a full-scale revision after such a long break was impractical, I did, importantly, want to make absolutely clear which ideas were my own—as they appeared in the original dissertation—before the subsequent research of other scholars in the intervening years.

One indication that my research was perhaps headed in the right direction is the fact that a handful of other scholars of Islamic history have taken up similar themes and perspectives, and from roughly the same period of the decline and collapse of the Abbasid state. Maaike van Berkel, Nadia El-Cheikh, Letizia Osti, and Hugh Kennedy have published articles over the past two decades that illuminate various aspects of the Abbasid court; indeed, in 2011 they collectively published *Crisis and Continuity at the Abbasid Court*, which—similar to my dissertation—analyzes the various elements of court society. Their research, however, also incorporates material from the courtier and historian al-Ṣūli, based upon an Arabic text that had not yet been published at the time of my dissertation.

Given that scholars have pursued and published research from this era of Abbasid history, why read this text, based upon a dissertation from 1994? I believe that the analysis, perceptions, and conclusions remain unique and relevant, something that is especially true of the conclusion, which summarizes the various insights of the work.

Regarding the footnotes, these are largely in the original version, with only cosmetic changes. I have, however, added references from the past thirty years, indicated in the footnotes with an asterisk so that current readers know where to turn for the most recent research. I have also indicated briefly when scholars have either come to similar conclusions, or on minor points disagreed. I have not incorporated subsequent research into the body of the text: the writing thus remains faithful to my original thoughts from thirty years ago.

That said, looking at the material with the benefit of some maturity and a great deal of hindsight, what are my own impressions, and what might I do differently? First, I have learned an important lesson: to publish research as quickly as possible. Second, the research was originally intended to include the activity of judges, whom I view as an important link—socially and culturally—between court society and the general Bagh-dadi populace. That analysis will not appear here, but will be published separately. Most importantly, this research does not include a theoretical framework. My opinion, when I was a student—which has not significantly changed—is that we still have a huge amount of empirical evidence to collect for Abbasid history; I suspected that approaching the material within a theoretical framework might shift the focus and alter the questions I ask. In short, I wanted to let the evidence guide my observations and interpretations; once we have collected substantial empirical evidence, it will be vital to endeavor to make comparisons to other periods of Islamic history, and human history. Contributing to that ultimate goal remains the main objective of this research.

Acknowledgments

During the past thirty-five years, from the inception of this research to its final publication, many people have contributed to my intellectual and personal growth. Ze'ev Brinner inspired me to undertake academic research and encouraged me to pursue my fascination with Islamic history. Michael Cook was a patient and diligent mentor for a doubtful and often frustrated young scholar-in-training, and continues to be supportive even after an interlude of decades. David Ben-Zur accompanied me for much of this multidecade journey, from the ice storms in Princeton to anxiety attacks in Istanbul; he will always be a cherished part of my life. So many loyal friends have taught me about the joys in life: Dave, Eric, and Brian, Nurit, Nimrod, and Dina, Aaron and Natalie, NB, Alon and David, Daniel, Dror, Carine and Philip, and of course Eli. The Sheldons and Waldmans have always been caring supporters of my various endeavors. Thanks to all of you for sharing so much with me.

Avi has been a remarkable partner for these past years and has given me the peace of mind and freedom to complete this project. I would be lost without him.

I'd like to thank the editors of this series for giving me an opportunity to publish my research, and Monique Bernards for bringing my dissertation to their attention. Special thanks go to Shawkat Toorawa for his generous investment of time and wisdom in this project, and to David Wasserstein for extensive comments on the original dissertation. I'd also like to thank the staff at the Sourasky Library, who helped me digitize an old and faded photocopy of my dissertation.

Most importantly, I wish to thank—and honor—my entire family: Charlene, Melinda, and Alan: you have always wrapped me in love; I cannot be more grateful. My nieces and nephews are a constant source of pride. And most of all, Mom and Dad: thank you for raising me to become whatever person I wanted to be. Nobody could ever ask for more than that.

David Marmer
Tel Aviv, February 2025

Prominent Personages at the Abbasid Court

(dates in office; death date if died not in office)

Abbasids

al-Mu‘taṣid (279–289/892–902)
al-Muktafi (289–295/902–908)
al-Muqtadir (295–320/908–932)
Ibn al-Mu‘tazz (d. 296/908)
al-Qāhir (320–322/932–934; d. 339/950)
Prince Abū al-‘Abbās, later caliph al-Rāḍī (322–329/934–940)

Wazirs

‘Ubaydallāh b. Sulaymān (279–288/892–901)
al-Qāsim b. ‘Ubaydallāh (288–291/901–904)
al-‘Abbās b. al-Ḥasan (291–296/904–908)
Abū al-Ḥasan Ibn al-Furāt (296–299/908–911, 304–306/917–919, 311–312/923–924)
Muḥammad al-Khāqānī (299–301/911–913; d. 312/924)
‘Alī b. ʻIsā (301–304/913–917, 314–316/926–928; d. 334/946)
Hāmid b. al-‘Abbās (306–311/918–923)
‘Abdallāh b. Muḥammad al-Khāqānī (312–313/924–925)
Abū al-‘Abbās al-Khaṣībī (313–314/925–926)
Muḥammad b. ‘Alī, Ibn Muqla (316–318/928–930; d. 328/940)
al-Ḥusayn b. al-Qāsim (319–320/931–932)

Women

Sayyida, Shaghab Umm al-Muqtadir (d. 321/933)
Fāṭima (d. 300/913)
Umm Mūsā (300–310/913–923; d. 315/927)
Thumal (?)
Zaydān (?)

Military Figures

Badr (279–289/892–902)
Sawsan the chamberlain (d. 296/908–909)
Ṣāfi al-Ḥuramī the eunuch (d. 298/910–911)
Gharīb the uncle (295–305/908–917)

Mu^unīs al-Khāzin (d. 301/914)
Mu^unīs al-Khādim (296–321/908–933)
Naṣr the chamberlain (296–316/908–928)
Hārūn b. Gharīb (305–323/917–935)
Shafī^c al-Lu^ulu^uī (d. 312/924–925)
Shafī^c al-Muqtadīrī (died sometime after 320/932)
Ibn Abī al-Sāj (d. 315/928)
Muflīḥ the eunuch (died sometime after 324/936)
Nāzūk (d. 317/929)
Abū al-Hayjā^ī (d. 317/929)
Yāqūt (d. 324/936)

Timeline

