

***Crisis and Continuity at the Abbasid Court: Formal and Informal Politics in the Caliphate of al-Muqtadir (295-320/908-32)***, ed. Maaïke van Berkel, Nadia Maria El Cheikh, Hugh Kennedy, and Letizia Osti (Islamic History and Civilization, Studies and Texts, 102) (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2013), i-xiii + 262 pp., ISBN 978-90-04-25271-4, €123.00 / \$144.00

This book, which focuses on the ruling era of al-Muqtadir (295-320/908-932), is collectively edited by four members of the School of Abbasid Studies, who examines various aspects of ‘Abbāsīd history over many years. The book includes an introduction and three main parts, each containing two or three chapters. The time line of events prepared by Hugh Kennedy and a map showing the largest borders of the ‘Abbāsīd Caliphate are useful for readers (pp. ix-xiii).

The first part, titled “Stories and Histories,” includes two chapters. In Chapter 1, “The Reign of al-Muqtadir,” Hugh Kennedy presents a general overview of this period. In general, the author relies on Ibn Miskawayh and ‘Arīb ibn Sa‘d, and rarely refers to al-Sūlī, who was a contemporary of al-Muqtadir and a courtier for decades at the ‘Abbāsīd court. Although Kennedy explains why he rarely references al-Sūlī, noting that the context and implications of al-Sūlī’s original account of al-Muqtadir’s accession (in contrast with Ibn Miskawayh’s) are discussed in further sections (p. 17, fn. 6), it would be beneficial if the author made use of al-Sūlī’s accounts of other events. In Chapter 2, “The Caliph,” Letizia Osti evaluates the narratives related to al-Muqtadir’s personality from a different perspective. Many chronicles indicating to al-Muqtadir’s prodigality and inexperience in political issues at the beginning of his rule associate the time of al-Muqtadir with the ruin of the caliphate. In contrast to the negative attitude of these chronicles on al-Muqtadir, Osti attempts to present “a civilian portrait” of al-Muqtadir with reference to accounts that he was a good son and father, a good Muslim, and an immature caliph who endeavored to make well-intentioned decisions but failed (pp. 49-61).

The second part, “Scribes and Soldiers,” consists of three chapters and examines the bureaucratic features of al-Muqtadir’s era as well as

its military structure. In Chapter 3, “The Vizier,” Maaïke van Berkel discusses the historical development of the vizirate in this period, the role of puissant families in the institutional working of this office, the struggles of these families with each other, and the formal and informal incomes of the viziers (pp. 65-86). On this point, it is crucial to note that although the reign of al-Muqtadir appears to be unstable, politically and economically, because of appointments to the vizirate at short intervals, rivalries between higher officers such as viziers, *ḥājibs* (chamberlains), and *ṣāḥib al-shurṭab* (chief of police), and the interference of the *ḥaram* in political affairs, the vizirate was still powerful, thanks to the effect of secretarial families such as Banū l-Furāt, Banū l-Jarrāḥ, Banū Khāqān. These famous families worked for decades in central administration in Baghdād, and some viziers who were descended from these families became political powers against the caliph. In Chapter 4, “The Bureaucracy,” van Berkel presents an overview of *dīwāns* and their subunits (i.e. *majlis*) within the frame of Qudāmāh ibn Ja‘far’s (d. 337/948) *Kitāb al-kharāj wa-ṣinā‘at al-kitābab*, an invaluable work for the ‘Abbāsīd bureaucracy in the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> centuries. Although the author is aware of the complementary narrative sources that provide additions to Qudāmāh’s classifications (p. 88), such as Ibn Miskawayh, al-Ṣābī, and ‘Arīb ibn Sa‘d, she does not make use of these chronicles and does not mention any other offices, such as *Dīwān al-maqbūḍāt* [*‘an Umm Mūsā wa-asbābībā*], founded by ‘Alī ibn ‘Īsā in 310/922 to manage the properties of Qahramānah Umm Mūsā and her brothers (this *dīwān* would become functional by order of al-Qāhir with the name *Dīwān al-maqbūḍāt* [*‘an wālidatibī wa-awlādibī wa-asbābībī*] after al-Muqtadir was dethroned in 320/932); *Dīwān al-mukbālifīn*, founded by the vizier al-Ḥusayn ibn al-Qāsim in 317/929 to confiscate the properties and lands of Mūnis al-Muẓaffar and his dependents; and *Dīwān al-murtaja‘ab* founded by Ibn al-Muqlah in 317/929 to manage the real estates (i.e. *iqṭā‘*s) that were withdrawn from the officers when they resigned or were dismissed from their charges. Another issue discussed under this title is the scribes (*kuttāb*). The role of the scribes became increasingly significant in political affairs as well as official business along with the rapid improvement of *dīwāns* at the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century. However, 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century authors are not in agreement regarding the hierarchical structure of the clerks, although it is understood that there is a dispute between the two types of clerks, men of letters (*kātib al-inshā‘*), and the secretaries of financial affairs (*kātib*

*al-kbarāj wa-l-dayā*). If we consider the reign of al-Muqtadir, which grappled with the financial crisis for a long time, it is clear that the secretaries of financial affairs were more efficient in central bureaucracy compared with their opponents (p. 109). In Chapter 5, "The Military," Hugh Kennedy focuses on the military structure of this period. Kennedy attributes a special importance to Mūnis al-Muzaffar, who was a prominent actor of the period. He presents the main lines of his political and military career and examines the role of the chamberlain, *ḥājib*, in the relations between the court and the army as well as chamberlain's relationship with the vizier. The author argues that the military became increasingly effective in the political life of the caliphate in contrast to the civil bureaucracy (p. 111). However, a periodization in terms of the influence of these two classes on political events is necessary, it can be claimed that the military became dominant in the state after the third and final vizirate of Ibn al-Furāt (d. 312/924), who was one of the preeminent viziers and the greatest opponent of Mūnis. With the death of Ibn al-Furāt, no one had a strong enough personality resist Mūnis, who reached the summit of his power in the next episode.

The third and final part, "Women and Courtiers," contains three chapters. In Chapter 6, "The Chamberlains," Nadia Maria El Cheikh focuses on the functions and duties of the chamberlain in the historical process. Unlike the previous chapter that emphasized the activities of the chamberlain outside the court, El Cheikh investigates the relations of chamberlains with the court and the *ḥaram*, particularly, the political role of Naṣr al-Ḥājib in the court. In the era of al-Muqtadir, the chamberlains increased their effectiveness in both civil and military bureaucracy and in the court and the *ḥaram*. Although there may be many reasons for this fact, two aspects strengthened the chamberlains: first, it was more difficult to access al-Muqtadir, who spent most of his time in the *ḥaram*; second, the *ḥaram* increased its social, political, and economic penetration in the caliphal administration. Chapter 7, "The Harem," also written by El Cheikh and a continuation of the previous chapter, focuses on the personalities and activities of Shaghab, *Umm al-Muqtadir* and the Qahramānah Umm Mūsá, one of the leading female figures, as well as the eunuchs who provided contact between the *ḥaram* and the court. It is not misleading to state that the main fact that made *ḥaram* members, especially Shaghab and Umm Mūsá the most influential political characters of the period was the financial crisis faced by the state. In other words, Shaghab

sometimes financed the government spending with her own wealth, and this gave her the power to take an effective position against political and military actors such as viziers and chamberlains. Similarly, Umm Mūsá became the first person approached by some candidate-viziers wishing to reach the caliph, who changed viziers often because of the financial crises. As the author notes, Umm Mūsá plotted successfully against the viziers to have them dismissed, imprisoned, and tortured and their property confiscated (p. 176). In Chapter 8, "Culture, Education, and the Court," Letizia Osti, examines the cultural and scholarly environment of the court, the hiring of tutors for the education of the caliph's children, the payment of these tutors, and the patronage of the 'ulamā'.

The appendix includes one article and three maps. The article, "Baghdād at the Time of al-Muq̄tadir," by Judith Ahola and Letizia Osti, presents textual descriptions of the canals, bridges, and markets of Baghdād. The information that is provided in this article is illustrated in detail in the third map. This article and the third map are noteworthy not only for scholars working on the political history of the 'Abbāsīd caliphate but also for those who are interested in the history of Islamic sciences in the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The chronicles identify the reign of al-Muq̄tadir with the ruin of the caliphate, but the accounts of the same chronicles indicate that Islamic cultural life and literature flourished with the patronage of the court and its surroundings and of wealthy individuals such as viziers, *kuttāb*, and heads of *dīwāns*. Hence, this period had distinctive characteristics in 'Abbāsīd history. The book's reflection on these two different perspectives will make a good contribution to the future works on 'Abbāsīd studies and on other periods of Islamic history.

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