Introduction

Why the Study of the Abbasids Matters Today

The modern world owes a great debt to medieval Islamic civilization generally, and to the Abbasid caliphate (750–1258), more particularly. In recent years a variety of popular surveys have described the critical scientific and intellectual achievements that took place in the golden age of the Abbasid capital, Baghdad, during the ninth century. The “House of Wisdom” movement patronized by the caliph al-Maʾmun (r. 813–833) promoted the revival of Classical Greek philosophy and science, long before these attracted attention in Europe in the later phases of the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment. To many readers, the names al-Razi, al-Khwarazmi, and al-Kindi are today as familiar as those of Aristotle, Ptolemy, Euclid, and Hippocrates, with both providing the two streams (ancient and medieval) that contributed to the stimulation of the Western Renaissance.¹

Islamic history was still relatively young, less than a century and a half old, when the Abbasids came on the scene in 750, after the momentous events that spanned the era of the Prophet (610–632), the reigns of his Companion successors (the Rashidun caliphs, 632–661), and the period of Islamic conquests with the Umayyad dynasty (661–750). But the Islamic empire comprised a diversity of more ancient communities (Arabs, Persians, Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, Manicheans, and Buddhists), all of whom partook in energizing the transition from the

divided world of Late Antiquity between the Roman (Byzantine) and Persian (Sasanid) empires straddling a border along the Euphrates river to a unified world of cultural and economic synthesis under the caliphate. It is tempting to study the achievements of Islamic science and culture without attention to their context in political history, but this legacy would not have gone very far without the initial guidance and resources provided by a series of Abbasid caliphs, such as al-Mansur, al-Rashid, al-Ma’mun, and al-Mu’tasim, who were keen patrons of scientific discovery and professional thought. These caliphs were also famous for their patronage of literary and religious debate, and their reigns witnessed the rise of other Arabic classics that continue to resonate in the legal practice and cultural life of Islamic society today. The *Sira* (or saga) of the Prophet Muhammad was compiled in the mid-eighth century by Ibn Ishaq, and a little later jurists such as Abu Hanifa, Malik, and al-Shafi’i contributed the ideas and texts that provided the foundations for Islamic legal thinking for centuries to come. The Abbasid court became a magnet for pioneering linguists, such as al-Khalil and Sibawayh, who laid out the rules of Arabic grammar and the correct style of expression; for poets, such as Abu Tammam and al-Buhturi; and for belles-lettres such as Ibn al-Muqaffa’, famous for his book of animal fables, *Kalila wa Dimna*, and al-Jahiz, a prolific essayist.

In spite of these legacies, the attention of modern historians to the Abbasids has been slim and uneven, with as yet no full survey available for the entirety of the history of the Abbasid caliphate. Abbasid history has often tended to be caught up in wider surveys of medieval Islamic history, which mostly tell the story of the Prophet and the rise of Islam, later conquests under the Umayyads, and then provide a sketchy look at the caliphs of Baghdad. Coverage of the Abbasids has tended to focus excessively on the reign of Harun al-Rashid, and mostly for a fairy-tale image colored more by *The Thousand and One Nights* than actual history. The focus on a period considered a golden age of the caliphate has made the first century of Abbasid rule, with names such as al-Mansur and al-Ma’mun, well known, but those of other caliphs from later centuries, such as al-Mu’tadid (r. 892–902), al-Qa’im (r. 1031–1075), al-Mustadi’ (r. 1170–1180), and al-Mustansir (r. 1226–1242), remain obscure to the general reader. As the central control of the Abbasids gave way to more assertive provincial dynasties or “successor states” such as the Tahirids, Samanids, and Buyids in tenth-century Iran, or to
the Ismaʿili Fatimids of Egypt; and as the Turkic sultanates of the Ghaznavids and Seljuks emerge in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the Abbasid caliphate becomes lost in a forest of political changes.

This study aims to provide a survey of the Abbasid caliphate – mostly as a political history, but with digressions on the social and cultural developments that accompanied the five-century period of Abbasid history. An important part of this corrective in ranging beyond the first century of the Abbasids is to appreciate the caliphate not simply in terms of its early military and territorial hegemony but as a political office that remained a central symbol of historical continuity in Islamic society and a source of legitimation to various dynasts around the Islamic world. Caliphs such as al-Mansur and al-Rashid in the eighth and ninth centuries may have held great military and territorial reach, but what later caliphs lost in military power in the tenth and eleventh centuries they were able to make up for in the reigns of al-Qadir, al-Qaʿim, al-Nasir, and al-Mustansir with an increase in their religious authority as a source of legitimacy for newly emerging dynasts. Various rulers, such as the Ghaznavids, Seljuks, Ayyubids, Ghurids, and the Delhi sultans could only project their new status as “sultans” upon receiving an edict of “blessing” from the caliph in Baghdad, who wielded a leverage similar to that of a medieval Pope in giving greater legitimacy to some rulers over others, and as such influenced the political geography of the Islamic world. To always measure the Abbasid caliphate by its military strength and territorial control in the early period overlooks the transformation of the caliphate over the centuries, and its ability to redefine its credibility and leverage in different phases of Islamic history.

A Survey of the Caliphate

To Western readers the term “caliph” remains enigmatic, and less recognizable in meaning than the terms “Caesar” or “Pope.” And even for Muslims the term can be elusive, since the “caliphate” is not an institution enshrined in Qur’anic injunctions or recommended by the Prophet, but is more an accident of history. It was a makeshift political office hastily crafted by the Companions of Muhammad to help fill the leadership vacuum left after his death in 632. The Arabic word itself, meaning “deputy” or “successor,” remained ambiguous, blurring the boundary between political and religious authority, and it remained unclear whether the term “caliph” meant “deputy of the
“Prophet” or “the representative of God on earth.” The religious and political dimensions of the leadership vacuum left by Muhammad were so strongly felt that when his Companions argued over the question they reportedly often referred to this leadership and succession challenge as “this matter” (hadha al-amr), not knowing what to call it, or whether the caliph was a religious or political leader. It took a relatively oppressive dynasty, the Umayyads (661–750), to establish the caliphate as a hereditary monarchal institution, but the full implications of the caliphal office did not crystallize until the Abbasids came to power. The Umayyads tried briefly to project a meaning of “caliph” as “deputy of God” rather than “deputy of the Prophet” during the reign of Abd al-Malik, but the experiment clearly failed, since the title was soon removed from coinage. Challenged by the family of the Prophet, Kharijites, and intertribal rivalry, the Umayyads found their only safety in projecting brute imperial force. Waves of conquest on different frontiers became a necessary distraction from internal questions of religious and political legitimacy.

The task of communicating both a political and religious meaning for the caliphal leadership, however, was far more successfully accomplished by the Abbasids, after the revolution that brought them to power in 750. As members of the Prophet’s Hashimite family, and descendants of his uncle, al-Abbas, they held a special mystique. In the last years of Umayyad rule they had joined with the Alids, descendants of the Prophet’s cousin Ali, in a revolutionary movement that was launched in Khurasan to overthrow the Umayyad dynasty, viewed by their opposition as usurpers of the greater, kin-based legitimate right of the Prophet’s family to rule. Khurasan, with further cultural influences from neighboring Transoxiana and Central Asia, also infused Abbasid caliphal pretensions with additional dimensions of charismatic authority, based on notions of messianic renewal and divine election, to make the Abbasid political office a highly religious one. The new, post-revolutionary state was referred to as dawla, a term that carries connotations of a new order, and the new caliphs assumed titles that reflected their roots in Prophetic heritage and divine support, such as al-Mansur (the Victorious), al-Mahdi (the Guided), al-Rashid (the Wise), and al-Ma’mun (the Well-Entrusted). Later court writers, such as Baladhuri and Qudama b. Ja’far, would refer to the dynasty as “the blessed dynasty” (al-dawla al-mubaraka).

In social terms, the Abbasid state brought radical change after the Umayyad period in the way it opened up the Islamic empire, transitioning
from the “Arab” kingdom of the Umayyads, which had relied on government by an Arab tribal confederacy and discouraged conversion to Islam. The Abbasid state instead opened up access to circles of power to new converts to Islam, promising an equality of sorts between the Arabs and non-Arabs, the former mawali (clients) of the Umayyad period. This trend toward Perso-Arab integration was perhaps best reflected in the office of the vizierate, which was dominated by the Iranian family of the Barmakids for many years between the reigns of al-Mahdi and Harun al-Rashid. The experiment opened the way for a stronger integration in the reign of al-Ma’mun, and the later emergence of provincial dynasties, such as those of the Tahirids and the Samanids. The Abbasids were not only aware of the social and religious diversity their empire spanned, but hammered out a legal system – in the Hanafi mold initially and with digressions to other trends later on – that ensured an attitude of flexibility in dealing with issues and groups. The institutions they put in place would later function as foundations of the great empires of Islam up until that of the Ottomans, which ended after World War I.

More than anything the name of the Abbasids has been associated with the city of Baghdad, which they founded in 762 as their new capital on the Tigris river. Baghdad grew rapidly to become the largest urban center of the medieval world – perhaps only matched in size by Constantinople – and it grew into an economic and intellectual powerhouse. The city comprised a learned society benefiting from numerous bookshops and public libraries, and became a hub for students traveling in search of knowledge.\(^2\) The eleventh-century Khatib al-Baghdadi best described the sense of wonder surrounding Baghdad, when he said: “In the entire world, there has not been a city which could compare with Baghdad in size and splendor, or in the number of scholars and great personalities ... Consider the numerous roads, markets, lanes, mosques, bathhouses, and shops – all these distinguish the city from all others.”\(^3\) As for its reputation as a center of commerce, Baghdad was famous even earlier; a late eighth-century Chinese traveler, Du Huan,


stated: “Everything produced from the earth is available there ... Brocade, embroidered silks, pearls, and other gems are displayed all over markets and street shops.”

The founding of Baghdad as the new capital of the Abbasid empire on the Tigris signaled not just a political shift from the Umayyad capital Damascus but a cultural and economic one as well. The Abbasids recognized their debt to the Iranian east that had brought them to power, and became strongly attached to the strategic location of Baghdad in the richest agricultural heartland of Mesopotamia, which was helped by the easy river transport that the Tigris and Euphrates provided. With the proximity of the ruins of the Sasanid capital Ctesiphon – famous for its Arch of Khusraw – and the vivid archaeological record elsewhere in Iraq of Assyrian and Babylonian ruins, the founder of Baghdad, al-Mansur, was making a statement of final imperial inheritance of ancient Near Eastern empires. He was helped in this by a diversity of communities that placed hopes on better times under the Abbasids: Nestorian Christians who were deeply at odds with the Church of Constantinople; Zoroastrians who yearned for an ally against Manicheans and Mazdakites; Jews who still remembered the harsh days of Byzantine rule under Heraclius; and Shiʿi Muslims who considered the Abbasids, as Hashimites, closer to the principle of rule by the family of the Prophet than the Umayyads. And these were still different from the hopes of the provinces, such as Khurasan, which wanted to be in the driving seat of the empire; Armenia, which sought a measure of self-rule; and the Hijaz, which looked for better integration with a caliphate always based in the north. In the inaugural age of the Abbasid dynasty it seemed that everyone wanted this state to succeed. The caliph was not viewed as a foreign leader but as a promising ally, and generally as the enabler of political stability, social order, and economic prosperity. Al-Mansur was in many ways Persia’s Cyrus in Arabic garb.

The general outline of Abbasid history defies a simple model of rise, prosperity, and decline. There was more than one moment of decline, and more than one of surprising recovery. This was noticed already in the tenth century by writers in the Abbasid chancery, such as Ibrahim

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b. Hilal al-Sabiʾ (d. 384/994), who wrote in one letter on behalf of the caliph to the Buyid king Bakhtiyar, that “you and others have seen how [over the years] the Abbasid state (al-dawla al-ʿabbasiyya) weakens at times, and revives at others . . . and yet in all conditions it has firm roots.” Al-Sabiʾ explains that turmoil when it happens “[is] by way of divine instruction for the subjects and admonishment to them . . . to a duration that God has preordained,” and that it has also been a pattern that when God again decrees the restoration (of the caliphate), he does so by sending someone who is loyal to its cause, and that no sooner does this happen than we find the state becoming “young again, renewed in vigor, and sturdy as before.” Although al-Sabiʾ’s reasoning for these ups and downs is religious, it is interesting nevertheless that he and his administrative cohorts held a historical view based on cycles in the fortunes of the Abbasid state.

The reign of Harun al-Rashid was undoubtedly a peak in Abbasid power. When it was followed by the succession crisis and civil war between his children, al-Amin and al-Maʾmun, and the rise of the first provincial dynasty of the Iranian Tahirids in the east, it may well seem like the end of the caliphate’s story for traditional historians. Anyone trying to tell al-Muʿtasim, al-Maʾmun’s successor, that he ruled over a period of decline might well have received the answer he allegedly once gave the Byzantine emperor: “The least of the territories ruled by the least of my subjects provides a revenue larger than your whole dominion.”

Al-Muʿtasim built the new city of Samarra, some 60 miles up the Tigris from Baghdad, which for about half a century was the new Abbasid capital, filled with palatial mansions, military cantonments, athletic and hunting grounds. The frenzy of luxury and palace building at Samarra reached its peak with al-Mutawakkil, who built his own city of al-Mutawakiliyya in what reflected the revived ability of the state to spend, an ability to exercise central control over land-tax revenue collection, and a state treasury awash with funds.

After the assassination of al-Mutawakkil in the mid-ninth century the Abbasid state, which then had a string of short-lived, beleaguered caliphs, could have been written off, but toward the end of that century

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al-Muʿtadid brought about a military revival, and the Abbasid state went on to garner wealth from tax revenues that supported a glamorous court in the early tenth century. Ibn Khaldun, famous for his theory of how urban culture dilutes the ties of tribal and family solidarity, and how luxury breeds political feebleness, could find proof for his theories in history during this period, as the Abbasids were overwhelmed by the hardy Buyid mountain-dwellers from the Caspian region. If there was a time when the Abbasid state seemed on the verge of oblivion, it was with the era of Buyid domination over the regions of Iraq and Iran (945–1055). Caliphs lost all territorial control, and they became no more than emblems of the past in the Islamic world, reduced to having only their names included on coinage and invoked for blessing in the sermon (*khutba*) of the Friday prayer. Buyid adherence to Shiʿi Islam (in its Zaydi and Twelver forms) added more pressure on the Sunni Abbasid caliphate.

But then historical circumstances turned against the Buyids with the rise of new Turkic dynasties, the Ghaznavids and the Seljuks, who espoused Sunni Islam and indirectly revived the importance of the Abbasid caliphal institution by aiming to act as its protectors against the Buyids and the rising Fatimids in Egypt. This coincided with a time when two Abbasid caliphs, al-Qadir, followed by al-Qaʿim, were actively working on reviving in a new way the religious authority of the office. They had cultivated strong ties with the religious class of the ʿulama, postured as guardians of orthodox Islamic belief in an age of great schism between Sunni Islam and Ismaʿili Shiʿism, and even set about articulating, in almost ideological terms, an official religious testament – the famous Qadiri Creed or *al-ʿaqida al-qadiriyya*, first made public in 409/1018. The main challenge in this conflict was no longer the Buyids, but the Ismaʿili Fatimids in Egypt, who for a while seemed on the verge of overrunning the entire Middle East and ending the Abbasid caliphate.

During the Seljuk sultanate the Abbasid caliphs did not wield political control over territory any more than they had under the Buyids, but the relationship between caliph and sultan was markedly improved since both the Abbasids and Seljuks were Sunni, and their relationship found its best moment of equilibrium during the vizierate of Nizam al-Mulk, the Seljuks’ famous Iranian chief minister and ideological architect of the Islamic educational institution known as the madrasa. Helped by their unusually long reigns, the Abbasid caliphs al-Qadir
(r. 991–1031) and al-Qa’im (r. 1031–1075) were able to revive the position of the Abbasids as a focus of Islamic and historical loyalty, and were aided in this effort by prolific jurists, such as al-Mawardi, who helped them articulate their authority as “Imams,” as he laid out the political theory in his famous treatise *al-Ahkam al-Sultaniyya*, the first succinct theory of government from an Islamic juristic point of view. In Baghdad, the Abbasids and Seljuks each had their own palace as a base, with Dar al-Khilafa for the caliphs, and Dar al-Mamlaka (later Dar al-Saltana) for the sultans. This situation remained stable until the caliph tried to assert a claim for more control in the Iraq region. This was bound to happen given the distant anchor of the Seljuk empire in eastern Iran at Marw, and the Abbasid memory of their once wider scope of territorial sovereignty.

An attempt to assert renewed military power was put forward by the caliph al-Mustarshid (r. 1118–1135), and although he was defeated, his attempted move to empower the caliphate in Iraq seems to have galvanized later Abbasids into persisting with the project of trying to shake off Seljuk hegemony and revive their real political authority. Al-Mustarshid’s successor, al-Muqtafi, gradually pieced together control over Baghdad, and extended it over southern Iraq. With an economic and political base in the Iraq region, a new caliphal state became a cohesive entity from Baghdad to Basra, and in the twelfth century the caliphs found new allies in place of the Seljuks with the rise of the Zangids, Ayyubids, and Rum Seljuks in Syria and Asia Minor. The background of war against the Western Crusades indirectly strengthened the position of the caliph as a central religious symbol for Islam. A diploma of investiture from the caliph to a Rum Seljuk or Ayyubid prince, usually accompanied by a robe of honor, a standard, a ring, and a sword, functioned like a coronation as well as religious blessing. Al-Mustadiʾ’s designation of the Rum Seljuk prince Qilij Arslan II (r. 1156–1192) as “sultan” therefore raised the latter’s profile in Asia Minor above that of other neighboring principalities, such as those of the Artuqids and Danishmends, and similarly gave the Ayyubid sultan Saladin much-needed legitimacy, after once having served merely as vassal of the Zangids of Aleppo.8

The climax of Abbasid efforts at revival finally culminated with the near half-century reign of al-Nasir (r. 1180–1225), the longest-reigning Abbasid caliph, who was able to exercise political authority in Iraq without any outside influence. Al-Nasir’s success was greatly helped by his crafting of a religious policy that attracted both Sunni and Shi’i loyalty, and later by his addition of a new dimension of Sufism. The twelfth century was a time of rising Sufi piety, especially with the saintly figure Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani (d. 561/1166), whose shrine in Baghdad became a place of pilgrimage that rivaled the shrines of Abu Hanifa and the Shi’i Imams. Al-Nasir joined Sufism through its Suhrawardi movement in 1207, and appointed as his key advisor the leader of this movement, Shihab al-Din al-Suhrawardi, who acted as his envoy on many official diplomatic missions. The caliph cultivated a chivalric order, known as Futuwwa, that centered on loyalty to his leadership and on practicing a set of virtues that was considered embodied in the heroic career of the caliph Ali. The caliph encouraged various leaders, including princes of the Ayyubids (1169–1260), Rum Seljuks (1077–1307), Ghurids (1000–1215), and others, to join this movement, envisioning the Abbasid caliph as a Grand Master within the frame of this chivalric order. Al-Nasir’s long reign lent stability to his rule, and he was greatly aided by the help of a capable minister from Shiraz, Ibn al-Qassab, who helped expand Abbasid control over Khuzistan, Isfahan, Qazwin, and Rayy (modern Tehran). But above all, the Abbasid caliphate was helped in this twilight phase by foreign developments, namely the rise of new dynasts in the east, such as the Ghurids in India, who were bitter rivals to al-Nasir’s enemies the Khwarazm shahs (1077–1231), and helped distract the latter, although the end of the Khwarazm shahs actually came with the invasion of Genghis Khan.

Abbasid Baghdad continued to progress during the reign of the caliph al-Mustansir, who built the famous madrasa of al-Mustansiriyya, an architectural and artistic wonder of its time, which was also the first to harbor an ecumenical tendency by including academic training in all four schools of Sunni jurisprudence, rather than only one, as was the case with previous madrasas. Al-Mustansir maintained an efficient army that on more than one occasion fended off Mongol attacks in areas adjacent to Baghdad. In order for the caliphate to survive at that critical juncture in its history it needed a vigilant and steady leader skilled at diplomacy and maintaining the social and religious unity of Baghdad in an hour of crisis. Al-Mustansir’s successor, al-Musta’sim, was hardly the capable
personality necessary for dealing with internal Sunni–Shi‘i stresses and the imminent Mongol threat. His court was notorious for being manipulated by his treacherous minister Ibn al-‘Alqami and for the rivalry amongst its officials. This seemed all too reminiscent of earlier reigns when a caliph withdrew into the background while ministers manipulated the state, but with the added calamities of natural disasters such as flooding in Baghdad, and rising religious tensions between Sunnis and Shi‘a in Iraq. It was within this atmosphere that the final cataclysm came in 1258, with Hulegu’s invasion of Baghdad and his destruction of the Abbasid caliphate.

Perceptions of the Abbasid Caliphate

Christian Views (Latin and Byzantine)

By its sheer longevity – five centuries – the Abbasid caliphate built up an image of antiquity in Islamic culture and took on the semblance of an indispensable political model in the Islamic world. This durability turned Abbasid caliphal legitimacy into something quite separate from the original circumstances that brought them to overthrow the Umayyads in 750. Foreign leaders in the Christian West always remained intrigued by the caliphate, and tried to establish some form of relations with it. Charlemagne famously sent more than one embassy to Baghdad in the reign of Harun al-Rashid in the late eighth century to establish an alliance against the Umayyads of Spain and acquire some access to Jerusalem and the Holy Land, and in 906 a Frankish princess, named Bertha, in northern Italy sent an embassy in the reign of al-Muktafi, also seeking diplomatic relations, and proposing marriage.

Medieval Western sources often referred to the caliph using a corrupted spelling of the caliph’s other title, Commander of the Faithful (amir al-mu‘minin), in distorted expressions, such as “Elmiram mommini,” “Miralomin,” or “Amir munmilin.”

Carolingian sources, such as Einhard, referred to Harun al-Rashid as “king of the Persians,” still categorizing the nations of the world under ancient labels, and in spite of Latin ignorance regarding Islam, an even later chronicler, William of Tyre (d. 1185), cast a favorable image of the Abbasids when it came to

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comparing their treatment of Christians, which he contrasted with the situation under the Fatimids and the Seljuks. The existence of Islam as a religion was tied by some medieval writers to the very existence of the Abbasid caliphate, as they latched optimistically onto the pro-Abbasid legend that the caliphs would last until they handed over the leadership in apocalyptic terms to Jesus on his Second Coming, which, the Latin West believed, spelled the coming conversion of all Muslims to Christianity.

On the Byzantine side, attitudes were more realistic. A history of conflict with the Abbasids was interspersed with many phases of cultural exchange and a perception of the caliph as an equal and rival to the emperor. Writing from Constantinople to the Abbasid caliph al-Muqtadir (r. 908–932) to ask him to improve the conditions of the populace in Cyprus, Patriarch Nicholas Mysticus (901–907, 912–925), who was regent for the young emperor Constantine VII, struck a warm diplomatic tone. In the format of missives usually sent to the Islamic ruler, with a double text, one in Greek written in gold letters and a parallel Arabic text written in silver, on purple parchment, the patriarch stated: “There are two lordships, that of the Saracens and that of the Romans, which stand above all lordship on earth, shining out like the two mighty beacons in the firmament.” In spite of the rivalry, the Byzantines viewed the Abbasids, as they had the Sasanids before, as an equal power and an anchor of organized statehood and society.

In the eleventh century the historian Ibn al-Athir depicted another moment in this mutual recognition following the Byzantine defeat by the Seljuks at the battle of Manzikert in 1071. After paying a staggering ransom to the Seljuk sultan Alp Arslan for freedom from captivity, the Byzantine emperor Romanus Diogenes reportedly asked, before he set out on his return journey across Asia Minor back to Constantinople,

10 Margaret Meserve, Empires of Islam in Renaissance Historical Thought (Cambridge, MA, 2008), 156–161.
where the caliph was (i.e. the direction of Baghdad), and when this was indicated, he turned to that direction and bowed, as if in military salute to the higher authority in the Islamic world that had defeated him.  

Less typical perhaps was the reaction of the more secular-minded emperor Frederick of Hohenstaufen when he came to Jerusalem in 1229 to take over the city in an arrangement he had made with the Ayyubid al-Kamil of Egypt. While touring the religious sites of Jerusalem, he is reported to have asked his guide, Fakhr al-Din, about the caliph, who he was and what his office meant. “He is the cousin of our Prophet,” Fakhr al-Din said, “and the caliphate continues in the Prophetic house, from father to son, in succession.” At this Frederick reportedly marveled, and scoffed at the process of selecting leaders in the West, most likely in reference to the papacy, with which he was at odds (he had been excommunicated by Pope Gregory IX). Frederick replied: “This is indeed a sound principle, but that rabble [i.e. the Franks] take someone from the dumpster, an ignoramus, who has no connection to Jesus whatsoever and they put him in charge, standing in as deputy of Jesus.”

Frederick’s attempt to compare the caliph with the Pope was not merely the gripe of a Western monarch involved in a fight with the head of the Christian Church. There was a growing tendency in the Middle East in the eleventh and twelfth centuries to compare the situations of Islam and Christianity. Muslim chroniclers often took the bold step during this period of comparing the positions of caliph and Pope by stating that the latter held the position of “caliph of the Franks” (khalifat al-firanj). If this merely sounded as if the Pope was a Christian “Commander of the Faithful,” Ibn Wasil goes farther by trying to explain the comparison in pointed terms, stating that the Pope is “the caliph of Jesus (khalifat al-masih) among them, and the one standing in for him” (al-qa’im maqamahu), and to him belongs “the authority to permit and forbid, and he is the one who crowns the kings with their crowns, and installs them in office.” The comparison established by Ibn Wasil would enjoy wide circulation in Islamic writing over the next two centuries, featuring in the encyclopedic

work of Qalqashandi, and a mirror for princes by a descendant of the Abbasids.\textsuperscript{16}

\textit{Islamic Views (from Egypt to India)}

In spite of its ups and downs, the Abbasid caliphate remained an enduring institution that cast a spell of perennial acceptance over the Islamic world. The fourteenth-century Ibn al-Tiqtaqa, author of \textit{al-Fakhri}, a treatise on government, best summarized the view amongst Muslims:

Know that this dynasty was one of the greatest dynasties. It administered the world by an administration combining religion with the state . . . The caliphate and the sovereignty remained in it for the space of 600 (Hijri) years, then dynasties attacked it, such as the Buyid dynasty, which included a hero such as Adud al-Dawla; the Seljuk dynasty, which included Tughrilbeg; the Khwarazm shah dynasty which included Ala al-Din, whose army comprised 400,000 troops; and the Fatimids . . . All that, yet their rule was continuous, nor was any dynasty strong enough to strip them of their power, nor to efface their traces. Nay rather, one of these above mentioned rulers used to collect, muster, and lead great armies till he arrived at Baghdad, and when he arrived, he would seek an audience of the Caliph, and, when he was given it, would kiss the ground before him, and the utmost favor he sought from him was that the Caliph would “present” him with a standard and robe of honor.\textsuperscript{17}

Although lacking military power, the caliphate stood as a vital institution of legitimation to various dynasts. The fifteenth-century Ibn Shahin al-Zahiri (d. 873/1469) states that no prince could aspire to the rank of “sultan” without first having a diploma for this from the caliph.\textsuperscript{18} The acquisition of this honorific from Baghdad was not something just filed away in archives, but was announced in public declarations, and commemorated on coins and in architectural inscriptions. The Rum Seljuk sultans included mention of their alliance with


the caliph in inscriptions on their monuments, such as with Kay Kawus I (r. 1211–1219) who referred to himself as “Proof (burhan) of Commander of the Faithful” in the fatḥ-nama inscribed on the walls of Antalya after its conquest, and his successor, Kay Qubad I (r. 1219–1237), used the same title in inscriptions on his architectural projects. The Ghurid sultan Ghiyath al-Din Muhammad b. Sam (r. 1163–1203), who ruled over a territory roughly equivalent to that of modern-day Afghanistan, included mention of his monarchal titles (al-sultan al-muʿazzam and al-shahanshah al-aʿzam) along with his newly acquired title from the caliph as Qasim Amir al-Muʿminin (“partner of the Commander of the Faithful”) on the famous minaret of Jam – the tallest in Islam up until that time – which he constructed in 570/1174, probably specifically to commemorate his newly acquired honors. The arrival of a caliphal endorsement was usually celebrated with processions and great fanfare. The ceremony of the investiture of the Ayyubid al-Malik al-ʿAdil in 604/1207 provides a representative snapshot of this, and similar events are attested for Nur al-Din and Saladin earlier.

Ibn Wasil states that when Shihab al-Din al-Suhrawardi, al-Nasir’s emissary, approached Damascus, carrying the investiture honorific (al-tashrif al-imami), al-ʿAdil, together with his sons, al-Ashraf and al-Muʿazzam, and a formation of troops, met the emissary outside the city, and all the public turned out for the occasion. Al-ʿAdil held an official reception in the citadel, where he sat and accepted the honors. The caliph’s emissaries then invested him with a black cloak and turban embroidered with gold, placed a heavy, jewel-studded gold necklace around his neck, and girded him with a sword whose scabbard glittered with gold. While this was happening, a banner was unfurled over his head, with all the titles of the caliph inscribed in white on the black cloth of the banner. Special commemorative (donative) gold coins were then showered on him, while the emissary handed other robes of honor to al-ʿAdil’s sons, and his minister, Ibn Shukr. A proclamation was then read that described the investiture, and listed the new titles bestowed by


the caliph on al-ʿAdil, “shahanshah, king of kings, friend of the Commander of the Faithful (shahanshah, malik al-muluk, khalil amir al-muʾminin).” After the ceremony al-ʿAdil mounted a white horse, rode outside the citadel for a distance, and then reentered through the gate of victory. 21

The description of this ceremony was something that was repeated from Cairo to Konya, and from Yemen to Delhi. The titles, symbols, and political language surrounding the event linked a myriad of kingdoms and principalities in a federative loyalty to the Abbasid caliphate. The Abbasid court in Baghdad also provided to rising dynasties the model for building courtly institutions and the diplomatic language associated with it. 22

Baghdad stood as a model of reference not simply due to the Abbasid caliphate but also as an intellectual and cultural center of the Islamic world. Prior to the rise of Egypt’s al-Azhar as a center of Sunnism in the Mamluk period, the Islamic world looked to Baghdad for the best colleges – particularly the Nizamiyya founded in 457/1065 by Nizam al-Mulk – which graduated the brightest scholars on Islam and trained the gifted in the Arabic literary craft. The list of these luminaries includes such names as the philologist Ibn al-Anbari, who stayed on as professor in the Nizamiyya; the Andalusian jurist Abu Bakr b. al-Arabi, who reportedly took much new learning back to Seville; the historian Ibn Asakir; the biographer of Saladin, al-ʿImad al-Isfahani; and the Iranian poet Saʿdi of Shiraz. A student of al-Ghazali, al-Mahdi b. Tumart, who came from North Africa, took not only debating skills and the latest ideas on Islamic interpretation from his stint in Baghdad but also a recipe for regime change, as he cultivated the daʿwa (mission) of the Almohad dynasty, which supplanted the Almoravids in 1147.

The Abbasid imprint on Islamic society was so strong that no one could conceive of continuity in the world without an Abbasid caliph. The aforementioned Ibn al-Tiqtaqa described how even after Baghdad had fallen there was great reluctance even amongst the non-Muslim...

21 Ibn Wasil, Mufarrij, 3:180–182.
Mongols to do away with the position of caliph. “[The Abbasids] had in the hearts of their people,” according to the author, “a position not approached by that of any other in the world. So much so that, when the Sultan Hulaku conquered Baghdad and wanted to kill the Caliph, Abu Ahmad Abdallah al-Musta‘sim, they told him that, if the Caliph were killed, the order of the world would be deranged, the sun veiled, the rain and crops withheld.”

Ibn al-Tiqtaqa was looking back on the Abbasid past in a “mirror for princes” style, but according to one historian was also reflecting, as St. Augustine did in 410 CE, after the fall of the Rome to Goths, on the meaning of the fall of the capital of an empire in the divine plan of history.

After the fall of Baghdad and the move of a shadow Abbasid caliphate to Cairo, starting with the reign of the Mamluk sultan Baybars, many political leaders, including the Mamluks, looked to the caliph as a source of legitimacy. But there were increasing experiments to discover a new legitimacy by applying the tasks that had made the Abbasid family central in the Islamic world. The Mamluks therefore became pioneers in the development of a strong interest in protecting and refurbishing the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, and protecting the pilgrimage caravans to Mecca. The Mamluk sultans emphasized their religious functions as “custodians of the two sanctuaries” (khadim al-haramayn), which ironically was from ancient times the honorific purportedly given by the Prophet to his uncle, al-Abbas – the task of providing water for the pilgrims and guarding the keys of the Ka‘ba. The Ottomans would later inherit these tasks when they took over the Mamluk domains. Patronage of the ‘ulama and construction of madrasas would also thrive under the Mamluks as religiously honorific tasks, but there was never really a substitute for the actual presence of the caliphs in Baghdad. Only there could one discover the historical continuity of the caliphate, and only there could the memory of caliphs such as al-Mansur, al-Rashid, and al-Ma‘mun be truly evoked.

In looking back on Abbasid history one finds a range of lasting influences and contributions of the Abbasids. The rise of the dynasty stimulated theories on government and law, encouraged a more expansive role for the Hashimite family with its Alid and Abbasid wings, and

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in time fostered a balanced interaction between Sunni and Shi‘i currents in spite of occasional discord. Caliphs such as al-Nasir and al-Mustansir managed this interaction more successfully than many later rulers in the region. In their administrations the Abbasids encouraged an atmosphere of openness to other religions, and employed individuals of diverse faiths – most prominently, a significant cluster of Christians who over the years served as ministers and court officials. With their capital standing at the crossroads of cultures, the Abbasids became the shepherds of international commerce, ethnic mixing, and cosmopolitanism. The caliphs themselves reflected this diversity, some with mothers who were Greek (al-Wathiq, al-Mu‘tamid, al-Muqtadi, and al-Radi), Turkish (al-Muktafari, al-Nasir, and al-Zahir), Armenian (al-Qa‘im, al-Mustanjid, al-Mustadi‘), and Abyssinian (al-Muktafari and al-Musta‘im).

There is perhaps one other important imprint that the Abbasids left in regional terms, and that is in their forging of the idea of Iraq as a unique entity, thereby shaping the foundations of the modern nation-state of Iraq. In recent years some publications that are apologetics for Western colonialism and the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 which fragmented the country have been misleading in denying any sense of cohesion for the land between the Tigris and Euphrates, or even that it should be called Iraq – preferring Mesopotamia instead. The Greek term “Mesopotamia” was the name that the Romans once gave to their easternmost province, and it was picked up in the modern period by British colonial officials – and in a restricted sense. Ancient geographers actually defined the label broadly – with Strabo defining it as all the land between the Tigris and Euphrates, while Herodotus viewed Mesopotamia as stretching from the Taurus to the Persian Gulf.\footnote{Hamish Cameron, \textit{Making Mesopotamia: Geography and Empire in a Romano-Iranian Borderland} (Leiden, 2019), 7–12.} Classical Arab geographers, such as al-Muqaddasi and Ibn Hawqal, recognized the region of Mesopotamia as “Iraq,” and, while this label could ebb and flow in territorial definition the way Misr (Egypt) did, in both cases rivers defined the core of these regions.\footnote{Abu‘l-Fida, \textit{Taqwim al-Buldan}, ed. M. Reinaud (Paris, 1840), 291. The thirteenth-century al-Qazwini even stretched the term Iraq to include Mosul: \textit{Athar al-Bilad wa Akhbar al-‘Ibad} (Beirut, n.d.), 419.} Abbasid methods of provincial administration reinforced this sometimes, such as when the term “al-Iraq” was inscribed on a gold dinar for the year 199/814.
(see coin illustrations), and medieval chroniclers enhanced the label further when they spoke of “the people of Iraq” (ahl al-ʿIraq). The foundation of Baghdad as a new capital and the inevitable immediate trade connections this city encouraged with towns such as Basra and Mosul created an economic zone of revenue generation for what would become the home province of the early Abbasid caliphs.

Caliphs in distress tried on more than one occasion to relocate to Mosul. Al-Muʿtadid seems to have spent more time there than he did in Baghdad, and in later centuries Mosul with its provincial dynasties helped strengthen the hand of later Abbasid caliphs when they sought to revive their authority – as happened when Nur al-Din Zangi sided with the caliph al-Muqtasi against the Seljuks. With the largest tax revenue of the Abbasid state coming from the Tigris-Euphrates region, Iraq was the home province of the dynasty. And even when the authority of the caliphs declined politically under Buyid and Seljuk rule, by their trenchant presence in Baghdad for five centuries the Abbasids kept the particularity of the Iraq province going. The importance of this Abbasid heritage to the identity of the region, along with the interconnectedness of its cities, were no doubt self-evident factors to British colonial officials, such as Gertrude Bell and Sir Percy Cox, when they set out after World War I to shape the boundaries of the modern nation-state of Iraq, and placed a Hashimite monarch on the country’s throne in 1921.  

Bell, in particular, described things in almost messianic terms, when she said of Faisal’s installation as king on 23 August 1921: “It has been 700 years since an Arab king walked among his Mesopotamian subjects.”

The Sources for Writing Abbasid History

Given the range of influences of the Abbasid caliphate on the medieval and modern periods, it is surprising how little work has been done to survey Abbasid history from beginning to end. In contrast, one can

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28 Lisa Cooper, In Search of Kings and Conquerors: Gertrude Bell and the Archaeology of the Middle East (London, 2017), 232.
find more readily available surveys of political history for provincial dynasties, such as the Buyids, Ghaznavids, Seljuks, and even the Saffarids and the Aghlabids. For the Abbasids, however, the picture remains scattered, and needs to be compiled from a variety of specialized studies and primary sources in order to fill the gaps for the later, under-studied phases (tenth to thirteenth centuries) and sketch a general history of the dynasty. Although in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries significant attention was paid to early Abbasid history and archaeology, the pendulum swung the other way after World War II, with a new emphasis on the provinces of the caliphate and the provincial dynasties. This shift maintained the neglect of the later Abbasid centuries, and added to it a sideling of the topic of the caliphate in general.

This lopsided situation began to change in the 1980s with new contributions on the early Abbasids by M. A. Shaban, J. Lassner, and E. Daniel (and P. Crone and G. Hawting on the Umayyads). The writings of Hugh Kennedy on both the Umayyads and the Abbasids helped energize a renewed look at the history of the caliphate, and brought this topic back to the academic center stage and the general reader at the same time. His surveys of the Abbasids included the detailed *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphat*es and, more recently, *When Baghdad Ruled the Muslim World* (also published under the title *The Court of the Caliphs*), which he labeled as “lighthearted”; but in both cases he tended to stop with the Buyid entry into Baghdad, and his work still awaited further analytic development and enhancement by information from other primary sources. We may also need to bear in mind that throughout the hiatus in Western studies on the caliphate, there was a steady stream of publications on the Abbasids in Arabic by Iraqi scholars. The list of those includes such names as Abd al-Aziz al-Duri, Saleh Ahmad al-Ali, Farouk Umar, Mustafa Jawad, Nasir al-Naqshbandi, Yusuf Ghunayma, Isa Salman, Gurgis Awwad, and Naji Ma’ruf, whose work can be found in journals such as *Sumer, al-‘Maskukat*, and *al-Majma’ al-‘Ilmi al-‘Iraqi*, in addition to monographs by some of them.

The state of evidence for Abbasid history has also provided a challenge for the historian. In material terms, we find, for example, that there is an ample resource of Abbasid coins in museum collections around the world, but these have never been systematically analyzed, and there is as yet no full catalog of Abbasid coinage similar to the one...
we have for the Umayyads.\textsuperscript{29} Abbasid archaeology, however, unlike numismatics, has left few traces. In spite of the detailed picture given by the eleventh-century Khatib al-Baghdadi of the Round City of al-Mansur, once located on Baghdad’s west side, we lack any remnants of his Golden Gate Palace with its iconic green dome. From a topographic point view, certain shrines, such as the Mosque of Abu Hanifa and the tomb of Ma’rūf al-Karkhi (along with the Kazimayn Mosque), can help in locating respectively the Rusafa of al-Mahdi on the east side and the Round City on the west side, since each of these was adjacent to these religious structures. Some compensation for those studying the profile of the Abbasid court and the urban rhythm of the Abbasid town can be sought with the varied state of ruins at Samarra, Raqqa, and Ukhaydir.

Art historians and archaeologists, such as K. A. C. Creswell, Ernst Herzfeld, and Gertrude Bell, pioneered the surveying and excavation of Abbasid monuments at Samarra in the period just before World War I, and more recently important studies on archaeology have appeared by Alastair Northedge (on Samarra), Michael Meinecke (on Raqqa), and more generally by Marcus Milwright and Alan Walmsley, but all these remain small in proportion to the historical presence of the Abbasids. The main Abbasid city on the east side succumbed to the destruction wrought by the Mongols in two waves (Hulegu’s in 1258 and Tamerlane’s in 1393 and 1400). Today, a few exceptions can evoke the medieval atmosphere: a bridge over the Harba river, attributed to al-Mustansir, is the only known all-brick bridge in Iraq; the Mustansiriyya madrasa dating to 1234 (even if heavily restored); and a wrongly attributed “Abbasid palace” (al-Qasr al-Abbasi), which is more likely a madrasa. The Khaffafin Mosque, once constructed by Zumurrud Khatun, al-Mustadi’’s wife, and the Qumrīyya Mosque, begun by al-Nasir and completed by al-Mustansir, were both rebuilt in later centuries. A market building called Khan Mirjan, dating to the Jalayrīds in 1359, possibly resembles Abbasid structures that were built in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries to a much closer extent than the restored structures.

In order to write Abbasid history we are left with a limited set of primary written sources for each phase of the caliphate’s existence, and

\textsuperscript{29} Michel G. Klat, \textit{Catalogue of the Post-Reform Dirhams: The Umayyad Dynasty} (London, 2002).
it may be worth providing an overview of these. For the early period and the high caliphate during the eighth and ninth centuries the historian has recourse to the most famous of the Arabic chronicles, *Tarikh al-Rusul wa’l-Muluk* (*The History of the Prophets and Kings*) by Muhammad b. Jarir al-Tabari (d. 310/923). This chronicle, which stops in 302/914, can be cross-examined with information provided by the *Tarikh* (*History*) of Ya’qubi (d. 284/897), which stops in 259/872, the accounts of Baladhuri (d. 279/892) in his *Ansab al-Ashraf* and *Futuh al-Buldan*, and the factual compendium book on Islamic heritage, *al-Maarif*, by Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889). And to these one can add some other general histories, such as *al-Akhhbar al-Tiwal* by al-Dinawari (d. 282/895) and *Muruj al-Dhabab* of al-Mas’udi (d. 345/956). All these primary sources usually also double as the key sources for writing the histories of the earlier Rashidun and Umayyad caliphates, but they differ regarding the Abbasids in that their authors were either contemporary with events they describe or closer in chronological distance to past events, and this has lent these authors a façade of reliability when it comes to reporting on the Abbasid period.

A useful bridge can then be found in a cluster of geographical treatises that span the tenth century, the most famous of which are undoubtedly Ibn Khurdadhbih’s *al-Masalik wa’l-Mamalik* (*The Book of Routes and Realms*), al-Muqaddasi’s *Ahsan al-Taqasim fi Ma’rifat al-Aqalim* (*The Best Divisions for the Knowledge of the Regions*), and Ibn Hawqal’s *Surat al-Ard* (*A View of the World*). These books provide information on regional economic resources, landmarks, a combination of history and legend surrounding locales, and the tenth-century take on ethnography. The heyday of the administrative class of the court during this same period also makes available some manuals of administration, such as *Kitab al-Kharaj wa Sina’at al-Kitaba* (*The Book of Revenues and the Craft of Writing*) by Qudama b. Ja’far (d. 337/948), *al-Wuzara’ wa’l-Kuttab* (*The Book of the Ministers and Scribes*) by al-Jahshiyari (d. 331/942), and *al-Wuzara’* (*The Ministers*) and *Rusum Dar al-Khilafa* (*The Rules and Regulations of the Abbasid Court*) by Hilal al-Sabi’ (d. 448/1056). A widely cited work, *Kitab al-Awrq*, by al-Suli (d. 335/946), the renowned chess master and courtier, focuses heavily on poetry and the gossipy side of the Abbasid court, but gives the view of someone associated with the ruling dynasty. Although the work of the humanists and the litterateurs can be dated in origin largely with the work of al-Jahiz (d. 255/869), it is really in the tenth century that a new wave of
moralizing and entertaining literature takes off, with writers such as al-Tanukhi (d. 384/994), Abu‘l-Faraj al-Isfahani (d. 356/967), al-Tha‘alibi (d. 429/1038), or the twelfth-century heritage compendium *al-Tadhkira al-Hamduniyya* by Ibn Hamdun. Historical writing was influenced by the new overt approach to draw lessons from history in the *Tajarib al-Uumam* (*The Experiences of Nations*) by Miskawayh (d. 421/1030), whose goal was instructing rulers on wiser political control than the enlightenment of the average citizen. At the western extremity of the Islamic world, in al-Andalus, a new phenomenon developed in the tenth century with the growing interest in all that was happening in the central Islamic lands, and particularly in Iraq. *Al-‘Iqd al-Farid* (*The Unique Necklace*) by Ibn Abd Rabbih (d. 328/940) in many ways provides a succinct anthology of what was required in a high-culture education alongside religious knowledge. Ibn Abd Rabbih reconciles elements from the literary writings of al-Jahiz and Ibn Qutayba, and one cannot but note the paradox of a writer working under Umayyad patronage – and in the year they declared themselves caliphs (929) – and yet expending great effort in preserving Abbasid heritage.

The literature of the *‘ulama* flourished during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, a period that is usually described as a “Sunni revival” accompanying the emergence of the madrasa. The hallmark of this literature is the biographical dictionary (*tabaqat*) of scholars based in one town or another. The fourteen-volume *Tarikh Baghdad* by Khatib al-Baghdadi (d. 463/1071) gives the illusion of great promise for all manner of detail on the political and social history of the Abbasid metropolis. In reality, this is a biographical dictionary, mainly of religious scholars but also, albeit briefly, of key figures who lived in Baghdad, or were connected with the Abbasid dynasty in some way, up until the time of the author. Ibn al-Dubaythi (d. 637/1239) produced a sequel (*Dhayl Tarikh Baghdad*) with a similar approach later on, and later there was another, by Ibn al-Najjar (d. 643/1245). Khatib’s *Tarikh* is heavily infused with hadiths of dubious authenticity, information about the teachers and students of scholars, and much lore about these scholars. His work sets the benchmark for the resource needed to study a field, which the longtime Harvard Islamicist Roy Mottahedeh has called “ulamalogy.” The book invited copycats in towns around the Islamic world, with similar biographical dictionaries for Isfahan, Qazwin, Nishapur, and Samarqand, and with the most voluminous being produced in Syria for towns such as Aleppo, by Ibn
al-Adim (d. 660/1262), and the record set for Damascus by Ibn Asakir (d. 571/1175), with his *Tarikh Madinat Dimashq* reaching up to seventy volumes in the modern published version.

Writing Abbasid history for the period from the eleventh to the early thirteenth centuries benefits from *al-Muntazam* by Ibn al-Jawzi (d. 597/1202). His seventeen-volume work combines the biographical dictionary format with the annalistic one, listing important events, but is too focused on Baghdad, and stops at 574/1178. Historians would have been at a great disadvantage were it not for *al-Kamil fi’l-Tarikh* of Ibn al-Athir (d. 630/1233), who lived through the turbulent period of the Crusades, the early Mongol invasions, and great powers such those of the Khwarazm shahs in Transoxiana and the Ayyubids in Egypt. Based in Mosul, and writing under the patronage of its wily Arabeg prince, Badr al-Din Lu’lu’, Ibn al-Athir tried to maintain neutrality toward the main dynasties of the period, and he reflects an environment of high culture different from that of Baghdad. Although he drew mainly on Tabari’s accounts for the earlier Abbasid period, he streamlined those, and often included valuable information on contemporary events in the Mediterranean world and Central Asia. The main value of his work is for the period after where Tabari’s stops, and the way he avoided privileging accounts that Miskawayh, for example, would have deployed as exempla in an earlier period. Through his attempt to remove the hagiography and exempla, and by trying to pay attention to different regions of the Islamic world, Ibn al-Athir paved the way for history as an independent and academic discipline.

The Ghaznavid and Seljuk periods, while covered by Ibn al-Athir, benefit from other less ambitious works, such as *Zayn al-Akhbar* by Gardizi (fifth/eleventh century), *Tarikh al-Dawla Saljuqiyya* by al-Husayni (d. after 622/1225), and *Rahat al-Sudur wa Ayat al-Surur* by al-Rawandi (d. 601/1204). Less is known about these authors than Ibn al-Athir, but they all seem to have had access to courtly circles and privileged information, and sometimes themselves received the patronage of princes. The maverick scholar al-Biruni was clearly not the only one who wrote under direct patronage from dynasts such as the Ghaznavids. Although focused on the Seljuks, the Persian historians provide valuable information sometimes not found in the Arabic sources, such as al-Rawandi’s mention of an attempt by the Abbasid caliph al-Muqtafi to have the Seljuk sultan Mas’ud kidnapped when he arrived for prayers on a religious holiday – an attempt that didn’t
materialize because the sultan failed to show up that day. Additional details on the political and military calculations of the princes in western Iran (‘Iraq al-ʿAjam) are also provided by al-Rawandi but not Ibn al-Jawzi or Ibn al-Athir.

While Ibn al-Athir’s chronicle stops in 628/1231, other works help continue the chronology at a distance from Iraq. In India, there is the *Tabaqat-i Nasiri* written in Delhi around 658/1260 by Juzjani, and although the work centers more on the careers of the sultans of Delhi, such as Ilutmish, it contains important references to the Abbasids. The true sequels to Ibn al-Athir can be found in the subsequent period in Syria and Egypt under Ayyubid and Mamluk patronage. Writers such as Abu Shama (d. 665/1266) and Ibn Wasil (d. 697/1297) provide important elisions of information for the thirteenth century and the twilight period of the Abbasid caliphate. The trend toward the voluminous oeuvre then builds up all the way till the fifteenth century in a wave that forms the true emblems of Mamluk universal histories, such as those by Ibn Kathir (d. 774/1373), al-Dhahabi (d. 748/1348), Ibn al-Furat (d. 807/1405), al-Maqrizi (d. 845/1441), Ibn Taghibirdi (d. 874/1470), and Ibn Iyas (d. 930/1530). Along with these, two encyclopedic works that contain much history ought to be mentioned: *Nihayat al-Arib fi Funun al-Adab* by al-Nuwayri (d. 733/1333) and *Masalik al-Absar fi al-Mamalik wa’l-Amsar* by Ibn Fadl Allah al-Umari (d. 745/1345).

Sibt ibn al-Jawzi (d. 654/1257), grandson of the more famous Ibn al-Jawzi of al-Nasir’s reign, also produced a work of history and biography known as *Mirʾat al-Zaman fi Tarikh al-ʿAyan* (A Mirror in Time for the History of Notables), which has only recently been published in its entirety, and with a sequel by a native of Baʿalbek, Qutb al-Din al-Yunini (d. 726/1326), together reaching up to twenty-two volumes. Sibt’s education and writing reflects a hybridity between the last days of Baghdad’s intellectual grandeur and that of the increasingly more central role for the religious experience of Damascus, where he eventually settled. His contribution reflects the ʿulama worldview of the intellectual elite, and what they considered necessary knowledge about the past. This type of composition was to have a long run, virtually up until the modern period, and was updated and organized around a century rather than a town, as had been the case with Khatib al-Baghdadi and Ibn Asakir. A historian of the Abbasids can find new information in even a seventeenth-century source, such as *Shadharat*...
al-Dhahab fi Akhbar man Dhahab by Ibn al-'Imad al-Hanbali (d. 1089/1678).

Abbasid Baghdad in its last decades lacks an easily usable history that can be identified as local. Ibn al-Sa’i (d. 674/1274), who was the first librarian of al-Mustansiriyya madrasa, wrote a multi-volume historical work that has been lost. A book entitled al-Hawadith al-Jami’a, once attributed to Ibn al-Fuwati (d. 723/1323) but now acknowledged to be anonymous, dates to the late thirteenth century. It provides valuable information on the reigns of al-Mustansir and al-Musta’sim, but one can easily notice in its historiography, as well as in much Arabic historical writing of the conquered east, the shadow of Ilkhanid pressure, which stifled the more vivacious spirit that characterized earlier writers on the Abbasids. Arabic poetry, the multi-layered anecdote, and digressions on characters on the margins of society, which reached a peak in the tenth century, all disappeared in the humorless world of the Ilkhanids. Concise dynastic histories, arranged by the reigns of caliphs, by authors such as al-Irbili (d. 717/1317) and Ibn al-Kazaruni (d. 697/1297), round out the survey of the Abbasid caliphate up until al-Musta’sim, but these remain mainly cursory and centered on the key political figures of each reign. And another work from the same period, al-Manaqib al-Abbasiyya wa’l-Mafakhir al-Mustansiriyya, remains in manuscript.

This sketch of primary sources, often familiar in name to specialists but sometimes inhibiting full access due to their size, gives us a glance of the historical literature that must be mined for writing Abbasid history. The fragmented nature of the evidence ensures that further research can often turn up new facts or provide an opportunity for a fresh reading of historical accounts previously thought to be fully understood. In surveying the Abbasid world, one needs to keep track of developments in three spheres that interacted over the course of a five-century period: the caliphate as a political institution that defined legitimacy and was open to a range of social perceptions and imagination; the Abbasid empire, which fostered networking across frontiers and encouraged cohesiveness and mobility in the region of the Middle East and North Africa; and, finally, the Abbasid capital, Baghdad, which was an urban magnet and a crucible of ideas.

The history of the Abbasid caliphate was not an isolated unit within the spectrum of medieval Islamic history but, as this survey shows, one that was deeply integrated into the social and religious patterns that shaped other Islamic dynasties over a long period. And, in spite of
efforts to understand the contexts of change, the question will always remain whether Islam as a religious system shaped the history of the Abbasids or whether it was shaped by their unfolding political history. The dynamic interaction of the caliphs with various Islamic trends shows the transformation of both over the course of history. The Abbasid capital Baghdad, like other medieval Islamic cities such as Bukhara, Cairo, and Cordoba, mirrors the favorable side of the modern world: an open society where freedom of markets, ideas, and multiculturalism played out, and the record of their histories shows how these factors stimulated energetic waves in the areas of learning, commerce, crafts, and the arts. But Abbasid history also shows, no less than today, the havoc caused by nature and nations in factors such as climate change and invasions. While their history provides a model of how Islamic civilization fused ancient legacies with contemporary cultures, it also provides a cautionary tale of how the momentum of progress is always a perilous one in the face of a political challenge.