CHAPTER TWO

THE CALIPH

Letizia Osti

A star shone on us from the Palace, bright, and a clear morning rose for the world and religion

When in 295/908 Abū Bakr al-Ṣūlī composed these celebratory lines on the accession of Jaʿfar b. al-Muʿtaḍid as caliph al-Muqtadīr, he could hardly have known what was in store for the next 25 years. In later periods however, in the chronicles written after the death of the caliph, al-Ṣūlī and many of his younger contemporaries project back to this very time a sense of uneasiness about the appointment of a barely-of-age boy to head the *umma*, an ill omen for the ruinous times ahead. This chapter looks at how the caliph and his times were seen by different types of sources over time, focusing on how information available to all authors is selected and used to form specific portrayals suited to their format and aims, as has been described in the Introduction.

Since the 1970s, a significant amount of scholarship has been devoted to investigating the narrative techniques employed by classical Arabic literature, tracing strands or clusters of *akhbār* across sources and analysing the implications of their different uses. Some studies of this type have been carried out on caliphs.\(^2\) Besides conclusions on specific cases, a general result obtained through this kind of analysis is that it was able to isolate an authorial voice in works which had been considered mere compilations of older material. Thus, such studies could isolate opinions and

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1 Al-Ṣūlī, *Mā lam yunshar*, 24 (*tawīl*). The first line plays on the double meanings of *wajh* (face/face of a star), *qaṣr* (castle/dusk) and *mushriq* (bright, but from the same root as Oriental).

reputations and how they are shaped and changed over time. In other words, this kind of analysis helps to understand how medieval Arabic sources make sense of history. Within this framework, this chapter investigates recurrent traits in the image of al-Muqtadir, some of which have persisted into our own time, beginning with general evaluations of the period in later sources and then looking at more detailed accounts in earlier ones.

The Disastrous Caliph

It has been argued that classical Arabic literature has a tendency to highlight the negative aspects of rulers;3 in late digests such as that of the eighth-/thirteenth-century historian Ibn al-Ṭiqṭaqā this seems to be the case for al-Muqtadir, whose caliphate is summarized thus:

The oath of allegiance was given to him in 295, when he was thirteen years of age. Al-Muqtadir was generous, munificent and a squanderer. He brought back the [old] ways [rusūm] of the caliphate, [restoring its] pomp, giving out large donations and pensions, numerous robes of honour and presents. In his palace there were eleven thousand Byzantine and black eunuchs. The treasure in his days was full of precious jewels, among which was the hyacinth stone which al-Rashīd had bought for 300,000 dīnār [. . .] He squandered all of those and wasted them in the shortest of times. [. . .] Know that the reign of al-Muqtadir was a turbulent reign, because of his young age and of the hold his mother, the women of his household and his servants had on him. The matters concerning his reign were run by women and servants, while he was busy satisfying his pleasure. The world went to ruin during his time, the treasuries were emptied and there were [religious] divisions.4

This evaluation of al-Muqtadir, prefacing Ibn al-Ṭiqṭaqā’s chronicle of his caliphate, is not far from that given by an author much closer to al-Muqtadir’s time, al-Masʿūdī. His evaluation, introducing a long and detailed section on the caliphate of al-Muqtadir, is in fact harsher than Ibn al-Ṭiqṭaqā’s and unequivocally identifies al-Muqtadir as the reason for the caliphate’s ruin:

He became caliph when he was still young, inexperienced and eager to indulge in luxuries. He did not concern himself with State affairs, nor did

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4 Ibn al-Ṭiqṭaqā, *al-Fakhrī*, 352 and 355. Translations from this source are my own unless otherwise stated.