TO BE A PRINCE IN THE FOURTH/TENTH-CENTURY ABBASID COURT

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Court studies are almost nonexistent for early Islamic history, including the Abbasid era. Many questions need to be investigated in connection with the Abbasid court. What terminology was used in the sources to define the court and the courtiers? Who was a ‘courtier’? What was the distinction between the household and the bureaucracy? How was the environment around the ruler organized spatially? Who filled it? How did it represent itself, and with what degree of ceremonial or spectacle? What were the rights and duties, obligations and privileges of the officers within the court and household? What do the sources tell us about the members of the caliphal households, whether women or princes?

In recent years, historians of the court have become interested in the ritual and symbolic aspects of rulership as part of the political system. They have, additionally, refocused attention on the whole personal and domestic world within which the ruler lived.¹ This paper explores one aspect of the personal world that constituted the fourth/tenth century caliphal court by focusing on the life and career of the Abbasid prince Abu al-ʿAbbas, eldest son of the caliph al-Muqtadir (AH 295–320/CE 908–932). Questions that I discuss revolve around the various spaces in which the prince lived, the education and tutorship that he received, the duties to which he was assigned from an early age, and the ceremonial role that he assumed. Information about his life prior to his assumption of the caliphate help us formulate a conception of the expected roles of princes at the fourth/tenth century Abbasid court, the possibilities and limitations open to them, and the networks that formed around them.

I have elsewhere investigated the varieties of functions that the eunuchs and harem stewardesses performed in the early fourth/tenth century Abbasid court. These investigations, like the one reported

here, are based on the premise that it is essential to limit the inquiry to a particular historical moment in order to free ourselves from the ‘deadly sameness’ of abstraction which allows no differences among times and places. The narratives pertaining to the reign of the Abbasid caliph al-Muqtadir offer particularly rich grounds for such an investigation. Accounts of this period underscore the weakening of the institutional integrity of the Abbasid caliphate which in turn contributed to problems plaguing the caliphate in the first part of the fourth/tenth century. In this view, the youth and personal incapacity of al-Muqtadir, in contrast to the vigour and ability of his immediate predecessors, opened the door to the ‘meddling’ of harem women and influential ‘courtiers’. The sources for the reign of al-Muqtadir are, in some ways, unique in providing insights on the workings of the ‘court’ and the domestic world. For this particular period we are able to get behind the scenes and have a glimpse at the personal and informal networks operating at court.

The Abbasid Courtier: Some Definitions

The Abbasid court of the fourth/tenth century was polycentric and eclectic and seems to have constituted a space open to a vast range of outside influences. Sourdel defines the Abbasid elite as ‘all those who surrounded the caliph, who had access to him, who were part of the court or the administration, and who served as his delegates in the army and the judiciary.’ There was, thus, no real ‘nobility’ but rather those ‘whose functions rather than their birth’ provided them with the privilege of attending the caliph’s audiences, of participating in the mazalim court and of figuring among those who gave the oath of allegiance to the new ruler.

The term that most closely describes the courtiers is al-hashiya/al-hawashi. In Tajarib al-umam, the most notable source for this period, Miskawayh (d. 421/1030) mentions that ‘Ali b. Isa abolished increases which had been extended to all ranks of the army, to the eunuchs (al-khadam), to al-hashiya, and to all clerks (al-kuttab) and employees

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