In 1951, Marius Canard wrote an article in which he compared Fāṭimid and Byzantine ceremonials. He prefaced his article by explaining that we know almost nothing about the ceremonial of the court in Baghdad and that the lack of documents relating to the ʿAbbāsids does not allow one to make the same type of comparison. In 1960, Dominique Sourdel reiterated the remarks of Canard to the effect that we are badly informed with respect to ʿAbbāsid ceremonial. Nevertheless, Sourdel felt that brief references in the chronicles and adab works, in addition to the information present in the work of Hilāl al-Ṣābiʾ, allowed him to assess and update the then current knowledge concerning ʿAbbāsid ceremonial. Since then no major work on the development of ʿAbbāsid ceremonial has appeared and it is time to revisit some of these questions with the specific intention of understanding its process of institutionalisation.

The first part of this paper discusses the antecedents to ʿAbbāsid ceremonial, including the initial tensions of the emerging Muslim community vis-à-vis ceremonials; the second part of the paper discusses the Palace as the exclusive stage for court ceremonial; the third part analyzes the gradual institutionalisation of ʿAbbāsid ceremonial, making frequent references to the Byzantine ceremonial for comparative purposes, bearing in mind that awareness of similarities and analogies between patterns of behavior can clarify not only what was shared by the two cultures and the ground that they had in common, but, conversely, illuminate what was peculiar to them as well as the respective processes of institutionalisation.

Textual Antecedents and Hesitant Beginnings

ʿAbbāsid ceremonial falls back on Roman, Byzantine and Sassanian antecedents. According to Aziz al-Azmeh, “a repertoire of concepts and topoi was

contained within an ambient late antiquity.”

That parts of ‘Abbāsid ceremonial come from the Sassanian model is clear from the adāb al-ṣultāniyya texts, treatises on monarchical government which form a distinctive genre of classical Arabic and Persian literature. There is scholarly consensus that this type of discourse belongs to a Persian tradition of writing which was consolidated during the Sassanian period where the “advice to ruler” writings (naṣīḥat al-mulūk) were part of the political culture of the state institution. The adāb al-ṣultāniyya discourse emerged in response to a historical need, namely, “theorising the state-empire” in the late Umayyad and early ‘Abbāsid period, given that Persian political culture and tradition were superior to the Arabic oral political inheritance. A notable ‘Abbāsid example of such works is Akhlāq al-mulūk by Muḥammad b. al-Ḥārith al-Thaʿlabī (d. 250/864) (formerly attributed to al-Jāḥiẓ), a work of advice literature that entered Arabic literary culture through a translation from Pahlavi in the third/ninth century and enjoyed a long popularity. The Sassanian elements in this manual are so clear that some scholars have suggested that it is in essence a Persian text to which al-Thaʿlabī added examples, attestations and explanations. While the most recent editor of this text disagrees with this analysis and gives a larger role to al-Thaʿlabī in his use of Arabic-Islamic texts which are now lost, a quick look at Akhlāq al-mulūk leaves no doubt as to the Sasanian antecedents that inform it. In the chapter on boon-companionship, for instance, al-Thaʿlabī starts with examples from the Persian kings “for they were the first in that and we took from them the regulations on kingship (mulk) and kingdom as well as the positions (tartīb) of al-khāṣṣa (the elite) and al-ʿāmma (the public)…”

The main text that deals extensively with ‘Abbāsid court ceremonials, Rusūm dār al-khilāfa, belongs to this genre of writings. This fifth/eleventh-century text relates the rules and regulations of the ‘Abbāsid court. Authored by Ḥilāl al-Ṣābiʾ (d. 498/1056), it includes a myriad of material ranging from how caliphs sit on the throne and what they wear to advice to viziers, secretaries, boon companions and others on how to dress, how to sit, and how to address the caliph, to descriptions of caliphal audiences. It is the unitary work of one...