

## Landed Property and Government Finance in the Early ‘Abbasid Caliphate

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This essay is not about “The Making of Europe” and it may seem strange to find it in a volume commemorating Rob Bartlett’s great work. In mitigation I can only say that some readers may find it interesting to compare attitudes to wealth and status in the Middle Eastern ‘Abbasid world<sup>1</sup> to those described so interestingly and persuasively in Bartlett’s book. It also shares with Bartlett’s work both an aspiration to present a history that combines the social and the economic in one discourse, and some interpretive ideas like core and periphery. It raises many similar issues like the redistribution of land as a result of conquest and the relationship between a military kleptocracy and the ruler’s power and resources. Perhaps this study brings out some interesting contrasts as well, especially the continuing importance of state and state institutions in the Islamic Middle East as opposed to the dominance of the aristocracy described in *The Making of Europe*.

In this paper I shall try to explore the resource base of the ‘Abbasid *sultān* and its relation to private landholding. By the eleventh century the Arabic word *sultān* is used as the title of individual rulers, a usage which survives to the present day in, for example, Oman. Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna (998–1030) was probably the first major figure to be addressed in this way and the title became common from the Saljuq period in the eleventh and twelfth century onward. In the ninth and tenth centuries, however, it was used to denote “the administration” or, in a very real sense, “the state” in Arabic historical sources. It consisted of the personnel of government, and the administrative institutions and procedures that survived the changes of rulers and dynasties.

The early Islamic *sultān* was in some important ways the last of the great ancient empires and the phrase Islamic Late Antiquity is, I believe, helpful in describing this polity. While there are obvious ways in which the new Islamic order represents a break with the Byzantine and Sasanian worlds, most

<sup>1</sup> This paper is focused on the period between the ‘Abbasid Revolution of 747–50 and the effective collapse of ‘Abbasid rule in the years leading up to the Buyid take-over of power in 945. All dates are Common Era (Anno Domini) rather than the *hijrī* dating used by the Arabic sources.

obviously a new governing religion and a new elite language, when it comes to state structures and institutions there are more fundamental continuities than might be imagined at first glance. Briefly, these are, first, the maintenance of a system of public taxation, paid by the majority of the population, collected by a government fiscal organization and dispensed in cash money to the *fonctionnaires* of the state, both military or civil. The second institution is the appointment and recall of provincial governors for the various provinces of the caliphate, sent out from the capital and owing their offices to government appointment rather than to their position as representatives of local elites or hereditary succession. The third manifestation of this antique legacy is the very idea of a state, a *sulṭān*, a system of administrative and fiscal structures that survives and transcends the coming and goings of individuals and even of dynasties.

Before embarking on the historical explanation, however, I would like to say something about the sources on which I base my argument. It is notoriously the case that the financial documents on which the administrative history of the 'Abbasid administration might have been written have almost entirely disappeared. The traditional view is that much of this disappearance might be attributed to the damage caused by the Mongol sack of Baghdad in 1258 and "the river Tigris running with ink" as documents and libraries of learned texts were consigned to the turbid waters of the river by the ignorant and uncomprehending conquerors. The reality of the situation was probably very different. From time to time there were fires, started either deliberately or accidentally, which, we are told, destroyed the records of the *dīwāns*.<sup>2</sup> More important was probably the casual attitude to the preservation of fiscal records and their destruction as soon as their immediate usefulness had passed. Illustrative of this in a number of ways is the story of the vizier Ḥāmid b. al-'Abbās and his administrative records.<sup>3</sup> When the financial year had ended and he had settled the accounts to his satisfaction, he had the records put into boxes. These boxes were then carried by his servants to the banks of the fast flowing Tigris where the contents were tipped into the water and swept away by the powerful current. This behaviour was not entirely the product of a desire to keep the office tidy. The story is preserved because, before the destruction, one of the files had been removed by one of the clerks and not returned. It was the content of this file which provided the evidence for his enemies to accuse him of dishonesty and secure his removal from office.

2 *Dīwān* originally refers to the lists of men entitled to receive payments but comes to refer also to the government offices where these lists were compiled and kept.

3 Abū 'Alī Miskawayh, *Tajārib al-umam*, ed. H.F. Amedroz (Oxford, 1920–1), 1.99–100