Casting the Caliph in a Cosmic Role: Examining al-Suyūṭī’s Historical Vision

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Authors of history during the Mamlūk period at best paid marginal attention to the men of the ‘Abbasid family who reigned, but did not rule, since the sultan Baybars installed the first caliph of Cairo in 659/1261. One noteworthy exception to this trend is the late-fifteenth/early sixteenth century polymath and religious scholar Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505).

As late samplings of Mamlūk historiography, some of the historical works of al-Suyūṭī deliver hindsight and nostalgia as well as more nuanced insights spanning nearly two and a half centuries of an evolving ‘Abbasid ceremonial tradition that would become unique to Cairo. Indeed, the detailed information provided in al-Suyūṭī’s retrospective biographies of the Cairo caliphs, found both in his history of Egypt (Ḥusn al-muḥāḍara fī taʾrīkh Miṣr wa-l-Qāhira) and his caliphal history (Taʾrīkh al-khulafāʾ), comprise an indispensible backbone for any study of the subject.

1 Al-Suyūṭī’s “Cosmic Vision” of the Caliphate

The powerful though somewhat ill-defined relationship between God, the ruler, and politics are well-trodden territory in the context of Islamic studies, and of course, in studies of Mamlūk historiography. The reign of the Umayyad caliph ʿAbd al-Malik (65–86/685–705) marks a change in the caliphal office as it assumed an increasingly formal, regal air and caliphs ceased to be regarded

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1 For a recent study of the significance of the sanctity attained through the caliph’s presence in the early Mamlūk period, see Mona Hassan, Loss of caliphate, which is the foundation of her forthcoming book Longing for the lost caliphate: A transregional history (Princeton University Press, 2017).

2 Important earlier studies of the ‘Abbasid caliphate of Cairo by G. Weil, V. Barthold, T. Arnold, and J.-C. Garcin have benefited from a close reading of al-Suyūṭī’s biographical entries of the caliphs. For examples of al-Suyūṭī’s biographical entries of contemporary ‘Abbasid family members in other works, see Naẓm 107–8; idem, Raf’ 28–9, 127.
as *primus inter pares* in the style of the bedouin tribal *shaykh*. Among the early ‘Abbasid caliphs of Baghdad, caliphal dignity assumed numinous characteristics emphasized by the pomp and ceremony of the office influenced by the influx of Persian bureaucrats from the former Sasanian administration harboring their own notions of what rulership ought to look like. The caliph became venerated; the man himself hidden behind guarded doors, and petitioners who gained access often kissed the hem of his garment or the ground at his feet as an armed headsman looked on. The courtly reputation which prevailed under the ‘Abbasid caliphs of the tenth century and onward had been

kingship of a universal type: half brutal power and half theatre. The theatre owed something to the fact that rulers had come to be credited with a cosmic role, in the sense that they were believed to influence the regularities of nature. Natural disasters would ensue if caliphs were killed, it was held […] Both caliphs and kings were seen as having special access to the sources of life, health, energy and well-being, in short, of all the pagan desiderata which the great salvation religions had reduced to secondary importance. The basic assumption behind these ideas is that the regularities of nature depended on a moral order which it was the duty of the king to maintain. “When rulers act wrongly, the heavens dry up,” a saying ascribed to the Prophet had it. The assumption was pagan, not only in the sense that it pre-dated the rise of monotheism and placed a high premium on well-being in this world, but also in the sense that it idolized a single human being in a manner that Sunnis were normally quick to disown.

That the caliph and his office were supernaturally linked to balance in the corporeal world was not an uncommon proposition for scribes in the Mamlûk chancery. Mamlûk caliphal investiture deeds (which al-Suyûṭî often reproduced in his historical works) frequently reiterate that the ‘Abbasid caliphate enjoyed such a mystical influence that, were it ever disturbed or outraged, serious repercussions would result in the physical universe.

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5 See Hassan’s remarks on the collective public mood of Mamlûk Egypt which interpreted the presence of the caliph as a perpetuation of order and unbroken continuity: Loss of caliphate 143–53, 240–6.