Mustafa Banister
The Abbasid Caliphate of Cairo, 1261–1517. Out of the Shadows

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This book examines the last chapter of the history of the Abbasid Caliphate, which took place, in Cairo during the two and a half centuries (659–923/1261–1517) following the demise of the caliphate in Baghdad at the hands of the Mongols (659–923/1261–1517). This is the broader inter-regional and socio-political context of the Mamluk Sultanate, which the author chooses to call the Cairo Sultanate following the lead of Jo Van Steenbergen (p. 1). The book focuses on the last Abbasid caliphate and its relationship to sovereignty, authority and political action through the historical prism of the Cairo Sultanate. The author examines how the caliphate came to appear as a permanent reality – both as an unshakeable institution and as a coherent practical idea – when socio-political realities seemed to suggest otherwise (p. 7). The book is organised into two main parts of roughly equal length, each consisting of five chapters.

The first part, "A History of the Abbasid Caliphate" (p. 19–226), provides a detailed history of the Abbasid dynasty in Cairo based on the chronicles of contemporary authors and, to a lesser extent, later historians. This history of the Abbasids of Cairo consists of five chapters covering the period from 658–659/1260–1261 to 923/1517, when the Ottoman conquest of Cairo marked the end of both the Sultanate and the Abbasids of Cairo.

It would be wrong to think that the Abbasid version of the caliphate was monolithic and uniform during the Mamluk era. The caliphal institution, from the investiture of al-Mustanṣir (d. 659/1261) by Baybars (d. 676/1277) until Muḥammad al-Mutawakkil III (d. 945/1538 or 950/1543), the last caliph, underwent important transformations and was characterized differently according to the periods. Indeed, each new Abbasid caliph took office in a particular context and maintained new relations with the different actors of the socio-political landscape in which he evolved.

In Chapter One, "The Origins and Establishment of the Abbasid Caliphs in Cairo 659-701/1261-1302" (p. 19–59), the author shows that through the investiture of al-Mustanṣir, Baybars reinvented the Abbasid Caliphate and used it in two different ways: 1) as an instrument serving the struggle against the Ilkhanids; 2) as a means of attracting and reintegrating into the sultanate certain elements of the political elite who had aspirations of contesting the power of the Mamluk Sultanate (p. 48).

Chapter Two, "The Qalawunids and the Caliphate 701-63/1302–63" (p. 60–90), focuses on the process of normalization of the institution of the Abbasid caliphate in Cairo, which became part of the socio-political landscape of the so-called Qalawunid period.

During the Barqūqid period, the subject of Chapter Three, 'Flirtations with power and Political Intrigue' (p. 91-140), the Abbasid caliphs in Cairo were, despite themselves, forced to take part in political intrigues with the result that the political importance of the role of the caliph increased. The reigns of al-Mutawakkil (d. 808/1406) and his son and successor al-Mustaʿīn (d. 833/1430) show that the caliph was able to play, during certain events, a role as a counter-power to the Mamluk sultan or as an arbiter and/or mediator between the amirs and the sultan.

This was not the case for their successors who reigned during the 9th/15th century and whose cases are the focus of Chapter Four, "Containing and Maintaining the Caliphate" (p. 141–191). The caliphs of this period were content to be "men of good works and religion" (p. 142), taking an interest in the study of religious sciences and thus to develop and consolidate their network and interactions with the class of *ʿulamāʾ*, which is best illustrated by the figure of al-Muʿtaḍid bi-llāh II (d. 845/1441). The only exception is the case of al-Qāʾim bi-amr Allāh (d. 859/1455), who was involved in the so-called Ẓāhirīs revolt against Ināl in 859/1455 (p. 160–163).

The fifth and final chapter, "The Last Abbassids of Cairo" (p. 192-226), traces the reign of the last two caliphs, al-Mustamsik and his son and successor al-Mutawakkil III, who were eyewitnesses to the fall of the sultanate and its conquest by the armies of Selim I after the battles of Marǧ Dābiq (9221516) and al-Raydāniyya (923/1517). The section on the transfer of the caliphal title to the Ottoman sultan is worth noting, as it puts an end to a legend that has been regarded as historical truth for too long.

Part Two, "The Legal, Historiographical and Chancery Dimensions of the Abbasid Caliphate of Cairo," is devoted to studying contemporary perceptions of the Abbasid Caliphate of Cairo. In Chapter Six, "Normative Perspectives on the Caliphate of Cairo: Jurisprudential, Advice and Courtly Literature"

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(p. 229-275), the author highlights the perceptions of the Abbasid Caliphate of Cairo by authors from different backgrounds and social statuses who dealt with the caliph directly and indirectly. The author points out that some *ʿulamāʾ*, such as Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) and Tāǧ al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 771/1370), structured their political vision around a caliphate as it existed in their time while being aware that it did not correspond to the ideal institution of early Islam as they understood it (p. 241-246). Through the analysis of several excerpts from contemporary authors' texts, the author highlights the subtlety in the use of terminology, especially with the terms caliphate/sultanate, which at first glance seem interchangeable. Nevertheless, the use of the term *imām* is ambiguous as sometimes referring to the caliph and sometimes not.

The political reality of the Mamluk period meant that the question of the imamate had to be rethought as the caliphate was no longer the institution with the power of coercion as it was in the early days of Islam. During the Mamluk period, the caliphate was part of a theoretical reconfiguration of the imamate that juxtaposed this term to that of sultanate, as suggested in the writings of Ibn ʿAbd al-Ẓāhir (d. 692/1293) and Badr al-Dīn b. Ǧamāʿa (d. 733/1333).

Chapter Seven, "The Cairo Caliphate in Medieval Arabic Historiographical Literature" (p. 276-338), continues the analysis of the contemporary perception of the Abbasids in Mamluk historiography. The author's social background and vocation, combined with the political and social context in which he evolved, clearly impacted his perception and writing of the history of the Abbasid caliphs of Cairo. The accounts of the 13th-early 14th centuries, attribute to Baybars the re-establishment of the caliphate, which explains the de facto legitimacy of his power as sultan. This is evident in Ibn ʿAbd al-Ẓāhir, who was head of the chancellery and panegyric of Baybars. Other *ʿulamāʾ* and authors of historical works such as al-Ṣafadī, Ibn Ḥaǧar and al-Suyūṭī, maintained various links (patronage, family, friendship) with the Abbasid caliphs, which most likely influenced their biographical writing of the Abbasids of Cairo. The author underlines and highlights the gap between the limited role and status of the Abbasid Caliphate of Cairo in the political and social reality. Furthermore, the image of the caliphate that several authors paint, is more similar to that of the Baghdad Caliphate of the 10th-11th centuries. In contrast, other authors such as al-Maqrīzī, Ibn Khaldūn and Badr al-Dīn al-ʿAynī distinguish between the position of the Abbasid caliphate in Cairo in their time and the earlier one in Baghdad, while acknowledging some continuity between the two caliphates.

Chapters Eight and Nine seek to explain the discrepancy between the reality of the Abbasid caliphate in the Mamluk period and its idealization by some contemporary authors. They analyze the functional aspects and formal expectations of the Abbasid caliphate in Cairo based on existing investiture and succession documents (also *khutba*-s, inscription, coinage, titulary, and protocol) in order to shed new light on the caliphal institution in the political-religious context of Mamluk Egypt and Syria in the 8th/14th and 9th/15th centuries.

Chapter Ten synthesizes the narrative, legal and documentary material explored in the previous chapters. It discusses how the Abbasid Caliphate of Cairo can be viewed in light of its social dimensions. It examines the nuances and evolution of the caliphate in its specifically Cairo context.

Voluminous and dense, Mustafa Banister's book takes issue with an idea that has been widely held for decades in Western scholarship, that of the Abbasid caliphate of Cairo as a puppet institution without power or influence. In other words, a caliph who was easily manipulated by the sultan, would have found himself directly involved in Mamluk power politics. The author brilliantly demonstrates that despite its reduced status and limited power, the Abbasid caliphal institution in Cairo, far from having lost everything, was a pillar of the political scene and was difficult to eliminate or replace (p. 440). The various appendices provided (maps, prosoprographical diagrams, illustrations) are useful for the reader.

Here we would like to add a few elements and make two minor remarks. Firstly, it would have been interesting to integrate the *Tuḥfa al-Turk fīmā yajib an yuʿmal fī al-mulk* of the Ḥanafī cadi Naǧm al-Dīn Ibrāhīm b. ʿAlī al-Ṭarsūsī (d. 758/1357) in the chapter dealing with political literature. It would be significant to know whether the author mentions the caliphate and whether he mentions it alongside the notion of the sultan. Also, one should ask whether he compares it to the *Taḥrīr al-aḥkām fi tadbīr ahl al-Islām* of Badr al-Dīn b. Ǧamāʿa. Indeed, the *Tuḥfa al-Turk*, like the *Taḥrīr*, was offered by its author to a sultan, in this case al-Nāṣir Ḥasan (d. 762/1361).

Secondly, the role of religious officials accompanying the caliph on military campaigns should be qualified. If the latter often had ceremonial participation or even sometimes remained on the fringes of the battle (p. 394), it should be noted that the Mamluk chroniclers mention the death of several of these officials and other scholars during confrontations. One particular example is the one against the Ilkhanid Mongols in which the Ḥanafī cadi Kamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Sinǧārī took part

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in the expedition of the caliph al-Mustanṣir to recapture Baghdad and lost his life in an ambush set up by the Mongols. Also relevant is the example of the cadi Tāǧ al-Dīn Yaḥyā al-Irbilī at the battle of Ḥoms of 680/1281, or the great Ḥanafī cadi Ḥusām al-Dīn al-Rāzī killed at the battle of Wādī al-Ḫazindār on 27 rabīʿ I 699/23 December 1299 who are contrasted in the literature to those of the Mālikī and Shāfiʿī scholars who fled.

These few remarks do not detract from the quality of Mustafa Banister's book, which has masterfully succeeded in placing the Abbasid caliphate in the wider context of the socio-cultural and political history of the two great interconnected regions of the Mamluk sultanate that were Egypt and Syria. The book is the most detailed and comprehensive historical study of the Abbasid Caliphate of Cairo to date. The author draws on a large body of primary sources – largely chronicles – which he analyses and compares. In addition, he engages in several points of discussion with existing historiography, in particular Mona Hassan, Jo Van Steenbergen, A. Broadbridge and others. This book is an important contribution to the social, cultural and political history of Islam with an in-depth examination of its most remarkable leadership institution, the caliphate, as traced and presented through Mamluk literary and documentary evidence. The book will be a landmark in Mamluk Studies.

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