The Decline and Fall of the First Muslim Empire

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In some ways, the fall or disintegration of empires[1] is a more problematic subject for historians than their rise. Why is it that the ruling élite, be it ideological or ethnic in basis, seems to lose the capacity or will to assert a dominance that had existed for generations and with which its fathers and grandfathers had grown up? In the case of the Muslim empire of the early caliphate, the question is given added poignancy by current political anxieties. The loss of "Arab unity" is the subject of near-universal lament among Arab thinkers about politics. If only, they cry, we could return to this prelapsarian world where all Arabs were brothers and where Arab rule extended throughout the Middle East, the Arab and Muslim people would regain their status as a world power, to rival and

[1]) The use of the word "empire" to describe the early Muslim state is of course controversial, and it has no equivalent in the Arabic sources. The Arabic word *dawla*, often used to describe the ʿAbbāsid regime has none of the hegemonic overtones of "empire". The "empire" I refer to is the first caliphate, which lasted from the time of the election of Abū Bakr after the death of the Prophet in 11/632 to the collapse of the last remaining vestiges of the power of the ʿAbbāsid caliphs of Baghdad in 323/935. The empire began as essentially an Arab-dominated polity, but by the time of its collapse the élite was multi-ethnic and defined by its Muslim faith and its allegiance to the ʿAbbāsid cause. The use of the term "empire" will seem inappropriate to some, but I use it to describe a political system in which a dominant élite rules over a collection of countries in which different areas have their own ethnic and cultural identities. Among the defining features of such a polity is the role of a dominant ideology, in this case Islam and the loyalty to a ruling dynasty. It also has an élite that is pan-imperial, that is to say that it can exercise power in many different areas of the empire and its loyalties are to the centre and to other members of the élite, rather than to the local communities over which it exercises power. These criteria are, of course, more a working definition than a defining statement of political theory, but I hope they will help to clarify the issues with which I am dealing. I use the term without any negative or pejorative ("evil empire") connotations, but simply as a description of a certain type of polity.

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defy West and East alike. Investigation of the reasons for the breakup of the caliphate brings us face-to-face with one of the major political challenges of our time.

Let us begin by considering the trajectory of the Muslim empire. The story begins with the great Muslim conquests of the seventh century. In the years after the death of the Prophet Muḥammad in 11/632, Muslim armies spread out and conquered the Middle East, with the exception of most of modern Turkey, with breathtaking speed. By 20/641 Iraq, Syria and Egypt were under Muslim rule, by 30/651 most of Iran had acknowledged Arab authority. North Africa and Spain (from 92/711), Transoxania and Sind followed until the Arab empire reached its maximum extent by about 101/720

After 40/661 the prophet's capital at Medina was abandoned as a centre of power, and Muʿāwiya, first of the Umayyad caliphs, moved the capital to Damascus in Syria. The Umayyads ruled as caliphs from their Syrian power base until they were overthrown by the ʿAbbāsids in 132/750. The ʿAbbāsids chose Iraq as their power base and in 145/767 founded an entirely new capital at Baghdad, which rapidly became the largest city and cultural capital of the Muslim world. But the same period saw the first territorial losses when, from 138/756, Spain became independent, though still of course in Muslim control, under the rule of a branch of the Umayyad family. After the death of the caliph Hārūn al- Rashīd in 195/809, the Muslim world was convulsed by a long civil war, at first between al-Amīn and al-Maʾmūn, sons of the dead caliph. Strife at the top enabled other regional discontents to manifest themselves, and it was not until about 215/830 that the authority of the ʿAbbāsids was more or less restored over the Muslim world. Even then, there were areas, like Khurāsān in the northeast, where power was essentially devolved: in the case of Khurāsān to the Ṭāhirids, a local Muslim élite family, while North Africa became effectively independent under the Aghlabid dynasty.

Until 247/861 the ʿAbbāsids, now ruling from a new purpose-built capital at Samarra, about a hundred miles north of Baghdad, enjoyed a second period of power, in some ways absolute but less widely spread than the first "golden age" from 750–809. In 247/861, however, the caliph al-Mutawakkil was assassinated by Turkish soldiers who had come to form a sort of praetorian guard in Samarra. For nine years there was effective anarchy as one caliph succeeded another in quick succession. After 256/870, when the caliphate emerged from this period of darkness, the extent of caliphal authority was much reduced. Egypt and much of Syria were ruled by Aḥmad ibn Ṭūlūn and his successors, and the Iranian plateau from the Zagros mountains east, with the occasional exception of

Fārs, had slipped from ʿAbbāsid control. Despite efforts of ʿAbbāsids like al-Muwaffaq (r. 279/892) and al-Muʿtaḍid (r. 279–89/892–902) to revive ʿAbbāsid power, the authority of the dynasts extended no further than Iraq. Under the disastrous reign of al-Muqtadir (r. 295–320/908–32) much of this was lost too. By the time of his death, ʿAbbāsid power was confined to Baghdad (now the capital once more), and in 323/935 a coup d'état by the general Ibn Rāʾiq effectively destroyed the last remnants of the political power of the caliphs. As different successor states emerged in east and west, the unity of the Muslim world was shattered forever.

The dynamics of this collapse reflected the complex interaction of historical processes. During the twentieth century, when the colonial empires founded by Western European powers declined and fell, we became used to a fairly straightforward explanation for this phenomenon. The subject peoples of the empires developed their own national and ethnic identities to the point that they were no longer prepared to accept foreign domination. They then embarked on a struggle for freedom, which might be relatively peaceful, as in India, or violent, as in Algeria, but was in all cases a struggle by those who wished to be free against colonial powers that were forced, more or less unwillingly, to surrender their authority. This model of imperial decline, which we might term the "liberationist" model, is taken for granted in most historical narratives of the last fifty years.

There are, however, alternative historical patterns. One is provided by the disappearance of British rule in Canada, Australia and New Zealand in the twentieth century. This was an entirely peaceful process. Originally these countries were ruled by governors sent out from Britain, who owed their loyalties to and took orders from their political masters in London. Typically, when their tour of duty ended, they returned to the centre and could be posted to another part of the empire. By the second half of the twentieth century, however, this pattern had disappeared. Local political élites had taken over, men whose loyalties lay to Canada, Australia or New Zealand and who never served in other areas. As a system of exercising real control, the empire had disappeared. It had a *Nachlass*, though, in a shared linguistic and cultural heritage and residual loyalty to a figurehead monarchy. This change took place without violence and almost without dispute, both the imperial centre and the erstwhile subjects regarding this as a natural evolution. In a sense, it was the success, in this area, of the British imperial system in exporting political and cultural patterns that rendered the process both natural and inevitable.

Another pattern is presented by the breakup of the Soviet empire in the last two decades of the twentieth century. For some areas, notably in

Eastern Europe, the liberationist model still retains some validity. A large proportion of the peoples of the countries of Eastern Europe genuinely wished to recover their national freedom and were prepared to make considerable sacrifices to achieve this, as the Hungarians had shown in 1956 and the Czechs in 1968. In the end, however, it was not the struggle for freedom within these countries that achieved the peaceful transition to real independence, but the collapse of the Soviet empire at the centre. If the Moscow government had still maintained the will to perserve its empire intact, and make the sacrifices that entailed, freedom would certainly have been delayed and the process might well have been bloody.

The liberationist model is even less appropriate for the countries of Turkistan. There is no evidence that the governing élites of these areas wished to become independent, and little – if any – that the bulk of the population wished to do so. Certainly there was no mass anti-Soviet movement and no real threat to Soviet power. These countries – Kazakhstan, Kirghistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan – had independence thrust upon them, willy-nilly, by the collapse of the centre. With variations, the same was broadly true in Armenia, Georgia, Azerbayjan and the Mongolian Republic. In all these areas local élites were obliged to take over and to realign themselves with the new world order in which national identities were the name of the political game. In many cases it is clear that they did so reluctantly and made the minimum changes necessary to adapt to the new circumstances while preserving their own status. Nevertheless, such changes acquire a legitimacy of their own: a decade after the breakup of the Soviet empire, it is likely that any attempt to reimpose direct rule from Moscow would be met with vigorous resistance. The élites of these areas, and their subjects, may not have wanted independence, but now that they have become accustomed to it, they would want to keep it. The new discourse of legitimacy is national identity and independence, not class consciousness and socialism. In this changed world, just ten years on, it is inconceivable that the Soviet system in Central Asia could be reconstructed.

Of course history never repeats itself and tendentious analogies are often unhelpful, but even a glance at the events of the last twenty years will show that the historical reality of the collapse of empires is often far removed from the simple liberationist model, and is instead the result of complex interactions between centre and periphery.

The Vicissitudes of the Central Government

For the two centuries following the ʿAbbāsid revolution of 132/750, the centre was represented by the caliphate based in Iraq and from 145/768 in either Baghdad or Samarra. The caliphate was controlled by the ʿAbbāsid family. Despite attempts by members of the rival ʿAlid family to assume the leadership of the muslim community, no non-ʿAbbāsid successfully assumed the title of caliph in Iraq in this period. However, the dynamics of power within the ruling family were constantly changing. Rivalries concentrated first and foremost on the succession to the throne. There was no provision for primogeniture, and since in a polygynous society élite males tend to have large numbers of children by different mothers, rivalries were endemic. Sons or cousins who emerged as candidates for the throne inevitably attracted groups of followers from among the élite who were determined that their man should inherit the supreme power. In turn, each candidate had to look after the interests of his constituency if it were not to disintegrate and leave him friendless. Debates about the succession were the main political discourse of early ʿAbbāsid rule. This in turn led, inevitably, to the development of centrifugal forces within the ruling family, which was almost forced to divide into factions and competing interest groups.

Until the death of Hārūn al-Rahīd in 195/809 these centrifugal forces were largely contained. The strategies for containment included clear designation by the previous ruler and internal exile of failed competitors,[2] but perhaps the most important one was the widespread distribution of high-status positions among the members of the ruling family. The family was also re-connected periodically by *ibn ʿamm* marriages[3] between the sub-dynasties and the lead lineage. In this way we see what virtually amount to sub-dynasties of the ʿAbbāsid family in al-Baṣra, al-Kūfa and Syria.[4]

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[2]) Though, interestingly, never external exile: disaffected members of the ruling family were never packed off to the Byzantine Empire or India. Nor did rebels try to escape to these other worlds, even when the alternative was certain death: they would live or die in the Dār al-Islām.

[3]) That is, marriages between first cousins, often seen as ideal relationships in traditional Middle Eastern societies.

[4]) For the Banū Sulaymān ibn ʿAlī in al-Baṣra, see Hugh Kennedy, *The Early Abbasid Caliphate: a Political History* (London, 1980), 76–76; for the family of ʿĪsā ibn Mūsā in al-Kūfa, *ibid.*, 74. For the sub-dynasty of the Banū Ṣāliḥ in northern Syria see *ibid.*, 74–75, and more recently, Paul M. Cobb, *White Banners: Contention*

However, in the aftermath of Hārūn's death in 195/809 these strategies failed disastrously. There was a prolonged and violent conflict between two of his sons, al-Amīn and al-Maʾmūn, that in turn generated spin-off conflicts throughout the Muslim world. When a measure of unity was restored after the entry of al-Maʾmūn to Baghdad in 204/822, the dynasty was reconstructed in a very different way.[5]

From the reign of al-Maʾmūn, the practice of appointing members of the ruling family to provincial governorates ceased completely. Instead they were largely confined to Baghdad or Samarra. Some among the descendants of al-Muʿtaṣim (r. 218–27/833–42) and al-Mutawakkil (r. 232–47/847–61) became candidates for the throne by attracting the support of different groups within the court power structures, but none had an independent power base as, say, ʿAbd al-Malik ibn Ṣāliḥ had had in Syria in a previous generation. This meant in turn that the family no longer acted as intermediaries between provincials and the caliphate, or functioned as local foci of loyalty. At the same time, descendants of the earlier provincial branches of the family became securely anchored in their provincial identities and had no more connections with the court. No member of the ʿAbbāsid family led the *jihād* against the Byzantines after al- Muʿtaṣim. This had been a way in which princes of an earlier generation had gained experience and attracted supporters: such opportunities were now lost.

Within the central government apparatus, very few members of the family played a part. From an extended family of brothers, cousins, uncles, etc., the ruling family was now restricted to the nuclear family of

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in ʿAbbāsid Syria, 750–880 (Albany, 2001), 27–31, which includes some very interesting details of the later history of the family as major landowners in the Aleppo area. For a more sceptical view of the importance of the Banū Ṣāliḥ see Michael Bonner, *Aristocratic Violence and Holy War: Studies in the Jihād and the Arab-Byzantine Frontier* (New Haven, 1996), 86–93, where it is pointed out that the power of the family was concentrated on the north, rather than throughout Bilād al-Sham. While this certainly became the case by the third/ninth century, and their power was never absolute or universal in the province, it does not seem to me to invalidate the basic point about their role in the political structure of the early ʿAbbāsid caliphate.

5) There are indications that this streamlining of the dynasty had already begun in the reign of al-Rashīd. The sub-dynasty of the Banū Sulaymān ibn ʿAlī had been greatly weakened after the death of Muḥammad ibn Sulaymān in 173/789, and the Banū Ṣāliḥ ibn ʿAlī had been at least temporarily eclipsed with the arrest of ʿAbd al-Malik ibn Ṣāliḥ in 189/803. For further discussion of Hārūn's policies in these areas, Kennedy, *Early Abbasid Caliphate*, 118–19.

the ruling caliph and his children. Only in times of political unrest were other, obscure princes sought out and thrust into the limelight. After the death of al-ʿAbbās in 223/838 none of al-Maʾmūn's children played a part in politics. With the solitary and notable exception of Abū Aḥmad al-Muwaffaq, son of al-Mutawakkil, the princes of the house seem to have lived their lives in the vast palace complexes of Samarra and Baghdad and, almost like Ottoman princes of the seventeenth century, their political role only began when they were removed from the confines of the palaces to assume the throne. Some like al-Muhtadī (r. 255–56/869–70) were determined but apparently inexperienced rulers who soon ran into trouble. Others were not: the caliph al-Muqtadir was said to have been chosen in 295/908 precisely because he was an inexperienced youth who could easily be manipulated. Abū ʿAlī Miskawayh, the most perceptive chronicler of ʿAbbāsid decline, reports the reply of the ambitious bureaucrat Abū l-Ḥasan ibn al-Furāt when he was asked to advise the *wazīr* al-ʿAbbās ibn al-Ḥasan on the choice of a new caliph. He is said to have replied:

> For God's sake do not appoint to the post a man who knows the house of one, the fortune (*niʿma*) of another, the gardens of a third, the slave-girl of a fourth, the estate of a fifth and the horse of a sixth; not one who has contacts among the people, has had experience of politics (*umūr*), who is worldly wise and has made calculations of people's fortunes.

Al-Muqtadir was chosen, even though he was only a boy.[6]

The nature of the non-royal élites had also changed significantly. In the early ʿAbbāsid period, élites had been drawn from the provincial patriciate and from tribal leaderships as well as from the ruling house and the Khurāsānian military. From al-Baṣra came the Muhallabids and the descendants of Qutayba ibn Muslim, from al-Kūfa the family of al-Ashʿath ibn Qays al-Kindī; the tribe of Shaybān was represented by Maʿn ibn Zāʾida and his nephew Yazīd ibn Mazyad. All these were members of local élites whose families were coopted into the new ʿAbbāsid élite. This is not to say that this was some sort of representative structure: these élite families were chosen for their loyalty and usefulness to the regime. But it did create a multi-stranded ruling group in which many members had

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[6]) Miskawayh, *Tajārib al-umam*, ed. H. F. Amedroz (London, 1920–21), I, 2–3. Miskawayh probably derived his report from Thābit ibn Sinān, a contemporary of the events, though how far the exact words are Ibn al-Furāt's, Thābit's or Miskawayh's is uncertain.

their own provincial power bases and, most of the time, a vested interest in keeping these power bases loyal and attached to the centre.

In the third/ninth century, the structure of power was very different. Real authority now lay in the capital with men, usually of eastern Iranian origin, who had no such contacts in the localities. In many areas, the power of provincial governors dwindled into insignificance. In the Umayyad and early ʿAbbāsid period the governorships of al-Baṣra and al-Kūfa were among the great offices of state, held by some of the most important men in the caliphate. In the third/ninth century we often do not know who these men were, and only on rare occasions – when there was some political upset, an attack on al-Baṣra by the Qarāmiṭa, for example – do we find out the names of these low-level functionaries.

After the upheavals of the Civil War, the decision was taken to recruit a new type of army. While the sources give us no direct reasons for this move, it must have been in response to the need to find a more reliable and streamlined military force than the one whose devisions and rivalries had led to the catastrophe. In addition, the new caliph al-Maʾmūn had been opposed by many of the most important elements in the old army of the ʿAbbāsids. This new army was largely recruited from Turks and others from the margins of the empire in the north and northeast of Iran. The origin of these troops has been the focus of a long-running historical controversy that does not concern us here.[7] Two points, however, must be noted about this new army, because they were to have important consequences for the fate of the caliphate.

The first of these is that the new soldiers had no roots in the heartlands of the caliphate – either Iran, the Fertile Crescent or Egypt. They belonged to no local tribes, nor did they have hereditary properties and status in these areas as so many of the Umayyad and early ʿAbbāsid élite did. This meant that they did not give the people of the old Islamic lands any stake in the regime; the subjects no longer had patrons, relatives or neighbours who were part of the power structure. On the contrary, they were completely alienated from the new army and its élites. The problem was compounded because this military tended to replace itself by the

7) For the classic views of the origins of these troops, David Ayalon, "The Military Reforms of al-Muʿtaṣim," in his *Islam and the Abode of War* (Aldershot, 1994), 1–39; Patricia Crone, *Slaves on Horses: the Evolution of the Islamic Polity* (Cambridge, 1980), 74–81. For the most recent discussion see Matthew S. Gordon, *The Breaking of a Thousand Swords: a History of the Turkish Military of Samarra, A. H. 200–275/815–889 C. E.*, (Albany, 2001), 6–9; Hugh Kennedy, *The Armies of the Caliphs: Military and Society in the Early Islamic State* (London, 2001), 120–21.

import of new recruits from marginal areas, again preventing the sort of racination of the soldiers that would have generated local loyalties through marriage, commercial ventures and land purchase.

The second characteristic was that the military, mostly based in the capital at Baghdad or Samarra, were dependent on the government for their salaries. This was nothing new: the *muqātila* of the Umayyad period and the *abnāʾ* and other troops of the early ʿAbbāsid era had been paid salaries. What was different was that these new soldiers had no other means of support. They were outsiders, entirely reliant on the state not just for cash but for their very survival. They could not tolerate a regime that tried, or even looked as if it might try, to dismiss them. Nor could they put up with a government that, for whatever reasons, was unable to pay them. A financial problem for the government, even a short-term one, would soon turn into a political crisis.

At one level, the new army, with its élite corps of mounted archers, proved extremely effective. In Egypt, which had seen unrest and chaos, the authority of the caliphate was restored.[8] On the frontiers it proved a match for the Byzantine defenders of Amorion, and in Armenia the Turkish soldiers led by Bughā the Elder in the campaign of 237/851–52 exerted the authority of the caliphs with a thoroughness that had never been achieved before and lingered long in the memories of the peoples of the area. Later in the third/ninth century, the élite corps of *ghilmān* led by the ʿAbbāsid prince Abū l-ʿAbbās, later to be the caliph al-Muʿtaḍid, was able to suppress the long-running rebellion of the Zanj in southern Iraq. This might have resulted in a restoration of the power of the caliphs if there had not been a growing financial crisis at the centre.

Under the Umayyad and early ʿAbbāsid caliphs there can be no doubt that Iraq was the most productive area of the caliphate. In the list of revenues said to date from the reign of al-Rashīd, the Sawād of Iraq is said to have yielded over 102,500,000 *dirhams* per annum.[9] Lower Iraq, including

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[8]) For the Turkish military in Egypt at this time, Hugh Kennedy, "Egypt as a Province in the Islamic Caliphate, 641–868," in Carl Petry, ed., *The Cambridge History of Egypt* (Cambridge, 1998), I, 62–85, at 82–85.

[9]) These figures are given on the basis of the revenue list in al-Jahshiyārī, *Kitāb al-wuzarāʾ wa-l-kuttāb*, as amended and discussed by S. A. El-ʿAlī, "A New Version of Ibn al-Muṭarrif's List of Revenues in the Early Times of Hārūn al-Rashīd," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 14 (1971), 303–10. The text is given in the edition of Muṣṭafā al-Sakkā, Ibrāhīm al-Abyārī, and ʿAbd al-Ḥafīẓ Shalabī (Cairo, 1938), 281–88, but as El-ʿAlī notes, this should be used with caution.

Kaskar, Kuwar Dijla and al-Ahwāz, produced another 57,420,000, and Hulwān 4,000,000. This gives a total of 163,920,000 *dirhams* from the alluvial areas of southern Iraq.[10] In contrast, the next richest province, Egypt, yielded the equivalent of 42,240,000;[11] i.e. southern Iraq yielded four times the revenue of Egypt. All the *junds* of Syria combined gave 34,672,000, only just over a fifth of the revenues of southern Iraq. Khurāsān only yielded 28,000,000, Rayy 12,000,000, Iṣfahān 11,000,000. Furthermore, the revenue from Iraq was close to the capital and could often be collected when others were interrupted and was probably less susceptible to deductions at source. The exact figures certainly elude us, and those that we have must be treated with caution. Having said that, it is clear that even in the time of al-Rashīd, the ʿAbbāsid caliphate was overwhelmingly dependent on the revenues of the irrigated alluvium of southern Iraq, rather than other areas of the caliphate, for its wealth. After the crisis of the mid-third/ninth century, when many outlying provinces slipped away, the importance of the revenues of Iraq became even more exaggerated.

As David Waines has shown, the agricultural economy of Iraq declined inexorably during the ʿAbbāsid period.[12] This was partly because this economy, though potentially very rich, was dependent on a large-scale irrigation system that required constant management investment, and above all, security, to allow it to function. This process of decline may have begun with the Muslim conquests or with the Byzantine-Sasanian wars that immediately preceded it. The trend may have been reversed with the high investments in irrigation systems reported from the Umayyad and early ʿAbbāsid period. After the civil war following al-Rashīd's death, during which many rural areas were pillaged by marauding soldiers, the process resumed and accelerated. Waines has shown how the 251/865 civil war damaged the agricultural areas around Baghdad, and the same was no doubt true for other areas. According to the figures,

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[10]) No revenues are recorded from al-Baṣra, the largest city in southern Iraq, which must have contributed, possibly substantial amounts.

[11]) The text gives 1,920,000 *dīnārs*, and this has been converted into *dirhams* using the 22:1 ratio employed in al-Jahshiyārī, 288.

[12]) David Waines, "The Third-Century Internal Crisis of the ʿAbbāsids," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 20 (1978), 282–303. Waines' conclusions are based on a study of the revenue lists preserved in the written sources and on the archaeological survey work conducted by Robert McC. Adams in the Diyālā river basin northeast of Baghdad and published in his *Land behind Baghdad: a History of Settlement on the Diyālā Plains* (Chicago, 1965).

the decline was nothing short of catastrophic: between the revenue list of Ibn Khurdādhbih (231–60/845–73) and the figures recorded by the *wazīr* ʿAlī ibn ʿĪsā in 303/915, that is in approximately half a century, cross revenue yields from areas in the Sawād typically declined by between 85 and 97 percent. As Wainᴇs sums up the position:

> The caliphate was confronted by a decreasing flow of revenue to the central treasury. Two main reasons were adduced: the rise of autonomous dynasties within the empire and the decline of agricultural production in the very heart of the ʿAbbāsid domains.

He goes on to argue that:

> the latter process was as critical to the fate of the caliphate inasmuch as the losses incurred were relatively greater from the very source of revenue that was becoming strategically more important in the wider political context.[13]

That is, the caliphate was increasing dependent on these areas just as the revenues they produced were most drastically affected.

The reasons for this decline do not immediately concern us, but they seem to be a product of underinvestment in irrigation works; this led to the breakdown of the canal systems, leaving some hitherto productive villages waterless. Even in areas that were still watered, underinvestment led to salinisation of the agricultural land, a process probably reflected in the increased proportion of salt-tolerant barley as opposed to the more valuable but less hardy wheat that was being grown.[14]

At the same time as the economy was faltering, the ʿAbbāsid state had embarked on military reforms that, while they could produce a very effective army, also required a reliable income stream to maintain them. The sums of money required were inelastic: that is, if there was a shortfall in revenue, it was not possible either to pay the troops less or to dismiss some of them to reduce costs. As already noted, these troops were dependent on their salaries for survival, and any policies that threatened their incomes were greeted with violent and often fatal responses. The government also suffered from the fact that it had no access to borrowing. Various forms of lending, whether open or disguised, certainly did exist, but these could not provide support at the levels required to finance the political and military infrastructure of a world empire: there was no source of credit to which the government could turn if there were a shortfall in revenue. The only way in which the demands for emergency funds

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13) Wainᴇs, "Internal Crisis," 293–95.

14) *Ibid.*, 292.

to tide over a crisis could be met was by the mulct of state functionaries, i.e. by extracting money by threats, force and tortures from state officials who may or may not have embezzled it.[15] This was not a very satisfactory procedure: it was messy and unpleasant, and it usually yielded much less than was hoped for. Any advanced state that promises to pay regular salaries will be obliged, from time to time, to resort to credit in years when expenditure is higher than usual or there is a shortfall in revenue. From the thirteenth century on, western European monarchies were dependent on credit for the functioning of government. The ʿAbbāsid caliphs had no such recourse.

Until the third/ninth century there are few indications that the government was ever short of money to pay the *ʿaṭā'* or that armies caused disturbances because that authorities were unable to pay them what had been promised. In an effort to attract support the Umayyad caliph al-Walīd II (r. 125–26/743–44) did promise to raise the levels of *ʿatā'*, a measure that was rejected by his successor, Yazīd III (r. 126/744), perhaps because there were insufficient funds. The fact that al-Walīd also promised that the *ʿatā'* would also be paid on time may imply that fiscal problems had meant that it was not previously. There are also many instances of people not being paid what they thought they were due for political reasons, or because they refused to perform military service, and this may have been in some cases a form of cost cutting. But in general, neither the Umayyad caliphs nor the early ʿAbbāsids were plagued by financial problems. We are told that on the death of al-Rashīd in 193/809 the caliphate had massive cash reserves.[16]

The first evidence of financial problems comes in the later stages of the war between the supporters of al-Ma'mūn and their opponents in Baghdad from 201/816 to 204/820. In the competition to attract military support, each side tried to outbid the other. The leaders of the Baghdad party, especially, made promises they could not keep and were reduced to authorising troops to go into the countryside and take what they could. However, these were disturbed and unusual times; the regular collection of revenue must have virtually come to a halt, and such incidents should not be taken as an indication that the whole system was in deficit.

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[15]) See, for example, the torturing of al-Ḥasan ibn Makhlad and the death of Abū Nūḥ and Aḥmad ibn Isrā'īl in 255/869 vividly reported in al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, ed. M. J. de Goeje *et al.* (Leiden, 1879–1901), III, 1720–25, and Thābit ibn Sinān's catalogue of the confiscations made by al-Muqtadir in Miskawayh, *Tajārib*, I, 239–41.

[16]) Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh*, III, 62; Miskawayh, *Tajārib*, I, 238.

Until the death of al-Mutawakkil in 247/861 the government seems to have been able to meet the financial demands imposed by the new military system. After his death, however, things began to change rapidly. In 249/863 after the accession of al-Mustaʿīn, elements in the military mutinied to press demands for their pay, and shortly afterwards the Turks of Samarra led a riot against the caliph's financial agents; this resulted in the death the chief administrator and the payment of unaffordably large sums to the soldiers. The war between the partisans of al-Muʿtazz and al-Mustaʿīn in 251/865, which resulted in the second siege of Baghdad, produced another major crisis and more violence.[17] That these financial problems seem to have been systemic rather than the result of abnormal circumstances is suggested by a comment in al-Ṭabarī's *History* that the annual bill for military salaries came to twice the receipts of *kharāj* taxation from the entire realm (*mamlaka*),[18] though it should be pointed out that this happened after many provinces had effectively ceased to contribute anything to the central government. In Shawwāl 253/October 867 the Turkish commander Waṣīf told the discontented soldiers to "eat dirt", for he had nothing else to give them; shortly afterwards, the unfortunate caliph al-Muʿtazz was brutally put to death because he could not find the 50,000 *dīnār*s necessary to satisfy the troops. His only recourse was to his mother Qabīḥa who, despite her great wealth, refused to help him out. There could not be a clearer or more brutal illustration of the problems caused by the lack of any mechanism for government borrowing.

There seem to have been two periods of major financial problems, the first in the anarchy at Samarra between the assassination of al-Mutawakkil in 247/861 and the accession of al-Muʿtamid in 256/870. There then followed a period of retrenchment. The size of the army was reduced and the budget brought back into balance, even though many territories had been lost. Al-Muʿtaḍid (d. 279/892) and al-Muktafī (d. 295/908) are said to have run a modest budget surplus,[19] and we have a revenue list surviving from the first year of al-Muʿtaḍid's reign that suggests careful budget-

[17]) The high cost of the war of 251/865 is suggested by the extraordinarily large number of reduced weight *dirhams* minted at Samarra in that year. See Luke Treadwell, "Notes on the Mint at Samarra," in C. F. Robinson, ed., *A Medieval Islamic City Reconsidered: an Interdisciplinary Approach to Samarra* (Oxford, 2001), 141–56, at 150–51.

[18]) Al-*Ṭabarī*, *Taʾrīkh*, III, 1685.

[19]) Miskawayh, *Tajārib*, I, 240–41.

ing.[20] This position was rapidly reversed under al-Muqtadir, when the government finances plunged into what turned out to be a terminal crisis. Thābit ibn Sinān was quite clear that the crisis was the result of the feebleness of the caliph and the corruption of the bureaucracy, but while these factors certainly exacerbated the position, it is probable that the problems were longer term and systemic. Expenditure rapidly grew out of control, while the revenues were diminished by renewed wars in Iraq connected with the revolts of the Qarāmiṭa. It is clear that the budget moved rapidly into deficit. While court extravagance certainly contributed to the problem, it was military wages that really brought catastrophe, partly because they were by far the largest element in government expenditure and partly because they were so inelastic; any attempts to cut army pay provoked a violent reaction. A succession of *wazīrs* attempted, with greater or lesser success, to manage a situation that was basically unmanageable. The ʿAbbāsid government was attempting to maintain a level of military spending that grew inexorably on the support of a steadily diminishing resource base. At one level, bankruptcy was the main reason for the collapse of the caliphate.

So far it has been argued that the middle ʿAbbāsid caliphate had in important ways become isolated from the bulk of the Muslim community. In the quest for military and governmental efficiency, government and the military had become specialised and professionalised. It was a highly centralised imperial system. In some ways this was very successful, and caliphs like al-Muʿtaṣim and al-Mutawakkil probably enjoyed a degree of absolute authority that their predecessors had lacked. But the regime also became isolated. It no longer represented a wide variety of constituencies and interest groups among the Muslim community; that is, most Muslims had no direct involvement with the ruling elite, and were subjects of ʿAbbāsid power, rather stakeholders in it. When the financial problems, which were probably inevitable in the system but were exacerbated by the falling productivity of Iraqi agriculture and the lack of credit, became apparent, there was no longer a reserve of popular support on which the dynasty could call.

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[20]) For the text, al-Hilāl ibn al-Muḥassin al-Ṣābī, *Kitāb al-wuzarā'*, ed. ʿAbd al-Sattār Aḥmad Farrāj (Cairo, 1958), 15–27. The text is discussed in Heribert Busse, "Das Hofbudget des Chalifen al-Muʿtaḍid billah," *Der Islam*, 29 (1967), 11–36.

The View from the Provinces

The tale of the collapse of the central government is, of course, only half of the answer to the question of the decline and fall of the caliphate. Developments away from the centre also had a profound impact.

The most important and certainly the most long-lasting of these was the progress of conversion to Islam. It is a paradoxical truth that the first Muslim empire was broken up by the success of Islam. The emergence of local native Muslim élites meant that a man – and by extension a ruler – could be a good Muslim without having any connection with or loyalty to the caliphate. It is remarkable that none of the successor states of the ʿAbbāsid caliphate, with the arguable exception of the Bagratid kings of Armenia, who were Christians, embraced a non-Muslim ideology.[21]

Our understanding of the nature and progress of conversion to Islam is largely dependent on the writing of Richard Bulliet.[22] For the historian there are major problems in plotting the chronology and pace of conversion to Islam. In the Arabic sources there is some anecdotal evidence, some individual examples, but nothing by way of statistics or general discussion. Bulliet has attempted to address this problem by investigating a large number of biographies and drawing a general conclusion from them. Biographies of learned men in Iran often contain genealogies extending back to a non-Muslim ancestor, clearly distinguished as such by his name. If the real approximate date for the death of the subject of the biography is known, then by working back through the generations, allowing 25 years for each generation, it is possible to arrive at an approximate date for the conversion of this lineage to Islam. Clearly, in each individual case there are a number of uncertainties. However, if this procedure is repeated over many thousands of biographies, then the collective results may well have some validity.

Bulliet's method is, as he says, heuristic, that is to say that it fits in with and serves to explain the other scattered bits of information that we have. As one might reckon intuitively, Bulliet's graphs show a bell-curve, the conversion beginning slowly in the years following the Muslim conquest, growing in speed with the coming of the ʿAbbāsids and proceed-

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[21]) It seems possible that the Daylamite leader Mardāvīj ibn Ziyār (killed 323/935) was attempting a Zorostrian revival, but the attempt came to an end with his assassination. See Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates* (London, 1986), 216.

[22]) Richard W. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: an Essay in Quantitative History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979).

ing swiftly in the third/ninth and fourth/tenth centuries before slowing down in the fifth/eleventh as the bulk of the population converts, leading only a minority who retain their ancient faith, in some cases right down to modern times. Bulliet's methodology may be open to criticism on matters of detail, but his arguments have found broad acceptance. His graphs of conversion to Islam are central to our understanding not just of religious change, but of the whole social and political history of the early Muslim world.

As has already been mentioned, the effect of the widespread conversion to Islam was to allow the emergence of native Muslim élites in the provinces of the empire. Empires that, like the first Muslim empire, extend over a large area and rule people of very diverse cultures and faiths can only exist if there is a pan-imperial élite. The members of this élite need to feel that their loyalties are to the centre rather than to the people of the localities in which they serve, and that their close personal contacts are with other members of the élite rather than with the subject peoples. A typical characteristic of such an imperial élite is that its members move from one province to another and that they are not tied to any specific area. It is also characteristic that they return to the court of the caliph, to receive new appointments or to serve as advisers or courtiers. The appointment to the office of governor was symbolised by the handing over of the *liwā'*, or banner. It is likely that most early Muslim governors had actually met a reigning caliph face-to-face, and many of them had been personal companions. Equally, a caliph who knew his job, like the Umayyad Hishām (r. 105–25/724–43) or the ʿAbbāsid al-Manṣūr (r. 136–58/754–75), would have known them all and recognised their various qualities. Even today, world leaders know how important face-to-face personal contacts are and will go to great lengths to make them: in pre-modern societies personal interactions were crucial for establishing bonds of loyalty and trust.

The Umayyad caliphate clearly had such an imperial élite. This is not to deny that its members had roots and support in certain areas, but rather to point out that they could move, with their supporters, to the provinces to which they were appointed. The early ʿAbbāsid élite, members of the ruling dynasty and others, were deployed throughout the empire. A family like the Muhallabids, who were based in al-Baṣra, served as governors in Egypt, Ifrīqiya and Sind. Maʿn ibn Zā'ida al-Shaybānī came from a tribe whose strength lay in the Jazīra, but he served as governor in Yemen and Sīstān and his nephew and successor as tribal leader, Yazīd ibn Mazyad, served in Khurāsān and Armenia.

In the aftermath of the Civil War a new élite emerged, largely made up of men from prominent eastern Iranian families and Turks who had been

recruited for high military posts. One family, the Ṭāhirids, now controlled both Khurāsān and, when the caliphs were established in Samarra, Baghdad. There was a break in the continuity of membership of the élite that is, in many ways, more absolute than the changes resulting from the ʿAbbāsid revolution. In some ways the new élite did serve as a pan-imperial élite, providing governors for provinces. Some, like Amājur in Damascus (257–64/871–77) were very successful, enjoying a fairly long period of office and bringing with them stability and even cultural patronage.[23] Others, like Ibn Ṭūlūn in Egypt, "went native", so to speak, and used their provinces as a base to make themselves independent rulers, identifying with their local subjects rather than with the imperial centre. Beneath the surface, however, new élites were emerging among Arabs and newly converted Iranians.

Each of the various successor states to the ʿAbbāsid caliphate had different origins and emerged in different ways. In some, like Shirvān, Fārs and Khurāsān, we can see strong elements of élite and more general social continuities with the ʿAbbāsid past. In others, like Yemen, there was a return to tribal structures. In a few, like the Zaydī polities of northern Iran, new anti-ʿAbbāsid ideologies were combined with elements of a pre-Islamic social structure. In a paper of this length, it is clearly impossible to offer a detailed history of all the post-ʿAbbāsid states. What I shall do then is to give a brief outline of the emergence of a sample of them to illustrate some of the general processes at work.

Fārs, in southwest Iran, had only been conquered by the early Muslims against stiff local resistance and had been disturbed in the early Umayyad period by Khārijite uprisings. Under the early ʿAbbāsid caliphate, however, it seems to have enjoyed a period of peace and prosperity. This had seen the emergence of a group of rich landowning families. Some of them claimed to be descended from the important families of the Sasanian period (Fārs had been the original heartland of the Sasanians), and even when converted to Islam they adopted such Sasanian names as Sābūr (Shāhpūr) and Ardashīr. The leading families do not, however, seem to have developed a political role comparable to those of the leading Khurāsānian notables, and were content to manage their estates. Fārs remained attached, both politically and fiscally, to the ʿAbbāsid caliphate until well into the reign of al-Muqtadir.[24]

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[23]) On Amājūr see Cobb, *White Banners*, 15, 39–41.

[24]) For Thābit ibn Sinān's comments on the importance of the revenues of Fārs for the profligate government of al-Muqtadir, see Miskawayh, *Tajārib*, I, 238–39.

In 315/927 the province was taken over by a military commander from Baghdad called Yāqūt,[25] who wanted to monopolise the revenues for the payment of his own troops. The demands of this large and ill-disciplined force led to overtaxation and the alienation of the leading figures in the local élite. In these circumstances a local notable of ʿAlid descent called Zayd ibn ʿAlī al-Nawbandajānī made contact with the commander ʿAlī ibn Būya, at this time an ambitious soldier in the retinue of the Daylamite warlord Mardāvīj. Zayd offered ʿAlī 200,000 *dīnār*s to supply and finance ʿAlī and his men so that they could gain a foothold in Fārs and drive out the rapacious Yāqūt. After a shaky start, ʿAlī was able to defeat Yāqūt in 322/934 and establish himself as military ruler of the province. Military victory may have established his control, but his continued success was based on the financial support of the Fārsī élite families, like that of Zayd ibn ʿAlī, who provided the resources and administrative expertise comprising the bases of Būyid rule in Fārs for the next century. The Būyids can, in fact, be seen as mercenary military leaders bankrolled by a consortium of powerful local landowners to maintain their status in the face of the collapse of effective ʿAbbāsid government. ʿAlī himself thought it desirable that the caliph should formally invest him with his new territories: after some negotiation it was agreed that he should be sent a robe (*khilʿa*) and the banner (*liwāʾ*) of office in exchange for four million *dirhams* (less than a quarter of what the province had sent to Baghdad when it was under direct rule). ʿAlī, like other new rulers of the time, did not go to Baghdad in person. Instead the caliph al-Rāḍī (r. 322–29/934–40) sent the insignia with an envoy. Despite the caliph's instructions, the hapless envoy was browbeaten into handing them over before payment was received. Needless to say, none of the four million *dirham*s was ever sent to Baghdad: the caliph was in no position to take any action against this contemptuous defiance.

Azerbayjan had always been a difficult area for the caliphs to control, threatened as it was by outside invasions at the hands of Khazars or Georgians and internal resistance from indigenous leaders like Bābak, but at least the more accessible areas along the Caspian Sea and inland up the Kur and Aras valleys had been under imperial control. The Umayyads had established an important garrison post at Bāb al-Abwāb (Derbent), and the early ʿAbbāsids seem to have maintained control over it. In 171/

[25]) The Būyid take-over of Fārs is described in Miskawayh, *Tajārib*, I, 280–301; see also Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates*, 212–17, for the rise of the Būyids.

787 Hārūn appointed Yazīd ibn Mazyad al-Shaybānī as governor.[26] Yazīd had acquired a formidable military reputation as leader of the bedouin tribe of Shaybān in the Jazīra, and his family was part of the pan-imperial élite of the early ʿAbbāsid state. He was appointed to counter the threat posed by Khazar invasions from the north. A successful tour of duty was followed by another after a few years, and other members of the family were appointed to continue what became an established connection with the province. In 245/859–60 the caliph *aqṭaʿa* ("granted") Yazīd's grandson Muḥammad ibn Khālid the city of Derbent[27] and, it would seem, the areas of Sharvān and Arrān to the south. He "(re)built" the city of Ganja and was granted it and the estates (*ḍiyāʿ*) in the area as hereditary possessions (*irthan*).[28] The next year the caliph al-Mutawakkil was assassinated, and in the ensuing anarchy the descendants of the Shaybānī leaders were allowed effective independence in the area. Muḥammad ibn Khālid still played a role in the politics of the central government when he fought for the caliph al-Mustaʿīn in the civil war of 251/865, and his brother Aḥmad was governor of Damascus in the same period.[29] But subsequent generations of the family seem to have severed their connections. Instead, they took the old Iranian title of Sharvān Shāh and claimed to be descended not from the *ashrāf* of Shaybān, but from the semi-legendary Sasanian hero Bahrām Gūr. All connection with the Banū Shaybān of al-Jazīra was lost. Members of the dynasty no longer visited the caliph's court, nor did they serve in other areas of the empire.

One of the most prominent of the dynasties that founded independent states in the wake of the collapse of ʿAbbāsid power was that of the Sā-

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[26]) For the history of the family, see Vladimir Minorsky, *A History of Sharvān and Darband* (Cambridge, 1958), which includes an edition and translation of the main primary source, the surviving portions of an anonymous *Taʾrīkh Bāb al-Abwāb*. For further discussion, see Wilferd Madelung, "The Minor Dynasties of Northern Iran," in Richard N. Frye, ed., *Cambridge History of Iran*, IV (Cambridge, 1975), 198–249, at 243–44; Crone, *Slaves on Horses*, 169–70; Kennedy, *Early Abbasid Caliphate*, 84–85.

[27]) Minorsky, *History*, Arabic text, 3. This is not the same (pace Minorsky trans., 25) as giving it as a "fief" (*iqtāʿ*): it might have been granted as a *qatīʿa* in absolute ownership. The *Taʾrīkh Bāb al-Abwāb* was composed in the late fifth/eleventh century, and the vocabulary may not reflect the original terms of the grant.

[28]) For these events, see Minorsky, *History*, Arabic text 3–4, English text, 24–26 and commentary.

[29]) Crone, *Slaves on Horses*, 170.

mānids,[30] who by the fourth/tenth century had effectively established themselves as rulers of the great province of Khurāsān in northeast Iran, the original homeland of the ʿAbbāsid movement. The Sāmānids emerged from the minor landowning aristocracy of Soghdia or Tukhāristān, both parts of Khurāsān. During the civil war following al-Rashīd's death, they supported al-Maʾmūn and his governors in Khurāsān and in about 204/819 they were rewarded with government appointments, Nūḥ ibn Asad al-Sāmānī, being made governor of Samarqand. In 212/827 we find his brother Ilyās as governor of Alexandria in Egypt,[31] suggesting that at this time the Sāmānids were part of the new pan-imperial élite. Subsequently, however, the family seems to have confined its activities to Transoxania (Mā Warā l-Nahr) and Khurāsān. At first they governed as lieutenants to the Ṭāhirids, but with the collapse of Ṭāhirid rule in Khurāsān after 259/873 they emerged as independent rulers. In 261/875 Nūḥ ibn Aḥmad was invested as governor of Transoxania.[32] They also began to mint coins in their own name. The de facto independence of the dynasts of eastern Iran did not mean that the caliphs had entirely abandoned their pretensions to formal sovereignty: in 287/900 the caliph al-Muʿtaḍid sent ʿAmr ibn Layth the Ṣaffārid a robe of honour (*khilʿa*) and a banner (*liwāʾ*)[33] as a token of his appointment to the governorate of Transoxania. The investiture conveyed no real authority, and when ʿAmr attempted to take over his new province he was humiliatingly defeated – to the caliph's apparent delight – by Ismāʿīl the Sāmānid, who was in turn given the caliph's approval. When Ismāʿīl ibn Aḥmad died in 295/907, the caliph al-Muktafī appointed his son Aḥmad as governor (*ʿāmil*) of Khurāsān and arranged for a banner (*liwāʾ*) to be sent to him as a sign of caliphal appointment.[34] It was the last time that an reigning ʿAbbāsid caliph appointed a ruler of Khurāsān. The ceremonial may have been the same as al-Manṣūr would have used, but the reality was very different. No Sāmānid ever came in person to receive the signs of office and, as the events of 287/900 had convincingly showed, such formal investitures were no

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30) For the rise of the Sāmānids see Wilhelm Barthold, *Turkestan down to the Mongol Invasion*, 2nd ed. (London, 1928), 209–27; Richard Frye, "The Sāmānids," in *Cambridge History of Iran*, IV, 136–61.

31) Al-Kindī, *Kitāb al-wulāt*, ed. Rhuvon Guest, (London, 1912), 184.

32) Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, III, 1889: the text simply says that Naṣr ibn Aḥmad *wuliya* ("was appointed"), but this probably implied that it was done by the caliph.

33) *Ibid.*, III, 2279.

34) *Ibid.*, III, 2290.

more than a simulacrum of a long-vanished authority. The lands where the ʿAbbāsid revolution had been born were lost to the dynasty forever.

The rise of the Sāmānids demonstrates clearly the emergence of a new élite. They were Muslim, the family probably having been converted in Umayyad times, and as governors they played an important role in leading the expansion of Islamic rule in Transoxania. They owed their initial success to the patronage of the caliph al-Maʾmūn, but after that they made their own way. They were firmly based in their own locality. No ruling Sāmānid, to our knowledge, ever visited the caliphal court, nor did any caliph ever come to Khurāsān during their rule. In fact it is most unlikely that, after al-Maʾmūn, any leading member of the Sāmānid family ever met a reigning caliph. After the reign of al-Maʾmūn, no Sāmānid seems to have served as governor outside his native Khurāsān. The only connection with the caliphs was the formal granting of investiture: no services were required in return. Yet this change was accomplished without violence against the caliph or his men and without any break in traditional protocol. Above all the Sāmānids represent the emergence of a native élite, firmly attached to the Muslim faith but with none of the ties to the caliphate or to other members of the imperial élite that had characterised previous rulers of Khurāsān.

Yemen was an area with a very different culture from Khurāsān.[35] In contrast to the Sāmānids' home territory, it played almost no part in the wider politics of the caliphate and the chroniclers of the central Islamic lands largely ignore it. It was of course a province of the caliphate. Governors were despatched from the capital, or sometimes indirectly from the Ḥijāz. They were based in Ṣanʿāʾ, and how much authority they had beyond the city walls is not clear. Despite the disturbances of the great Civil War, the caliphs continued to appoint governors until the reign of al-Mutawakkil. Typically they were scions of the ruling house or members of prominent Muslim families: among the governors sent by al-Amīn were a descendant of the great Umayyad governor of Iraq, Khālid al-Qasrī, and of the second of the Rāshidūn caliphs, ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb. Few if any of them were Yemenis, and by and large they formed part of the pan-imperial élite. After the restoration of ʿAbbāsid power, we see signs of the eastern Iranian élite taking over even in this distant corner of the empire: under al-Wāthiq in 229/843 Harthama Shār Bamiyān, a prince from what

[35]) For Yemen under the caliphate, see the detailed but uncritical account in ʿAbd al-Muhsin Madʿaj, *The Yemen in Early Islam (9–233/630–847): a Political History* (London, 1988); see also R. B. Serjeant and Ronald Lewcock, *Ṣanʿa': an Arabian Islamic City* (Cambridge, 1983), 51–57.

is now Afghanistan, was sent as governor. He was followed by Jaʿfar ibn Dīnār al-Khayyāṭ, an apparatchik of the Samarra regime, but after the accession of al-Mutawakkil in 232/847 he abandoned his post to his son Muḥammad and returned to Samarra: power politics at the centre had more allure than a provincial governorate. This probably represents the end of effective ʿAbbāsid rule, even in the Ṣanʿāʾ area where the governors had always based their authority.

ʿAbbāsid control was challenged by increasingly open tribal resistance. In the lowland Tihāma, al-Maʾmūn appointed Muḥammad ibn Ziyād as governor in 203/818, apparently to quell the disorder caused by the local ʿAkk and Ashʿar tribes. Muḥammad claimed to be descended from Ziyād ibn Abī Sufyān, the great early governor of Iraq, but it is not clear whether he was an outsider appointed by the caliph who was able to establish his authority or a prominent local figure whom the caliph thought it useful to support. Whatever his origins, Muḥammad soon established himself, founding the great city of Zabīd in 204/820 and establishing a dynasty that was to last until the early fifth/eleventh century. After Muḥammad's appointment, there seem to have been no further attempts by the central government to assert its authority in this area.

In contrast to this comparatively peaceful evolution, highland Yemen saw more violent rejection of ʿAbbāsid rule. In the south Ibrāhīm ibn Dhī l-Muthla al-Manākhī rebelled against the ʿAbbāsid regime in 212/827–28 and in 214/829 soundly defeated the governor Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd, who attempted to dislodge him and sacked the main southern city of al-Janad. No subsequent governor tried to suppress him, and the Manākhīs were acknowledged as descendants of the pre-Islamic Ḥimyarite kings.[36] Whether the rugged area of the mountains of Dhū l-Kilāʿ over which they ruled had ever been under the effective rule of the caliphs is quite obscure: were tax-gatherers ever sent there, were local officials appointed from outside? We have no means of knowing, but the point at issue is this: does the apparent loss of ʿAbbāsid authority in this area represent a resurgence of tribal independence or simply give formal acknowledgement to an independence that had always existed in fact? Does the breakup of the caliphate have any practical effect in this area?

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[36]) For the genealogy of Dhū Manākh, see Werner Caskel, *Ǧamharat an-Nasab. Das genealogische Werk des Hišām ibn Muḥammad al-Kalbī* (Leiden, 1966), Taf. 274 and register s. v. Dū Manāḫ. Yemeni historical tradition was very conscious of the ancient lineages of both the Manākhīs and the Yuʾfirids: see, for example, Nashwān ibn Saʿid al-Ḥimyarī, *Mulūk Ḥimyar wa-aqyāl al-Yaman*, ed. ʿAlī ibn Ismāʿil al-Muʾayyad and Ismāʿīl ibn ʿAlī al-Jarāfī (Cairo, 1959), 164–68.

At the same time Ṣanʿāʾ itself was threatened by Yuʾfir ibn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Ḥiwālī, a local Yemeni chief from Shibām and the eagle's nest fortress of Kawkabān, northeast of the capital. From 214/829 he made himself effectively independent in his home territory. In 229/844 he was able to resist the forces of the ʿAbbāsid governor, Shār Bamiyān, who attempted to dislodge him. Subsequent governors were no more fortunate, and after the departure of Jaʿfar ibn Dīnār, Yuʾfir was able to attack the capital itself. By the end of al-Wāthiq's reign in 233/847 ʿAbbāsid power was ended. The Yuʾfirid dynasty struck coins bearing the names of the ʿAbbāsid caliphs, who were also mentioned in the *khuṭba* (Friday sermon), and al-Muʿtamid is said to have written a formal diploma of investiture in 257/870–71. As late as 299/901 the Banū Yuʾfir were acknowledging al-Muʿtaḍid in the mosque in Sanʿāʾ,[37] and the ʿAbbāsids again took a brief interest in the country when it became a base for Zaydī rebels. There is no evidence that any Yuʾfirid ever met a caliph, travelled to Baghdad or held office in any other province of the empire. Despite intermittent attempts to reestablish some ʿAbbāsid influence after the revival of the caliphate in the later third/ninth century, Yemen had passed from the hands of the pan-imperial élite to local chiefs. Like the Manākhīs, the Yuʾfirids claimed descent from the pre-Islamic aristocracy of Yemen, and as with the Manākhīs, it is questionable whether the authority of the caliphs had ever extended over Shibām and Kawkabān. What marks out the Yuʾfirids is of course the taking of Ṣanʿāʾ, the acknowledged seat of the governors, and the failure of the ʿAbbāsid administration to make any effective effort to recover it.

In all the examples cited here, the successor states can be characterised as belonging to the Sunnī branch of Islam and so acknowledged the status of the ʿAbbāsids as God's caliphs, however feeble their real power had become. The collapse of the authority of the ʿAbbāsid caliphate in the lands to the south of the Caspian Sea, however, presents a rather different picture.[38] In maps of Islamic history and broad surveys it is customary to include the mountainous areas of Ṭabaristān, Gīlān and Daylam within the frontiers of the caliphate. In reality, this is an oversimplified picture. ʿAbbāsid government certainly did function in the coastal areas, especially

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[37]) Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, III, 204.

[38]) The best survey of this complex history is to be found in Wilferd Madelung, "Minor Dynasties". See also *idem, Religious Trends in Early Islamic Iran* (Albany, 1988), 87–92; *idem*, "Abū Isḥāq al-Ṣābī on the ʿAlids of Ṭabaristān and Gīlān," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 26 (1967), 17–56, repr. in his *Religious and Ethnic Movements in Medieval Islam* (Aldershot, 1992), Chap. VII.

cities like Sārī and Āmul in Ṭabaristān. In contrast, although the Arabic sources do not dwell on it, it is clear that many of the mountain regions were politically beyond ʿAbbāsid control and, furthermore, that a large proportion of both rulers and ruled remained non-Muslim until well into the third/ninth century. Such were the principalities ruled by the Bāwandids of highland Ṭabaristān (who accepted Sunnī Islam in 227/842) and the Qārinvands of the Damāvand area, whose leader Māzyār was converted at much the same time. Both these dynasties claimed, probably with some justification, to be descended from élite families of the Sasanian period. When these areas were incorporated into the wider Muslim world, it was at the hands not of the ʿAbbāsids, but of the Ṭāhirids and Sāmānids of Khurāsān. In a sense, therefore, the breakup of ʿAbbāsid rule in these areas can be simply explained by the fact that it had never existed in any meaningful form. Native élites had simply maintained their power throughout the period of the muslim empire; when it collapsed, they either consolidated their independence or fell victims to other, more rapacious local élites. In fact, there remained within the boundaries of the empire pockets of territory where the writ of caliphal rule had never run and where local dynasts or tribal leaders remained the real power in the land.

The emergence of the ʿAlids as an important power in the lands of the southern shores of the Caspian was another factor undermining such ʿAbbāsid authority as there had been. The story is a complicated one and the traditions are often confused, but the broad outlines are clear. The mountains of this remote area and its independently minded people had offered the prospect of shelter to members of the ʿAlid family fleeing Umayyad and ʿAbbāsid authority on several occasions. Whether these visits had sown the seeds of devotion to the family of the Prophet is unclear, but in 250/864 resentment against Ṭāhirid rule led the notables of Rūyān and Chālūs in the central area of the Caspian coast to appeal to an ʿAlid, al-Ḥasan ibn Zayd, to come and take power.[39] The regime lasted until 287/900, when the then-leader, Muḥammad ibn Zayd, led an overambitious attempt to invade Khurāsān and was defeated and killed. However, one of his followers, another member of the ʿAlid family, al-Ḥasan ibn ʿAlī, known as al-ʿUṭrush, fled westward to Daylam where he was invited by Justān ibn Marzbān, called the "King of the Daylamites". Gradually al-ʿUṭrush took over authority from Justān, who was obliged to swear allegiance to him; until his death in 304/907 he ruled over a Shīʿī state that

[39]) Presumably to give Islamic legitimacy to their own independent polities, rather as the new monarchies of southeast Europe in the nineteenth century looked to German royal families to provide them with legitimate sovereigns.

owed neither secular or religious loyalty to the ʿAbbāsids. Even the Sunnī historian al-Ṭabarī, who came from the area, acknowledged that "the people had not seen anything like the justice of al-ʿUṭrush, his good conduct and his commitment to justice".[40] In Daylam, the apparent collapse of ʿAbbāsid rule brings together several different factors: it had never been under effective ʿAbbāsid rule, and the local nobles asserted their power by converting to Islam – not to the Islam of the caliphs, but the Islam of their most deadly enemies, the Zaydī Shīʿa. It was the triumph of Shīʿī Islam that forms the background to the great expansion of the Daylamites and their Būyid leaders in Iran and Iraq in the fourth/tenth centuries.

These successor polities have certain features in common. They were all Muslim and none made any attempt to recruit non-Muslims to their cause. They all achieved independent power without resorting to armed confrontation with the forces of the caliphate (although there were occasional clashes between the Yuʾfirids and the ʿAbbāsid garrison of Ṣanʿāʾ). Apart from the Zaydīs, none actually repudiated the notional sovereignty of the caliphs. But they also looked to other discourses of legitimacy to validate their power, the Shaybānī leaders and the Sāmānids claiming descent from Bahrām Gūr and the Yuʾfirids from the Tubbaʾs of pre-Islamic Yemen.

Conclusion

For anyone brought up on English-language historiography, the phrase "decline and fall of … Empire" has very immediate resonances. The echoes of Edward Gibbon's great eighteenth-century classic, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, are immediately apparent. Gibbon's work is one of the great classics of English literature, and it still retains its relevance for the study of Late Antiquity. Not for one moment would I wish to compare this short essay with Gibbon's masterpiece: not in scale, nor elegance, nor wit. But even so, there are interesting comparisons and contrasts to be made. The breakup of the Islamic empire was essentially a product of the success of the dominant culture. The rapid pace of conversion to Islam as a religion and acceptance of Islamic culture led to the breakup of the unitary state. The élites that assumed power had, in many cases, deep roots in the localities they came to rule, and in some cases

[40]) Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, III, 2292.

they were – or claimed to be – directly connected with élites that had existed before the Muslim conquest. Yet all were acculturated to the new religion and the political discourse that went with it.

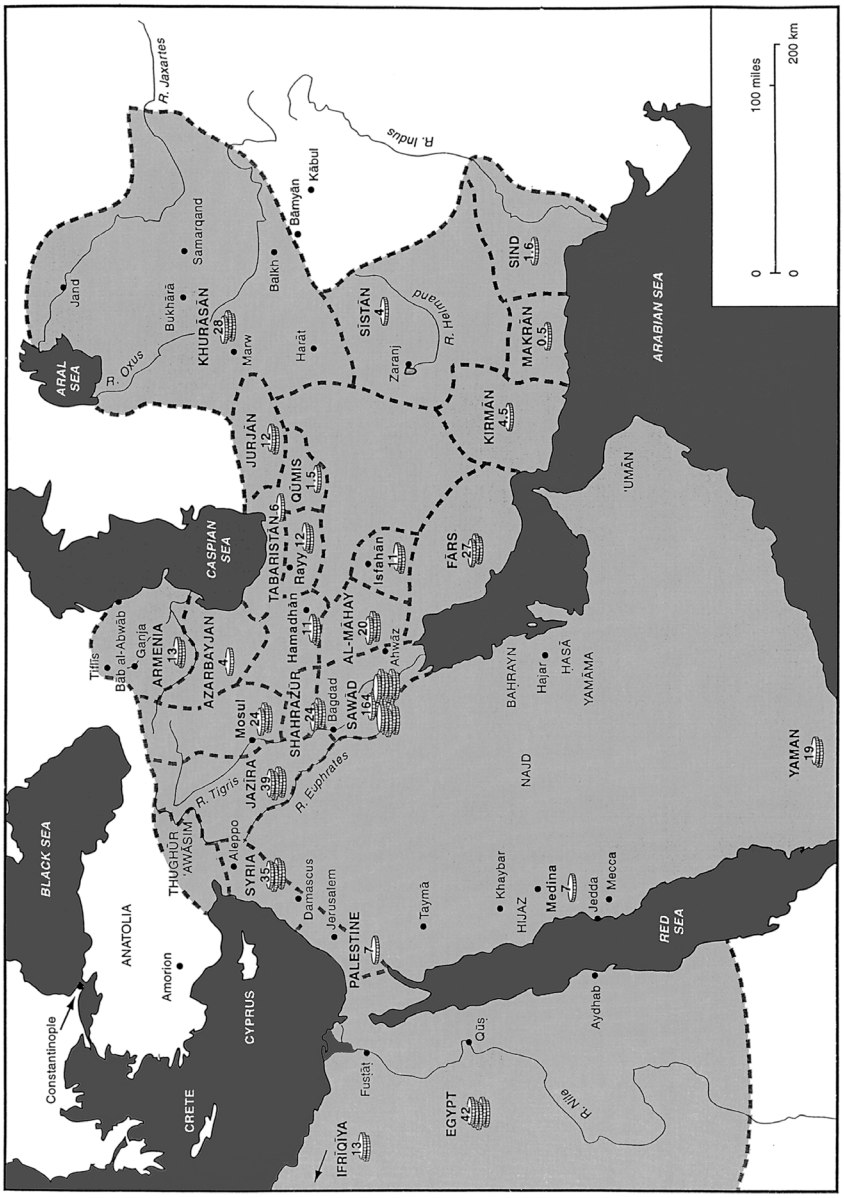
The story of the disintegration of the Roman Empire is different, but not entirely dissimilar. For the culture of the Christian Roman Empire survived in the religious beliefs and the high culture of many of the successor states. Was early mediaeval Christendom, then, an equivalent of the Muslim commonwealth that emerged after the fall of the Muslim empire?[41] As usual with complex historical questions the answer is yes and no. The ties binding the Muslim world together went deeper than the links of Latinate culture and Roman Christianity. Perhaps most importantly, they involved a common vernacular in many areas and a more common legal system. None of the Islamic successor states developed a separate system of law as the Franks or Visigoths did: they all looked to Islamic law to provide their judicial norms and frameworks. There was also a more or less common system of coinage, or at least recognisable exchange rates, and this was reflected in the movements of people – not tribes or ethnic groups, but individuals. In early mediaeval Europe, those, like St. Boniface who moved from one culture to another, were bold and unusual pioneers: in the Islamic east, a man like the historian al-Ṭabarī, who left his native hills in Ṭabaristān at the southern end of the Caspian Sea to settle in Baghdad, was joining thousands of his contemporaries in a movement of men that created a pan-Islamic intellectual élite: his contemporaries noted his scholarship, his industry and his austere lifestyle, but no one thought it worth drawing attention to his travels.

How then does the breakup of the caliphate compare with other more recent imperial disintegrations? Are there any parallels to be found? The "liberationist" model is seldom appropriate, and there are few instances of forceful rebellion against ʿAbbāsid authority. Only in the Yemen and occasionally in the Caspian provinces were there direct confrontations between locals aspiring to independence and the forces of central government, and even these instances may conceal a more complex pattern of long-standing separatism. The collapse of the British and Soviet empires may afford closer analogies. The emergence of the Sāmānids in semi-alliance with the ʿAbbāsids and the naturalisation of the Mazyadids in Shirvān have parallels with the drifting apart of the élites of the British empire, while the landowners of Fārs, striving to maintain their wealth and

41) For a wide-ranging discussion of the idea of "commonwealth" in the Late Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic worlds, see Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, 1993).

social status in the face of the collapse of a central government that had previously protected them, may have analogies in ex-Soviet Turkistan. In the end, however, all these parallels can do is to emphasise yet again that the breakup of the caliphate was no simple matter, but the result of a complex interaction of political forces. They also show that it was probably inevitable. It was certainly irreversible.[42]

[42]) I am extremely grateful to Professor Lawrence Conrad for inviting me to give this lecture. It was an honour to speak in a University where not only Becker himself, but also the great and much-lamented Albrecht Noth had taught. I am also grateful to the many members of the Hamburg audience who made helpful suggestions and produced stimulating ideas.



This map shows the revenues in millions of *dirham*s said to have been yielded by the provinces of the caliphate in the late second/eighth century (see n. 9 of text). Provincial boundaries are fluid and approximate.

Revenues are rounded to the nearest million *dirham*s, except in the case of provinces like Makrān, where the sums were very small.

Revenues from Syria and Egypt, given in *dīnār*s in the Arabic account, have been converted into *dirham*s at a rate of 22:1 to facilitate comparison.