

Meta-Narratives: Political Legitimacy, Fate and Piety in the Narratives of the Abbasid Civil War

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This paper is an attempt to highlight some of the broader moral and religious concerns of Abbasid historiography as pertains to the Abbasid Civil War and the ensuing reign of al-Ma'mûn. By focusing on the narratives of Ibn A'tham al-Kûfi and al-Dinawari it is argued that Abbasid historiography framed its narratives within, but not necessarily for the sole purpose of imparting, the moral and ideological priorities of historians and therefore it cast its narrative at once both as an account of events and as a social-moral commentary. The result of this was that accounts of past events, as well as a body of cultural maxims precipitated by current social values, were produced.

Key words: Abbasid historiography, Ibn A'tham, al-Dinawari, Islamic Historiography, Abbasid Civil War, al-Amin, al-Ma'mûn.

Oftentimes, the readers of medieval Islamic historiography find themselves engulfed by a moral discourse, breathing ethical and religious meaning through the incorporation of the themes of fate, piety, and legitimacy into otherwise mundane affairs. If we take the craft of history at its face value, it seems only natural that historiography reflects the worldview of historians. In that sense, early Islamic historiography is no exception. It too involves a deliberate or unconscious secondary intention beyond narrating events. It is this that must be taken into consideration for making a proper evaluation of its larger narrative. The narrative may introduce moral and religious themes for didactic purposes that are intended for readers from the same and following generations. It may also hope to produce a cultural-moral matrix as a guide for society and political practice. Furthermore, on occasions the secondary intentions appear in fact to be the primary aim of the historian, the reason why he is narrating the accounts of the past in the first place. At other times, the narratives appear to be simply pioneering attempts at exploring the

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boundaries of historical writing. Having said this, one must also clarify that individual accounts need not be of immediate political or sectarian utility to find a way into the narrative, although some certainly did help the promotion of a particular view or individual.

Fortunately, recent scholarly treatments of early Islamic historiography have picked up themes beyond those provoked by questions concerning *isnad* and religious or sectarian partisanship, even though the questions of *isnad* and partisanship do not seem to die away quickly.¹ In an attempt to better understand early Islamic historiography, recent studies have been shifting away from limiting themselves to deconstructing narratives into bits and pieces to actually reconstructing them to make sense of not only the narratives, but also the events permeating them. By examining some of the broader moral and religious questions with which medieval historians seem to have grappled and, at the same time, desired to impart to their readers, this paper aims to contribute to scholarship in this direction. In an attempt to look at early Islamic narratives from the standpoint of their didactic and moral intentions, the present study, which should be viewed as a working paper, shall look into the narratives of Ibn A'tham al-Kūfi and al-Dīnawarī on the Abbasid Civil War and the reign of al-Ma'mūn.²

Ibn A'tham al-Kūfi is one of the earliest historians to deal with the period in question. His *Kitāb al-Futūh*, most probably written around the first decade of the 3rd/9th century,³ has generally been underrated in modern scholarly works.⁴ If we exclude works such as Khalifa b. Khayyāt (d. 240/854 or 241/855), which offer a brief account of selected events, Ibn A'tham's

¹ Albrecht Noth, in collaboration with Lawrence I. Conrad, *The Early Arabic Historical Tradition: A Source-Critical Study*, translated from the German by Michael Bonner (Princeton, N.J.: Darwin Press, 1994); Tarif Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Fred M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginning of Islamic Historical Writing*, (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1998); Tayeb El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography: Hārūn al-Rashīd and the Narrative of the 'Abbāsīd Caliphate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Michael David Cooperson, *Classical Arabic Biography: The Heirs of the Prophets in the Age of al-Ma'mūn* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) and Chase F. Robinson, *Islamic Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

² See the study of Bernd Radke, "Towards a Topology of Abbāsīd Universal Chronicles," *Occasional Papers of the School of Abbasid Studies* 3 (1990 [published in 1991]), 1ff. For an analysis of biographical sources on al-Ma'mūn and Ali al-Rīda, see also Cooperson, *Classical Arabic Biography*, 24-107. The recently published study of Robinson, *Islamic Historiography*, too, calls for more serious attention to the social and ideological background of early Islamic historiography.

³ M. A. Shaban, "Ibn A'tham al-Kūfi," *EI*, 2nd ed. See also Robinson, *Islamic Historiography*, 34.

⁴ For the scholarship on Ibn A'tham and his history, see Shaban, "Ibn A'tham al-Kūfi"; M. Fayda, "Ibn A'sem el-Kūfi," *DIA*.

narrative remains the only substantial account of the period and presents not only a more contemporaneous construction of the Civil War, but also a work with which one may compare later narratives. al-Dinawari (d. 281-2/895-896 or slightly later),⁵ a well-educated and talented scholar with in-depth knowledge of literature and sciences, is similarly one of the earliest historians in the Islamic historiographical tradition to organize his narratives as universal history.⁶ Both historians therefore merit our attention for their innovative spirits and pioneering efforts in dealing with historiographical narratives.

Political Legitimacy

Clearly, the legitimacy of the Muslim community, the Caliphate, and the reigning caliphs was a major concern to historians who also promoted political ideals that spelled out what a perfect caliphate was.⁷ The narratives of Ibn A'tham and al-Dinawari show that the concern of historians stretches far beyond the simple justification of a particular caliph. It includes themes cultivated from existing political wisdom and, more importantly, from common ideals of legitimate rule in the early Islamic milieu.

For Ibn A'tham, piety, fairness, and justice signify a legitimate rule. In the narratives of the Abbasid Civil War he emphasizes time and again that any claim to legitimate and popular rule should embrace piety and avoid moral negligence and religious flaws. When Ibn A'tham depicts al-Amin as unfit for the caliphate, he guides the reader to identify the primary reason for it as being the caliph's moral laxity and religious negligence. The same logic continues in the accounts describing the deposition of al-Amin. Instead of building the narrative on actual political and administrative miscalculations and impotency as he sees them, Ibn A'tham directs his attention to moral and religious shortcomings, such as the impiety and moral laxity that rendered al-Amin's rule inefficient and undesirable to explain why al-Amin was not worthy of the caliphate. The following is what Ibn A'tham has to say in this regard: "When the caliphate was given to Muhammad al-Amin, he gave himself to amusement, entertainment, and recreation. He then bought a variety of jewelry and occupied himself with women. When he did it excessively and people

⁵ B. Lewin, "Abū Ḥānifa al-Dinawarī," *EI*, 2nd ed.

⁶ Of his two other contemporaries, Ibn Qutayba (*al-Ma'arif*) does not deal with the Abbasid Civil War in any substantial way, and al-Ya'qubi (*Tarikh*) merits another dedicated study.

⁷ For the complex web of issues associated with political legitimacy and historiography, see Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, 98ff.

became tired of it, they found harshness in their hearts [toward al-Amin].”⁸ Simply, with a similar logic, he honors al-Rashid and al-Ma’mun for their upright morality and religiosity.

al-Dinawari⁹ too links legitimacy to upright behavior, qualifications for rule, and the display of justice in practice. Upright behavior comes through piety and religious devotion, while the qualifications for rule need military and administrative prowess as well as moderate political conduct within the broad framework of justice.¹⁰ The popular perception of nobility expressed in forbearance, *hilm*, and manly virtues, *muruwwa*, permeates al-Dinawari’s narrative, although they are not cited as such, reflecting the values of his milieu and projecting a role model for the reader.

Ibn A’tam also seems concerned with the integrity and equilibrium of the community. He stresses unity and discourages civil discord. Ibn A’tam charges the caliph as the leader of the faithful who has the responsibility to satisfy such obligations. On his deathbed, al-Rashid apprehensively advises his retinue to adhere to agreement and unity, to offer good counsel to rulers, and not to let dissension invade their community: “I advise you to unite your voices and offer good counsel to your leaders, *a’imma*. I forbid you disunion, breach [of agreement], deception, hatred and envy... It is your obligation to protect the community from worldly desires, *ahwa’*, from error and reprehensible innovation.”¹¹

The fulfillment of agreements, as also hinted at in al-Rashid’s deathbed speech, is elevated to a major theme in the conflict between al-Amin and al-Ma’mun, not only because the author perceives it as being morally commendable, but also because it echoes a fundamental principle from early Islamic political practice and thought, namely the appointment and pledge of allegiance, *al-aqd* and *bay’a*. When al-Ma’mun sought the counsel of his retinue after he heard that al-Amin had designated his son as successor and intended to remove al-Ma’mun from his position, he was advised to be patient and abide by the agreement: “All told al-Ma’mun that the way is to be patient and not to violate the agreement. If your brother transgresses your

⁸ Ibn A’tam al-Kufi, *al-Futuh* (Hyderabad: Osmania Oriental Publications Bureau, 1975), 8:288. Hereafter cited as *AF*.

⁹ Abd al-Mun’im Amir, introduction to *al-Akhhbar al-Tiwāl*, by al-Dinawari (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr al-Hadith, 1988). Hereafter cited as *DA*.

¹⁰ *DA*, 387-389.

¹¹ *AF*, 8:283.

[rights], God will be your supporter against him. Let your response to him be pleasant and display modesty and obedience to him.”¹²

If the advisors of al-Ma'mūn are praised for insisting that al-Ma'mūn abide by the agreement, al-Amin himself is condemned for not doing so. al-Dinawari portrays al-Amin's alteration of the succession order in a morally questionable light. In the following account, al-Amin confides to his advisor his intention of deposing al-Ma'mūn: “Then Muhammad al-Amin invited Isma'il b. Sabih, the Chief Officer of Intelligence, *Katib al-Sirr*, and said, ‘What do you see O Ibn Sabih? He said, ‘I see a blessed reign, a sound caliphate and a forward-looking affair. God has concluded that [affair, caliphate] for the Commander of the Faithful in the best and most abundant way.’ Muhammad said to him, ‘I did not bring you [here] to preach to me, I wanted your opinion.’ Isma'il said, ‘I would like the Commander of the Faithful to explain the issue to me so that I can advise him of my view and recommendation.’ He [al-Amin] said, ‘I am thinking of removing my brother Abd Allah from Khurasan and putting the son of the Commander of the Faithful, Musa in charge of it.’ Isma'il said, ‘I ask you to seek refuge in God O Commander of the Faithful from violating what al-Rashid established, prepared, and erected the pillars of.’ Muhammad said, ‘al-Rashid was deceived by embellishment in the affair of Abd Allah. Woe to you Ibn Sabih, Abd al-Malik b. Marwan had a better opinion than yours when he said ‘two lions do not meet in an attack unless one kills the other.’”¹³

Corollary to the idea of unity and preventing civil discord, both Ibn A'tham and al-Dinawari emphasize the notion of obedience to the caliph and rallying around him in times of crises. However, legitimate resistance, even though it may involve violence, is actually recognized. Both historians make clear that obedience and loyalty do not preclude legitimate resistance. By affirmatively depicting al-Ma'mūn as demanding his rights vis-à-vis al-Amin, Ibn A'tham effectively distinguishes between unquestioning loyalty and legitimate resistance based on rightful demand and honorable conduct. Such consciousness spills over to other events as well. In the account treating the rebellion of Nasr b. Shabath between 205-210/821-825, for instance, Ibn A'tham, narrates how both sides perceive their positions vis-à-vis each other in respect to the notions of obedience and legitimate resistance. Ibn A'tham relates that when

¹² AF, 8:296.

¹³ DA, 393-394.

al-Ma'mûn sent Tahir against Nasr b. Shabath, who led the uprising against al-Ma'mûn, that Thair wrote a letter to Nasr demanding his surrender without armed engagement. Tahir's letter portrays Nasr b. Shabath as nothing more than a rebel against God's will and decree: "God has taken for a friend whoever befriended him [al-Ma'mûn] and for an enemy whoever showed hostility towards him [al-Ma'mûn]." ¹⁴ In his reply, Nasr b. Shabath justifies himself, saying that he is acting against the oppression of rulers and administrators—a situation when resistance is considered by movements of opposition not only as being legitimate, but also as obligatory: "If our rulers and governors oppress [us] / We oppose them with sharpened and keen swords." ¹⁵ We do not know whether Ibn A'tham had any particular interest in defending, or even allowing a voice to, Nasr b. Shabath. The account nevertheless clearly draws limits to political obedience and loyalty, in this case justice and fairness, in the absence of which resistance becomes justifiable and legitimate.

Overall, the narratives of both Ibn A'tham and al-Dinawari reflect an engagement with the popular perception of justice without specific conditions set for its scope and implementation. The narratives serve as vehicles not only to narrate the past events, but also to impart political mores and values. Both historians promote and encourage virtues that are fitting to ninth century Abbasid values, such as abiding by agreements, loyalty, faithfulness, political and administrative competence, and full commitment to the affairs of the caliphate while at the same time they discourage incompetence and those things that they consider to be morally reprehensible. While al-Amin and al-Ma'mûn come across as contrasting characters in many accounts, it should be noted that there is no need to assume that the narratives were fictional vehicles to tell an epic story of good and evil. Rather, it seems that the events are evaluated and reconstructed within the political values and wisdom of the Islamic third century. Apart from the fact that many histories were written under the patronage of and for the rulers and administrators themselves, historians tended to concern themselves with broader questions of identity as authors operating within and for a community. In other words, Muslim historians ventured into exploring ways to depict early Islamic society and its political leadership in new lights vis-à-vis other cultural traditions.

¹⁴ AF, 8:313.

¹⁵ AF, 8:314.

Fate

By the time Ibn A'tham and al-Dinawari had written their chronicles, there was already a substantial body of literature discussing human freewill and predestination. What the ongoing controversy between the Mu'tazilites and their adversaries in the third Islamic century proves is that the question of freewill was a major concern of scholars over a broad spectrum.¹⁶ Popular belief in fate was also no marginal sentiment in the Abbasid society.¹⁷ Both authors, therefore, were addressing an audience which was already familiar with issues of fate and freewill. It is not surprising, therefore, to see their narratives were also guided by ideas of predestination.

In two significant instances, the death of Hārūn al-Rashīd and the siege of al-Amin, Ibn A'tham emphasizes how fate unfolded in the lives of these two caliphs. In the course of his narrative, Ibn A'tham depicts al-Rashid as foreseeing his imminent death in Tūs, and submitting to his fate: "When al-Rashīd arrived at Tūs he called for al-'Abbās b. Mūsā and said to him: O, 'Abbās! According to our sacred knowledge, I am to die in Tūs. He [al-'Abbās] said: Nay, may God heal the Commander of the Faithful. He [al-Rashīd] said: It is what I say." Ibn A'tham proceeds to cite a few lines of poetry which al-Rashīd had recited to al-'Abbās: "He [God] brought me to Tūs, his verdict is certain; there is nothing [to wish] except his satisfaction, and patience and submission."¹⁸

The dramatic end of al-Amin is also portrayed as the manifestation of a foreordained fate.¹⁹ The account depicts al-Amin besieged in his palace in Baghdād by al-Ma'mūn's general Tāhir. al-Amin goes out one night, seeking relief from his distress. His conversation with Ibrahim b. al-Mahdī leads to a night of entertainment with a singer-slave girl, named Da'f, whom al-Amin calls to entertain him. Upon hearing her name, Ibrahim b. al-Mahdī finds it to be ominous. When she finally arrives before al-Amin, she sings some poetry of al-Nābigha al-Ja'di for the caliph: "Kulayb, by my life, was a better

¹⁶ See Joseph van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1992), 2:50ff., 643ff.; William Montgomery Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought* (Edinburgh: The University Press, 1973), 209ff., and *Free Will and Predestination in Early Islam* (London: Luzac and Company Ltd., 1948), 93ff.

¹⁷ al-San'āni devotes a section on predestination, 11:111ff. 'Abdallāh b. Wahb b. Muslim's *Kitāb al-Qadar wa mā Warada fi Dhālika min Āthar*, ed. 'Abd al-'Aziz 'Abd al-Rahmān Muḥammad al-'Ashim (s.l.: Dār al-Sultān, 1986) is dedicated to traditions concerning predestination. See also van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, 1:118ff., 132ff., 2:202ff.; Watt, *Formative Period of Islamic Thought*, 82ff., 209ff.

¹⁸ *AF*, 8:282.

¹⁹ *AF*, 8:303-304, 305.

defender and less guilty than you, yet he became stained with [his own] blood." Distressed, al-Amin orders her to sing something else. She can remember nothing except the following verses:

Their departure has made my eye tearful and sleepless
Verily, parting from loved ones provokes many tears.
The vicissitudes of their fortune continued to oppress them
Until they destroyed each other
Verily the vicissitudes of fortune are oppressive.

Once again, al-Amin is annoyed. He demands that she sings another song. The third song is no better:

By the Lord of repose and movement
Fate possesses many snares
Night and day succeed each other, and the stars revolve in the firmament
Only to transfer prosperity from one king,
Occupied with the love of this world, to another.

Irritated, al-Amin orders the slave girl to leave. As she gets up to leave, she trips over a crystal cup and breaks it. At this moment, al-Amin remarks to Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdi: "O Ibrāhīm, don't you see what this slave girl has talked about and what has happened with the cup. By God, I think my affair [time] has come. I [Ibrāhīm] said: 'May God prolong the life of the Commander of the Faithful, and strengthen his dominion.' Before the conversation finishes we heard a voice from the Tigris [saying]: 'so has been decreed that matter you [two] do inquire' [Q.12: 41]. He [al-Amin] said to me: 'O Ibrāhīm did not you hear what I heard?' I said: 'No, O Commander of the Faithful, I have not heard anything.' He resumed the conversation, and the voice returned... It was only one or two nights later that he [al-Amin] was killed and there happened to his [al-Amin's] affair what has happened."²⁰

al-Dinawarī is similarly convinced of the role of fate in the affairs of the two brothers. The story of al-Kisā'i, the mentor of the two young princes, and Khālisa, a slave girl belonging to al-Amin's mother, shows al-Dinawarī's belief in the power of fate. al-Dinawarī relates a dream revealed to al-Kisā'i by this slave-girl. The story goes that al-Kisā'i was a strict and highly demanding mentor. He was more rigid with al-Amin than with al-Ma'mūn. Having heard the situation, Umm Ja'far, the mother of al-Amin, sent Khālisa

²⁰ *AF*, 8:302-304. For how al-Amin accepts his destiny saying in one of his poems: "Where is the escape from fate?", see also *AF*, 8:305. These verses are also to be found in al-Tabarī, *The History of al-Tabarī: The Reunification of the 'Abbāsīd Caliphate*, trans. C. E. Bosworth (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987), 31:179-181.

to al-Kisā'i, asking him to be more merciful toward her son. To assure al-Kisā'i that al-Amin's fate was predetermined and that forcing him would not change this, Khālisa relates to him the dream that Umm Ja'far had had when al-Amin was born. In her dream, Umm Ja'far is said to have seen al-Amin surrounded by four women, who spoke of his destiny, character, and disposition, including his 'short life,' his 'treacherous' disposition, his 'oppressive rule,' his 'unfaithfulness,' his 'numerous vices,' his 'wastefulness' his 'irascibility,' his 'disloyalty to his kin' and his 'swift demise.' After relating this dream, "Khālisa cries and exclaims: O al-Kisā'i, [do you still think] warning will help?"²¹

The accounts of Ibn A'tham and al-Dinawari place al-Amin's future in the hands of a fate that cannot be diverted or avoided. Given the character of al-Amin as described in the narratives, and more significantly, given his innate ill-fated nature he is unable, even if he wished to do so, to actually modify his conduct. al-Amin simply becomes a prisoner of his fate. Making al-Amin the victim of his fate strengthens the moral lessons of the narrative in more than one way. First of all, it justifies the counter claims of al-Ma'mūn and legitimizes his eventual caliphate. It also exonerates, to a measure, al-Amin personally, attributing his misconduct to something beyond his capacity and control. And thirdly, this event strengthens the message that fate and fortune do not distinguish between rank, social status, or wealth.

Prophecies, predictions, and omens, which are certainly some of the concerns of medieval historians, may also be examined under the general rubric of fate. The references to prophecies and predictions sometimes are made in explicit terms. In other instances, the references are implicit and often associated with extraordinary affairs that evoke a messianic or apocalyptic context.

Ibn A'tham's depiction of al-Ma'mūn's entry into Baghdād is one of the powerful examples that encourage the reader to imagine the scene within a messianic context. Ibn A'tham's and al-Dinawari's depiction of al-Ma'mūn's victorious return to Baghdād in the context of a solar eclipse and the association of his arrival with the cessation of civil wars is brief, yet suggestive. Both note that that when al-Ma'mūn entered Baghdād, the Civil War, *fitan*, ended upon his arrival.²² Another suggestive account that evokes the image

²¹ DA, 387-388.

²² AF 8:325; DA, 278-279.

of a magnanimous ruler is that of al-Rashid, in the verses of Ibn 'Atāhiya celebrating his birth: "Let Ray and its land be restored/and [let] goodness from his hand abound in it."²³ Here, al-Rashid is portrayed as a source of rain and abundance, which will bring life -that is prosperity and justice- to the waiting inhabitants.

The work of al-Dinawari too is permeated by prophecies, predictions, and extraordinary happenings. One account thus describes a scene where al-Ma'mun asks the advice of Ibn Sahl regarding al-Amin's affairs in 195/811, just before the armies of Tahir and 'Ali b. 'Isa meet. The account goes on to say that al-Fadl b. Sahl asked al-Ma'mun for a day to think about the matter, which he was granted. The next day al-Fadl came and told al-Ma'mun that he had considered the stars and found that al-Ma'mun would win.²⁴

After a noteworthy remark on the foundations of knowledge, i.e. that the sources of information are generally either prophetic transmissions or astrological knowledge,²⁵ al-Dinawari proceeds to describe how al-Amin was destined to be ill-fated and how al-Rashid actually predicted the future of his sons. Following a sentimental moment during which al-Rashid introduces his two sons to al-Asma'i, who is amazed by their knowledge and manner, he anticipates their future by asking al-Asma'i and those in his presence: "What do you do when their animosity emerges and their hate manifests itself, and they harm one another until blood is spilled and many of the living people wish they were dead? I [al-Asma'i] said, 'O Commander of the Faithful, is this a thing that astrologers have determined at their birth, or is it a thing that scholars have transmitted in regard to them?' He said, 'Nay, it is a thing passed on to the 'ulamā' by the saints (*al-awliya'*) from the prophets."²⁶ In order to clarify that what has just been narrated is not an isolated incident, al-Dinawari relates yet another account, corroborating al-Rashid's foreknowledge: "They said: al-Ma'mun used to say with regard to his caliphate, that 'al-Rashid learned all that happened between us [i.e. between al-Amin and al-Ma'mun] from Musā b. Ja'far b. Muḥammad. That is why he said what he said."²⁷

²³ AF, 8:285.

²⁴ DA, 390.

²⁵ Astrology as a source of prediction is also emphasized in DA, 395.

²⁶ DA, 389.

²⁷ DA, 389.

In the end, the reader arrives at a mixed conclusion; this is what the authors intend to be the lesson of the narrative. On the one hand, despite the predicament outlined in the narratives of al-Amin and al-Ma'mun, an individual will be judged based on their deeds while on the other hand, the struggle between fate and human freewill, i.e., the capacity or incapacity of a human being to alter their disposition involve forces beyond the control of the individual. However, the ultimate message of the narratives does not seem to encourage pessimism. On the contrary, the message permeating the narratives affirms that even though one cannot alter one's fate one should still strive to act according to the religious and moral principles, upon which they will be judged.

Piety

Already in the previous paragraphs we have noted how questions of legitimacy and fate are promoted, yet at the same time various notions of piety are relied upon.²⁸ Ibn A'tham, for instance, projects piety not only as the basis of moral integrity, but also that of a just and successful rule. Therefore, one may look at the Civil War narratives as a field where both authors cultivate an image of a model ruler. al-Rashid and al-Ma'mun are depicted to represent many facets of mainstream piety, *taqwa*, while al-Amin remains a victim of his own recklessness and impiety; this is clearly demonstrated in the last speech of al-Rashid.²⁹ In another account, Ibn A'tham has al-Rashid just prior to his death insist on abandoning people of irreligious whim, deception, and reprehensible innovations.³⁰ When the author wishes to praise al-Rashid, he finds no better way than reflecting on his pious conduct: "[He used to] pray a hundred units of prayer [*rak'a*] everyday until he departed from this world, except when an illness prevented him [from doing so]. He would give a thousand dirhams everyday out of his personal wealth; and when he set out on pilgrimage a hundred *faqih*s would accompany him. When he missed the pilgrimage in a given year, he would fund three hundred men to do the pilgrimage for him."³¹ Similar praise embellishes al-Ma'mun's conduct within the notion of mainstream piety, which is distinguished

²⁸ For a more comprehensive treatment of piety in early Islamic historiography, see Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, 64ff.

²⁹ *AF*, 8:326.

³⁰ *AF*, 8:282-230.

³¹ *AF*, 8:282.

by modesty, the rejection of extravagance, forgiveness, sensitivity, magnanimity, and forbearance.³²

At the other end of the spectrum, al-Amin's conduct and eventual disgrace loom large as a reminder of how impiety ruins one's life, regardless of social status. In fact, it has political consequences, as it disturbs the social equilibrium, which must be taken into account. Ibn A'tham thus remarks that when al-Amin engaged in entertainment and amusement and neglected the affairs of the caliphate the people were so annoyed by his conduct that they finally turned against him.³³

We have already mentioned the latter portion of the account of al-Amin in the Qarar palace. Here, we would like to examine the initial section of it to illustrate how piety is in fact a major concern of historians when they evaluate their subjects: "It has been mentioned on the authority of Ibrahim b. al-Mahdî that he was residing with Muhammad the Deposed in the City of Mansur when Tahir besieged the city. One night he [al-Amin] went outside of his palace wanting to relieve his distress, and went to the Qarar palace. He [al-Amin] said to me [Ibrahim b. al-Mahdî], 'O Ibrahim don't you see the pleasantness of this night and the beauty of the Moon in the sky and its reflection in the water? Would you like to drink?' I said to him, 'do whatever you wish, may God make me your ransom.' He asked for a bottle of wine, *nabidh*, and drunk it. Then he asked for another drink. Because of my knowledge of his immorality, I began to sing for him without him even asking me to do so. I sung for him what he liked. He said to me, 'what do you say to someone accompanying you with an instrument' I said, 'this is exactly what I need.' Then he called for a senior concubine..."³⁴ The scene continues with anecdotes showing how ominous the night was for the future of al-Amin. The account demonstrates the link between al-Amin's impious and careless conduct, even when he is besieged in his palace, and his final demise. The narrative implies that the impiety of al-Amin harms him in a number of ways. It upsets not only his supporters, who eventually abandon him, but also wounds the moral integrity of the caliphate, which makes him even more vulnerable to the blame of the future generation. The alternative role model, who wins this contest, both morally and politically, al-Ma'mûn,

³² AF, 8:322, 325, 326, 334, 336, 341.

³³ AF, 8:288.

³⁴ AF, 8:302.

symbolizes the final victory of the righteous, the eventual and certain arrival of divine decree and the vindication of the Abbasid caliphate.

al-Dinawari also shows a clear preference for piety. His narratives of the Civil War praises modesty, fairness, and justice as various manifestations of piety and reject overconfidence, pride, and arrogance as reprehensible misconduct and reasons for failure.³⁵ al-Rashid's intention to appoint al-Amin as his successor is a good example of how al-Dinawari regards piety as a necessary requirement for political success and personal integrity. The anecdote depicts Hārūn al-Rashid at a moment of reflection about his sons' conduct. In a conversation with al-Fadl b. al-Rabi', al-Rashid speaks his mind: "I know that if I appoint Muḥammad, who is prone to amusement and delight, he will upset the people and lose control, and will be a temptation for rebels and sinners from the outermost regions. And if I appoint 'Abdallāh he will put them [the people] on the straight path and he will restore the rule. He certainly has the determination of al-Mansūr and the courage of al-Mahdī."³⁶

It is important to note that while mainstream piety seems clearly a desirable quality of a ruler in the narratives, ascetics' piety, *zuhd*, is praiseworthy when it is taken up by individuals with no political responsibility. A good example of ascetic piety is narrated in Ibn A'tham's *al-Futūh*. The story goes that one of al-Ma'mūn's brothers, suspicious of Ibn Tāhir's political agenda, warns al-Ma'mūn regarding 'Abdallāh b. Tāhir's 'Alid inclinations. al-Ma'mūn takes this warning seriously enough to send an envoy in disguise, who poses as one of the ascetics, *al-fuqarā wa al-zuhhād wa al-nussāk*, to try to disclose the real political loyalty of 'Abdallāh b. Tāhir. The envoy sets out, makes his way to Ibn Tāhir's residence, gets an opportunity to propagate his cause as a supporter of 'Alid and then asks Ibn Tāhir's support for one of the 'Alids. However, Ibn Tāhir refuses this solicitation, insists on his loyalty to the caliph, and threatens the unruly *zāhid* with punishment if he ever sees him again. Having accomplished his mission, the envoy comes back with this news, which pleases al-Ma'mūn. True or not, this story mirrors the perception and function of ascetic piety in 'Abbāsīd society. The narrative depicts asceticism as a recognized, well-established, and socially respectable *modus vivendi*, and a distinct way of political propaganda. Given that al-Ma'mūn prefers an ascetic for this mission, and that Ibn Tāhir treats him well, to the

³⁵ DA, 394-395, 396.

³⁶ DA, 389.

extent that he holds a private conversation with him, one is not surprised to see the narrative both reflecting the social credibility and at the same time perhaps advocating ascetism as a desirable mode of piety for individuals.³⁷

This reaching out from mainstream and orthodox piety to popular devotion can also be seen in the account dealing with the caliphal insignia, the Staff, the Mantle of the Prophet, and the Seal of the Caliphate, the *qadib*, *burda* and *khâtim*.³⁸ By shedding the insignia of the caliphate as a source of holiness, Ibn A'tham seems to elevate the ruling family to a level of holiness and sacredness, thereby blurring the boundaries between orthodox and popular piety. This view is certainly corroborated by another account in which the author emphasizes the sanctity of the Abbasid family once again. According to the account, when al-Amin sent İsa b. Mâhân to Khurâsân against al-Ma'mûn, the latter set out with a large army with nothing but a silver string with which al-Ma'mûn was to be tied if captured.³⁹

So far we have seen how the narratives strive to make a point of the events, to place them in a social and cultural value system and to produce and reproduce a moral, political, and religious ideology that would sustain the equilibrium of the Abbasid society. The narrative of the events is heavily mixed with particular moral and religious values. This situation brings some questions to the fore: Is the study of the chain of transmission enough to appropriately evaluate the narratives? What are some other concerns of the historians that may have had an influence on their narratives? Is there any way to isolate the flesh from the bone, the fact from the moral lessons? Is there actually any bone? It is obvious that when a particular theme or a moral lesson becomes either the primary or equally significant part of the author's intention in the narrative that it is possible for the facts to be bent, or even created to serve the desired impact. And this may be true for some of the accounts we have already examined.

There are, however, some limitations to the wholesale discarding of historiography. The narratives do not present a monolithic line of logic, nor are they consistent in favoring a particular individual or group. Rather, they are multiple and conflicting accounts of events indicating diverse positions. Ibn A'tham, for instance, makes it clear that both brothers conspired to eliminate

³⁷ AF, 8:319-320.

³⁸ AF, 8:283.

³⁹ AF, 8:298.

each other. The narrative of his *tarikh* blames al-Amin because he was the first to violate the agreement, drop the name of al-Ma'mūn from the Friday prayer sermon and appoint his son as successor.⁴⁰ Similarly, his criticism of al-Ma'mūn surfaces when he depicts al-Ma'mūn's reaction to his brother's murder. This particular episode depicts al-Ma'mūn as being almost without emotion when the envoy brings the news of al-Amin's defeat and murder. The contrast is especially stark between al-Ma'mūn's cold, unfeeling state and al-Fadl b. Sahl's emotional, regretful reaction.⁴¹ How do we then justify discarding them all without sorting out the layers and the voices in them? Also, historiographical accounts are sometimes corroborated by evidence of architecture, numismatics, few documents, and external narratives. How can we ignore these when we evaluate the veracity of historiography?

With the same token, in a field such as history, which deals with human action and intention, the author most of the time does not need to create or twist facts, since he still has freedom, indeed the responsibility and right, to place them in an interpretive frame that suits his perception of reality and his *weltanschauung*. It is quite possible that Ibn A'tham and al-Dinawari, or their sources, downplayed the virtues of al-Amin while highlighting those of al-Ma'mūn to create their intended narrative, or they focused their attention on certain themes at the expense of others. While this, obviously, is not peculiar either to Islamic or medieval historiography, it does not readily translate into the idea that historians created fresh or distorted facts to build their moralistic messages. In fact, there would be little incentive for them to do so, since they are capable of disseminating such messages by molding their accounts into an interpretive framework of their own. Exploring further the intention of early Islamic historians in writing history will yield much insight into our understanding of not only the narratives, but also the historians themselves.

⁴⁰ AF, 8:295.

⁴¹ AF, 8:308.