Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies (2025), 1–16
doi:10.1017/S0041977X25000217

SOAS University of London

ARTICLE

The circle of the world: the global diplomacy of Caliph al-Manṣūr

Sam Ottewill-Soulsby

University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway
Email: sottewillsoulsby@gmail.com

Abstract

Between 757 and 768, the second ʿAbbāsid caliph, al-Manṣūr, engaged in an unprecedented set of foreign relations which stretched across Afro-Eurasia, from Tang China to Carolingian Francia. The unique scale of this activity has previously gone unnoticed because much of the evidence comes from the caliph's diplomatic partners. Al-Manṣūr's dealings with these polities tend to be taken on a case-by-case basis, resulting in often-unconvincing explanations of his motives. By instead taking all of this activity together as a whole, we can see a deliberate policy of "prestige diplomacy", in which the caliph sought to legitimize his regime to a domestic audience by bringing envoys and gifts to his court, following Sasanian models of universal kingship.

Keywords: ʿAbbāsid; International relations; Global history; Tang China; Carolingians; Khazars; Byzantium; Makuria

Introduction

On 6 June 754, the first ʿAbbāsid caliph, al-Saffāḥ (r. 750–754), was profoundly ill. We are told that on that day "two envoys came to see him, one from Sind, the other from Ifrīqiya".[1] The caliph knew then that he was doomed, for prophecy had warned him that should such a thing happen, he would die within three days. So it came to pass and he was succeeded by his brother, al-Manṣūr (r. 754–775). This story, reported by the ninth-century historian al-Yaʿqūbī, raises a couple of interesting points. The coming of envoys from the lands that are now Pakistan and Tunisia speaks to the vast breadth of the lands ruled by the ʿAbbāsids. At the same time their presence also reminds us that affairs relating to distant territories did not unfold at the convenience of the caliph but had to be juggled all at once. But it also invites us to consider the value of a global perspective when examining the reign of al-Manṣūr.

It is doubtful that any historian working today would attribute al-Manṣūr's ascent to power to the completion of this prophecy. But to judge from the behaviour of the caliph during his reign, one might be forgiven for imagining that he believed it. Between 757 and 767 al-Manṣūr conducted an unprecedented series of diplomatic overtures across Afro-Eurasia, sending embassies to nearly every power between Tang China and Carolingian Francia. The

[1] Al-Yaʿqūbī, "The history", in Matthew S. Gordon, Chase F. Robinson, Everett K. Rowson and Michael Fishbein (eds and trans.), *The Works of Ibn Wāḍiḥ al-Yaʿqūbī: An English Translation*. Vol. 3 (Leiden, 2018), 595–1293, 1090–1.

sheer scope of this activity has gone previously unremarked. What follows considers the implications of this diplomatic activity. It argues that while each of these interactions was couched in the specific circumstances of previous contacts, taken together, they form a programme of "prestige diplomacy" designed with a domestic audience in mind.[2] Al-Manṣūr was seeking to stabilize his new regime within the Caliphate by demonstrating the respect in which he was held by all the empires of the world, bringing their representatives to his new capital at Baghdad with gifts. In this way, he tapped into older Persian and Umayyad ideas of universal monarchy. Taking a global perspective allows us to understand this generally mystifying political activity as part of a single diplomatic moment. As such it sheds light not just on al-Manṣūr, but on all the polities with which he interacted.

Al-Manṣūr in the round

The history of the ʿAbbāsid Caliphate as it is currently written is primarily a domestic one. At some point after the end of the age of expansion, perhaps around the Battle of Talas in 751, scholarly attention turns to the workings of the ʿAbbāsid revolution and to affairs in the heartlands of the dynasty. In large part, this follows the cues of our sources. The great histories of the eighth-century Caliphate, such as al-Ṭabarī (d. 923), focus on internal matters, paying little enough attention to developments in Syria and Egypt, let alone ʿAbbāsid relations with the world beyond.[3] The only exception here is the Caliphate's great rival, Byzantium, whose dealings with Baghdad could merit notice. This has shaped modern research priorities. Interest in relations between the Caliphate and its neighbours tends to be maintained by specialists either on a particular frontier or on the neighbour in question.

Al-Manṣūr faced a series of dangerous political problems throughout his reign.[4] Other leaders of the ʿAbbāsid revolution challenged his claims to power.[5] Descendants of ʿAlī (r. 656–661) also made bids for the Caliphate. These immediate difficulties were dealt with via a series of murders, executions and extremely conveniently timed collapsing houses.[6] Al-Manṣūr survived his greatest test during the rebellion of the ʿAlīd Muḥammad al-Nafs al-Zakiyya in 762–763.[7] Nonetheless, even after this point the caliph faced numerous potential challenges.

In response to these threats, al-Manṣūr articulated a more ambitious vision of his position as caliph, grounding his regime ideologically. Among the ideas developed was a growing emphasis on the caliph as a Universal Monarch, managing the affairs of all peoples at the centre of the circle of the world. This was not an entirely new idea in the Caliphate, as demonstrated most famously by the frescoes at Quṣayr ʿAmra, an eighth-century desert castle constructed for the Umayyad al-Walīd II (r. 743–744), where "six kings", including the Byzantine emperor, Sasanian shah and the Ethiopian king, are depicted paying tribute

[2] Sam Ottewill-Soulsby, *The Emperor and the Elephant: Christians and Muslims in the Age of Charlemagne* (Princeton, 2023), 12–13.

[3] Hugh Kennedy, *The Early Abbasid Caliphate: A Political History* (London, 1981), 216; Corisande Fenwick, *Early Islamic North Africa: A New Perspective* (London, 2020), 7–8.

[4] Andrew Marsham, *Rituals of Islamic Monarchy: Accession and Succession in the First Muslim Empire* (Edinburgh, 2009), 192.

[5] Kennedy, *The Early Abbasid Caliphate*, 58.

[6] Al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*. Volume 29: Al-Manṣūr and al-Mahdī A.D. 763–786/A.H. 146–169, trans. Hugh Kennedy (New York, 1990), 17; Jacob Lassner, *The Shaping of ʿAbbāsid Rule* (Princeton, 1980), 19–38; Paul M. Cobb, *White Banners: Contention in ʿAbbāsid Syria, 750–880* (Albany, 2001), 26–7.

[7] Tilman Nagel, "Ein früher Bericht über den Aufstand von Muḥammad b. ʿAbdallah im Jahre 145 h", *Der Islam* 46, 1970, 227–62; Amikam Elad, *The Rebellion of Muḥammad al-Nafs al-Zakiyya in 145/762: Ṭālibīs and Early ʿAbbāsīs in Conflict* (Leiden, 2015); Harry Munt, "Caliphal imperialism and Ḥijāzī elites in the second/eighth century", *Al-Masāq* 38, 2016, 13.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0041977X25000217 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to the caliph.[8] When al-Walīd was overthrown, his short-lived successor Yazīd III (r. 744) declared, "I am the son of Kisrā and Marwān is my father; Caesar was my grandfather; my grandfather was Khāqān", thus presenting himself as the heir of Sasanian, Umayyad, Byzantine and Central Asian rulers respectively, uniting all the world in his ancestry.[9]

Al-Manṣūr developed this concept through a greater emphasis on Persian culture and models of kingship. Al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 868) and al-Yaʿqūbī wrote of al-Manṣūr that he sought to imitate the Persian kings of old.[10] The latter noted that al-Manṣūr "was the first caliph who translated ancient Persian books and rendered them into the Arabic tongue".[11] The importance of Persian precedent to ʿAbbāsid court life was noted by al-Thaʿlabī (d. 864) in his *Mirror for Princes*, which itself drew heavily upon Sasanian material, "for they were the first in that and we took from them the regulations on kingship and kingdom".[12] The increasing importance of Persians to the administration and the cultural life of the empire reinforced this tendency.[13] Sasanian kings had placed great emphasis on universal monarchy, in which Iran was the centre of the world to which all other powers paid tribute.[14] This was a theme that appeared in historical writings and which ʿAbbāsid scholars repeated. Al-Ṭabarī said of Khusrow I Anushiruwān (r. 531–579) that "all the nations were in awe of him; and numerous delegations from the Turks, the Chinese, the Khazars and similar nations thronged his courts".[15] Descriptions like these appear in Arabic histories and geographies of the period, providing a model for rulership.

One of the ways this manifested was al-Manṣūr's foundation of a new capital city at Baghdad. He chose the location in 762 and initial building work was finished in 766/7, with the caliph relocating there in 763/4.[16] In doing so, al-Manṣūr shifted the centre of the empire close to the heartlands of Sasanian power. Descriptions of the site emphasize its centrality and easy access in all directions.[17] He had people from throughout the Caliphate moved to his new capital.[18] The shape of the Round City at the heart of Baghdad and the gates pointing in cardinal directions served to make a claim for cosmological significance, thus putting himself at the centre of the world.[19]

None of this will be news to specialists in ʿAbbāsid history, although the above summarizes and elides important details and debates. Something that has been underappreciated

[8] Garth Fowden, *Quṣayr ʿAmra: Art and the Umayyad Elite in Late Antique Syria* (Berkeley, 2004), 197–225.

[9] Al-Masʿūdī, *Les Prairies d'Or*, trans. Charles Barbier de Meynard and Abel Pavet de Courteille (Paris, 1965), 909.

[10] Al-Masʿūdī, *Les Praires d'Or*, 326; Al-Yaʿqūbī, "The book of the adaptation of men to their time and their dominant characteristics in every age", in Matthew S. Gordon et al., *The Works of Ibn Wāḍiḥ al-Yaʿqūbī: An English Translation*. Vol. 1 (Leiden, 2018), 45.

[11] Al-Yaʿqūbī, "The book of the adaptation of men", 45.

[12] Nadia Maria El Cheikh, "The institutionalisation of ʿAbbāsid ceremonial", in John Hudson and Ana Rodríguez (eds), *Diverging Paths? The Shapes of Power and Institutions in Medieval Christendom and Islam* (Leiden, 2014), 352.

[13] Lassner, *The Shaping of ʿAbbāsid Rule*, 169–75; Alison Vacca, *Non-Muslim Provinces under Early Islam: Islamic Rule and Iranian Legitimacy in Armenia and Caucasian Albania* (Cambridge, 2017), 211–14.

[14] Richard Payne, "Cosmology and the expansion of the Iranian Empire, 502–628", *Past and Present* 220, 2013, 3–33.

[15] Al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*. Volume 5: The Sāsānids, the Byzantines, the Lakhmids, and Yemen, trans. Clifford E. Bosworth (Albany, 1999), 160. On his interest in the Sasanians, see Mohsen Zakeri, "Al-Ṭabarī on Sasanian history: A study in sources" and Zeev Rubin, "Al-Ṭabarī and the age of the Sasanians", in Hugh Kennedy (ed.), *Al-Ṭabarī: A Medieval Muslim Historian and His Work* (Princeton, 2008), 41–71.

[16] K.A.C. Creswell, *Early Muslim Architecture: Umayyads, Early ʿAbbāsids & Ṭūlūnids*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1932–1940), 5–7.

[17] Al-Yaʿqūbī, "The geography", in Gordon et al., *The Works of Ibn Wāḍiḥ al-Yaʿqūbī*. Vol. 1, 70–1; Al-Yaʿqūbī, "The history", 1108; al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*. Volume 28: ʿAbbāsid Authority Affirmed: The Early Years of al-Manṣūr A.D. 753–763/A.H. 136–145, trans. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Albany, 1995), 238, 243.

[18] Al-Yaʿqūbī, "The geography", 81.

[19] Charles Wendell, "Baghdâd: Imago Mundi, and other foundation-lore", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 2, 1971, 99–128.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0041977X25000217 Published online by Cambridge University Press

is the explosion of diplomatic activity that took place under al-Manṣūr between 758 and 767. In these years, al-Manṣūr communicated with his neighbours in every direction to an extent that had not happened for at least half a century. The geographical comprehensiveness of these relations has been missed, in part because in many cases our sources for the interactions are not Arabic and have only been of interest to specialists of the neighbouring power in question. As a consequence, scholars have, quite reasonably, tried to understand each example of diplomatic activity in isolation, taking them on their own terms and concentrating on the specific relations between the Caliphate and the neighbour they are interested in.

This is an entirely understandable thing to do. But stepping back to examine al-Manṣūr's diplomacy as a whole reveals a couple of interesting patterns that help us to understand what was going on in each specific case of interaction. On one level al-Manṣūr was clearly attempting to reset relations with his neighbours after 20 years of political disruption and civil war within the Caliphate. But, in addition to issues specific to each partner, the caliph's diplomatic activity seems designed with a domestic audience in mind, intended to bring envoys or gifts to the imperial centre and reinforce al-Manṣūr's self-presentation as a universal monarch and the heir to the Persian rulers of the past.

In order to illustrate this point, what follows will consider some examples of the type of activity alluded to above. There are a couple of important caveats that need to be made. First, we are at the mercy of a highly heterogenous source base written in a variety of languages and in a wide variety of genres that require careful handling. Second, all of these relations took place within a historical context. Al-Manṣūr worked with the grain of previous interactions, using opportunities as they appeared and responding to crises. As a consequence of these considerations, although most of this diplomatic activity served a common purpose, it took different forms because of the peculiarities both on the ground and the way they are reported in the sources.

Distant dynasties – the Tang and the Carolingians

Among the most mysterious of al-Manṣūr's dealings are those he conducted with two powers on either end of Eurasia. That the caliph sent embassies to the Tang and the Carolingians is recorded only in Chinese and Frankish sources. This has raised scepticism among Arabists about the veracity of the latter, although curiously not of the former.[20] Al-Manṣūr dispatched multiple embassies to China, on a scale surpassing any of his predecessors or successors. In the case of the Carolingians, the initiative came from King Pippin III (r. 751–768), but the caliph reciprocated speedily. The exact purpose of these talks is unclear. In both, the most generally accepted reason has been a military alliance against a shared enemy: Tibet in the case of China, Umayyad al-Andalus in that of the Franks. The evidence for such considerations is extremely weak. More plausible is the shared need of all three dynasties to be able to demonstrate international prestige and legitimacy. The Tang were reeling after the impact of the An Lushan rebellion in 755, while Pippin had seized the throne from the Merovingians in 751. Both needed to stabilize their regimes. Just like al-Manṣūr, they stood to benefit from the presence of foreign diplomats and gifts at their courts, particularly if they were from celebrated but unfamiliar empires that bore no practical danger to the Caliphate. Thus, the three empires conducted prestige diplomacy with one other.

[20] Francis W. Buckler, *Harunu'l-Rashid and Charles the Great* (Cambridge, MA, 1931), 43–7; Yuri Bregel, "Barthold and modern Oriental studies", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 12, 1980, 386–8; Walther Björkman, "Karl und der Islam", in Wolfgang Braunfels (ed.), *Karl der Grosse: Lebenswerk und Nachleben 1* (Düsseldorf, 1965), 672–82.

The *Models from the Archives* assembled at the start of the eleventh century in Song China (960–1279) gathered records of foreign embassies received by previous dynasties.[21] Among them are a series of references to ʿAbbāsid diplomats who arrived at the court of the Tang dynasty (618–907). They are identified by their black robes, black being the colour of the ʿAbbāsids. Although the first were sent during the reign of al-Saffāḥ, further delegations arrived from al-Manṣūr in 755, 756, 758, 760, 768, 772 and 774.[22] There are no Arabic sources for this activity.[23] The Chinese records are brief and not particularly enlightening. The entry for 756 is typical:

> In the seventh month of the fifteenth year [of the Tianbao reign, 23 May–20 June 756], the Black-robed Da Shi dispatched its envoys to come to pay tribute.[24]

There are a couple of things worth noting here. First, the mere presence of envoys from the Caliphate was not to be taken for granted. The 11 embassies sent by the first two ʿAbbāsid caliphs represent an unprecedented increase in ambassadors. Second, after al-Manṣūr's death in 775, the next envoys would not be dispatched until 790, under al-Manṣūr's grandson, Hārūn al-Rashīd (r. 776–809), who sent a total of two embassies during his long reign.[25] Finally, these embassies were a particularly difficult exercise after 764 when the capture of Liangzhou by the Tibetan Empire severed many of the communication routes between China and Central Asia.[26]

This contact has been explained as part of an alliance between the ʿAbbāsids and the Tang against Tibet. Part of the appeal of this idea is that it seems to be a highly rational piece of *realpolitik*. This is the sort of thing rulers are supposed to be doing in their diplomacy. China and the Caliphate had definitely allied in the early eighth century against Tibet and the Second Türkic Qaghanate.[27] In 786 the Chinese statesmen Li Mi would propose another agreement of this sort, offering an actual example of someone explicitly advocating such an arrangement.[28] The problem is that there is not much evidence for military cooperation in the 750s and the 760s.[29] Arabs were present in Tang armies, but most specialists are sceptical

[21] Johannes L. Kurz, "The compilation and publication of the *Taiping yulan* and the *Cefu yuangui*", *Extrême- Orient, Extrême-Occident* 1, 2007, 59–63. For a recent overview of early Chinese relations with the Caliphate, see Jeffrey Kotyk, *Sino-Iranian and Sino-Arabian Relations in Late Antiquity: China and the Parthians, Sasanians, and Arabs in the First Millennium* (Leiden, 2024), 258–87. For the wider commercial and cultural contacts, see Alain George, "Direct sea trade between early Islamic Iraq and Tang China: from the exchange of goods to the transmission of ideas", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, third series, 25, 2015, 579–624.

[22] *Cefu Yangui*, in Wan Lei (trans.), *The First Chinese Travel Record on the Arab World: Commercial and Diplomatic Communications during the Islamic Golden Age* (Riyadh, 2017), 41–4.

[23] Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw it: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton, 1997), 249–53; Hans Bielenstein, *Diplomacy and Trade in the Chinese World, 589–1276* (Leiden, 2005), 359.

[24] *Cefu Yangui*, 41.

[25] Bielenstein, *Diplomacy and Trade*, 359.

[26] Christopher I. Beckwith, "The Tibetans in the Ordos and North China: considerations on the role of the Tibetan Empire in world history", in Christopher I. Beckwith (ed.), *Silver on Lapis: Tibetan Literary Culture and History* (Bloomington, IN, 1987), 4.

[27] Christopher I. Beckwith, *The Tibetan Empire in Central Asia: A History of the Struggle for Great Power among Tibetans, Turks, Arabs, and Chinese during the Early Middle Ages* (Princeton, 1987), 110–18.

[28] Yihong Pan, *Son of Heaven and Heavenly Qaghan: Sui-Tang China and its Neighbors* (Washington, 1997), 335; Rong Xinjiang, "New evidence on the history of Sino-Arabic relations: a study of Yang Liangyao's embassy to the Abbasid Caliphate", in Victor H. Mair and Liam Kelley (eds), *Imperial China and Its Southern Neighbours* (Singapore, 2015), 246–8.

[29] Beckwith, *The Tibetan Empire*, 152.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0041977X25000217 Published online by Cambridge University Press

about the idea that this represents ʿAbbāsid support instead of mercenaries looking for employment.[30]

The Chinese context matters here. The year 755 saw the start of the great An Lushan rebellion, which continued for eight years with a truly apocalyptic death rate and devastating consequences for Tang prestige and confidence, destroying Chinese power in Central Asia for the next eight centuries.[31] The capital at Chang'an was sacked by the Tibetans in 763 and the Tang spent the next two decades fundamentally dependent on the military support of the Uighur Empire for survival.[32] Al-Manṣūr was probably in no position to pile into this maelstrom, even if he wanted to, and tensions between the Caliphate and the Uighurs would complicate any alliance with the Chinese.

In the absence of a military alliance, the references to tribute in Chinese accounts of Arab ambassadors provide a potential solution. Key to Tang diplomacy was the concept of the tribute system, whereby visiting foreigners were understood to be bringing goods from their lands as a means of demonstrating their submission to the emperor, the Son of Heaven.[33] The emperor might, out of his own generosity, bestow gifts upon said visitors.[34] ʿAbbāsid ambassadors received marks of rank and silk robes, among other gifts that could be brought back to Baghdad to demonstrate the esteem in which the caliph was held in the furthest east.

The embassy sent to Emperor Suzong (r. 756–762) in 758 is particularly interesting. According to Suzong's court biography, this was an unusually large and touchy group, which got into a fight with a much larger delegation from the ruler of the Uighurs, Gele Qaghan (r. 747–759), over who should be received by the emperor first, before the ever-diplomatic ministers managed to devise a compromise whereby both parties could be met at the same time.[35] This was especially important because that same year Suzong arranged for Gele to marry his daughter, reflecting Chang'an's need for Uighur support against Tibet.[36] That the envoys from the Caliphate could plausibly rank at the same level as the Uighurs in the extremely hierarchical Tang court ceremonial was a major statement of power and status.[37] The ʿAbbāsid ambassador was also given the striking distinction of a feast being held in his honour.[38]

While al-Manṣūr had sent embassies before, this seems to represent an increase in the scale and intensity of display, demonstrating a new confidence, but also a need to receive respect in turn. For their part, Suzong and his successor Daizong (r. 762–779) were probably happy to encourage such embassies. They needed all the legitimacy and appearance of normalcy they could get as they pulled the teetering dynasty back from the brink.[39]

[30] See the doubts of Hamilton A.R. Gibb, "Chinese records of the Arabs in Central Asia", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 2, 1923, 618–19.

[31] Mark Edward Lewis, *China's Cosmopolitan Empire: The Tang Dynasty* (Cambridge, MA, 2012), 157–60.

[32] Beckwith, "The Tibetans in the Ordos", 4; Pan, *Son of Heaven*, 287–98. On the rise of Uighur power, see Ablet Kamalov, "The Moghon Shine Usu inscription as the earliest Uighur historical annals", *Central Asiatic Journal* 47, 2003, 77–90.

[33] John K. Fairbank, "Tributary trade and China's relations with the West", *Far Eastern Quarterly* 1, 1942, 135–246; James L. Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar: Qing Guest Ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793* (Durham NC, 2005), 8–15; Liam C. Kelley, *Beyond the Bronze Pillars: Envoy Poetry and the Sino-Vietnamese Relationship* (Honolulu, 2005), 18–26.

[34] Lewis, *China's Cosmopolitan Empire*, 164.

[35] *Cefu Yangui*, 42, 44. On the officials, see Wang Zhenping, *Ambassadors from the Island of Immortals: China-Japan Relations in the Han-Tang Period* (Honolulu, 2005), 111–12.

[36] Colin Mackerras, *The Uighur Empire according to Tang Dynastic Histories: A Study in Sino-Uighur Relations, 744–840*, second ed. (Columbia, 1973), 64–5.

[37] On fighting for status, see Wang, *Ambassadors from the Island of Immortals*, 117–20.

[38] On such banquets, see Wang, *Ambassadors from the Island of Immortals*, 115.

[39] Pan, *Son of Heaven and Heavenly Qaghan*, 157; Jonathan Karam Skaff, *Sui-Tang China and Its Turko-Mongol Neighbors: Culture, Power, and Connections, 580–800* (Oxford, 2012), 136–9.

This prestige diplomacy gave two dynasties – one newly made in the course of one revolution, the other nearly toppled by another – a valuable means of demonstrating their legitimacy through the respect of a powerful but distant power.

Similar considerations were at play when, late in the year 767, the Carolingian king of the Franks, Pippin III, was informed that an embassy he had sent to the Caliphate some three years earlier had returned home.[40] Accompanying Pippin's returning envoys were al-Manṣūr's own emissaries, sent to convey his response to the Frankish king's overture. The following spring Pippin brought them to an assembly of the great and good of his realm held at the fortress of Champtoceaux on the Loire, 30 kilometres north-east of Nantes. There, Pippin formally received the ʿAbbāsid embassy, exchanging gifts with the envoys, before having them escorted back to Marseilles so that they could return to their master.

This is the Carolingian perspective of Pippin's dealings with al-Manṣūr. Specifically, this is the account of the *Continuations to the Chronicle of Fredegar*, which is our only source for this episode.[41] Not only are there no other Frankish sources, but, as with the Tang, there are also no Arabic references to this event at all. At no point are we told why Pippin sent envoys to al-Manṣūr, why the caliph chose to reply or what was discussed at any of the meetings. As with the case of al-Manṣūr's dealings with the Tang, the most popular explanation is that Pippin and the caliph were seeking a political and military alliance against their shared enemy, the Umayyad regime in Muslim Spain.[42]

Both Pippin and al-Manṣūr had a track record of hostility to al-Andalus. On the Frankish side, Pippin spent much of his first decade as king waging war on the Muslims of Septimania. In the 750s, Pippin conquered Septimania in southern Gaul.[43] Al-Manṣūr also had reason to be interested in al-Andalus. The province had been effectively independent of the rest of the Caliphate from 741.[44] In 755 al-Manṣūr supported an uprising in Zaragoza against the Andalusi government.[45] The arrival of the Umayyad ʿAbd al- Raḥmān b. Muʿāwiya (r. 756–788) in the Iberian Peninsula in 756 and his assumption of power in Córdoba gave

[40] "Continuations of Fredegar", in Andreas Kusternig and Herbert Haupt (eds), *Quellen zur Geschichte des 7. und 8. Jahrhunderts* (Darmstadt, 1982), c.50, 320. On the dating, see Michael McCormick, "Pippin III, the embassy of Caliph al Manṣūr, and the Mediterranean world", in Matthias Becher and Jörg Jarnut (eds), *Der Dynastiewechsel von 751: Vorgeschichte, Legitimationsstrategien und Erinnerung* (Münster, 2004), 233–5.

[41] On the *Continuations*, see Roger Collins, "Deception and misrepresentation in early eighth century Frankish historiography: two case studies", in Jörg Jarnut, Ulrich Nonn and Michael Richter (eds), *Karl Martell in seiner Zeit* (Sigmaringen, 1994); and Roger Collins, *Die Fredegar-Chroniken* (Hannover, 2007), 89–96.

[42] Buckler, *Harunu'l-Rashid and Charles the Great*; McCormick, "Pippin III, the embassy of Caliph al Manṣūr", 237–41. For the immediate reception of Buckler's book, see François-Louis Ganshof, "Harunu'l-Rashid and Charles the Great: Compte Rendu", *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'histoire* 11, 1932, 774–6; and François-Louis Ganshof, "Harunu'l-Rashid et Charlemagne; une fantaise historique", *Byzantion* 7, 1932, 555–7; Erwin Rosenthal, "Harunu'l Rashid and Charles the Great review", *Historische Zeitschrift* 145, 1931, 630–1; O. Meyer, "Harunu'l Rashid and Charles the Great", *Neues Archiv der Gesellschaft* 49, 1932, 575; Einar Joransson, "Review: Harunu'l-Rashid and Charles the Great", *Speculum* 7, 1932, 116–21; Steven Runciman, "Charlemagne and Palestine", *English Historical Review* 50, 1935, 606; Karl Schmid, "Aachen und Jerusalem: Ein Beitrag zur historischen Personenfuhrung der Karolingerzeit", in Karl Hauck (ed.), *Das Einhardkreuz: Vorträge und Studien der Münsteraner Diskussion zum arcus Einhardi* (Göttingen, 1974), 124. For other works that support the idea of a ʿAbbāsid-Carolingian alliance, see Aryeh Grabois, "Charlemagne, Rome and Jerusalem", *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'histoire* 59, 1981, 795; Roger Collins, *Charlemagne* (Basingstoke, 1998), 152; Tayeb El-Hibri, "The empire in Iraq, 763–861", in Chase F. Robinson (ed.), *The New Cambridge History of Islam*. Volume 1: The Formation of the Islamic World, Sixth to Eleventh Centuries (Cambridge, 2010), 281; Janet L. Nelson, *King and Emperor: A New Life of Charlemagne* (London, 2019), 89.

[43] "The Annals of Aniane", in Ir.J.M.J.G. Kats and David Claszen (eds), *Chronicon Moissiacense Maius: A Carolingian World Chronicle. From Creation until the First Years of Louis the Pious*, 2 vols (Leiden, 2012), a.752, 118, a.759 118; Josep M. Salrach, *El Procés de Formació Nacional de Catalunya (segles VIII–IX)* (Barcelona, 1978), 5–7.

[44] Eduardo Manzano Moreno, "The Iberian Peninsula and North Africa", in Robinson (ed.), *The New Cambridge History of Islam*. Vol. 1, 590–3.

[45] Akhbār Majmūʿa, *A History of Early al-Andalus*, trans. David James (London, 2012), 73.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0041977X25000217 Published online by Cambridge University Press

al-Manṣūr a further motive to be hostile to al-Andalus. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān's Umayyad lineage made him a potential threat to al-Manṣūr's ʿAbbāsid regime. As a consequence, the caliph backed a series of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān's opponents in al-Andalus.[46]

In this reading, Pippin and al-Manṣūr had a shared enemy in ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, so their dealings with each other were intended to establish an alliance against Córdoba. However, there are a couple of problems with this hypothesis. At the time that Pippin sent his embassy to al-Manṣūr, he was not at war with al-Andalus and would not be again for the rest of his life. All of his previous campaigns had been north of the Pyrenees.[47] They had finished in 760 with the acquisition of Roussillon. Given that ʿAbd al-Raḥmān I spent the 760s fighting for his political and literal survival in the south of al-Andalus, he was not a threat to or a priority for Pippin.[48] The next years saw the Frankish king focused on campaigning in Aquitaine.[49] This war prevented him from marching into the Iberian Peninsula, as doing so would have left him exposed to an Aquitainian counterattack.[50]

Similar issues arise when we consider al-Manṣūr's perspective. The caliph was much more focused on reconquering North Africa, something only achieved in 772.[51] In al-Andalus, al-Manṣūr offered purely moral support to local challengers to ʿAbd al-Raḥmān. The point of the exercise was to regain control of the province through a loyal governor who did most of the hard work of overthrowing the Umayyads himself. Letting the Iberian Peninsula be conquered by a Christian ruler who owed Baghdad no allegiance did very little to improve things for al-Manṣūr. For his part, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān was in no position to endanger the ʿAbbāsids, beset as he was by enemies within the Guadalquivir River valley.

Instead, this interaction fits al-Manṣūr's relations with other powers as 'prestige diplomacy'. There are differences in the diplomacy that took place between the caliph and the Carolingian to that with China. Their communication began later and was clearly initiated by Pippin. The Franks may simply not have been that important to al-Manṣūr, so it may not have occurred to him to contact them.[52] He quickly rectified that omission and seized the opportunity that Pippin offered him. In other ways, these contacts clearly fit the pattern from elsewhere. The embassy has no clear strategic purpose, with the emphasis instead being on high status gatherings and expensive gifts that can be brought back to the Caliphate. For al-Manṣūr the Franks were a new addition to a galaxy of peoples come to do him honour, cementing his political authority.

When the Frankish ambassadors arrived in the middle of the 760s bearing gifts for the caliph, they fit precisely the image that al-Manṣūr was constructing for himself. It makes sense that they would have been received well and that the caliph would have been happy to send envoys back to get further gifts. By seeing al-Manṣūr as engaging with the Franks as part of his construction of universal monarchy, the subsequent lack of contact between

[46] Akhbār Majmūʿa, *A History*, 102, 107.

[47] "Annals of Aniane", a.759, 118.

[48] Roger Collins, *The Arab Conquest of Spain 711–797* (Oxford, 1994), 105; Elizabeth Savage, *A Gateway to Hell, a Gateway to Paradise: The North African Response to the Arab Conquest* (Princeton, 1997), 43–5; Khalid Yahya Blankinship, *The End of the Jihâd State: The Reign of Hishām ibn ʿAbd al- Malik and the Collapse of the Umayyads* (Albany, 1994), 203–22.

[49] Bernard S. Bachrach, "Military organization in Aquitaine under the early Carolingians", *Speculum* 49, 1974, 1–33; Rutger Kramer, "Franks, Romans, and countrymen: imperial interests, local identities, and the Carolingian conquest of Aquitaine", in Rutger Kramer and Walter Pohl (eds), *Empires and Communities in the Post-Roman and Islamic World, c. 400–1000 CE* (Oxford, 2021), 253–82.

[50] *Annales regni Francorum* (ARF), in Friedrich Kurze (ed.), *MGH SRG 6* (Hannover, 1895), a.764, 765, 22.

[51] Al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī.* Vol. 29, 67, 69; Hugh Kennedy, "The origins of the Aghlabids", in Glaire D. Anderson, Corisande Fenwick and Mariam Rosser-Owen (eds), *The Aghlabids and their Neighbors: Art and Material Culture in Ninth-Century North Africa* (Leiden, 2018), 33–48.

[52] Although see here Daniel G. König, *Arabic–Islamic Views of the Latin West: Tracing the Emergence of Medieval Europe* (Oxford, 2015); and Sam Ottewill-Soulsby, "ʿAbbāsid-Carolingian diplomacy in early medieval Arabic apocalypse", *Millennium* 16, 2019, 213–32.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0041977X25000217 Published online by Cambridge University Press

him and the Carolingians after 768 also becomes more explicable. After the reconquest of Ifrīqiya in 772, al-Manṣūr began putting more resources into taking back al-Andalus. If he sought to ally with the Franks against the Umayyads, that would have been the time to be sending envoys and diplomats. But if the point of the exercise was having foreign visitors from distant lands bring gifts that could be interpreted as tribute, then only one exchange of embassies was required. In this way, al-Manṣūr's dealings with Pippin served his wider ideological purposes.

Like Suzong and Daizong, the Frankish king belonged to a dynasty that could do with all the legitimacy it could get.[53] The Carolingians were new to the throne, with Pippin having declared himself king in 751. The parallels with the recently installed ʿAbbāsid regime may have contributed to Pippin and al-Manṣūr's good relations. Like the caliph, Pippin had been conducting prestige diplomacy with external powers, including the Papacy and the Byzantines.[54] The two rulers therefore probably understood exactly what each needed from the other. Al-Manṣūr was not alone in using exotic international relations to secure his domestic position. He merely did it on a scale impossible for Pippin to rival.

Dangerous neighbours – the Khazars and Byzantium

Neither the Tang nor the Carolingians were an immediate threat to the Caliphate. Diplomacy with them could remain focused on mutual admiration and the accrual of prestige at home. But other powers existed that were sufficiently proximate and powerful that al-Manṣūr's relations with them had to be more carefully handled with an eye to potential conflict. Even here, however, the caliph managed peace and war while thinking of a domestic audience.

In 759 al-Manṣūr appointed Yazīd b. Usayd al-Sulamī as governor of the province of Armenia.[55] Yazīd was listed by al-Yaʿqūbī as one of the ten men al-Manṣūr most trusted, something reflected in the sensitivity of his new post.[56] The new governor was ordered to improve relations with the Khazar Qaghanate north of the Caucasus by negotiating a peace treaty through a marriage alliance with the qaghan, named Baghatur by Ibn Aʿtham.[57] The Khazars were a formidable power with whom the Caliphate had been in regular conflict for the best part of a century, with a particularly devastating set of invasions in 726 and 730.[58] Al-Manṣūr himself named the Caucasus frontier on which the ʿAbbāsids met the

[53] Rosamond McKitterick, "The illusion of royal power in the Carolingian annals", *The English Historical Review* 115, 2000, 1–20; Paul Fouracre, "The long shadow of the Merovingians", in Joanna Story (ed.), *Charlemagne: Empire and Society* (Manchester, 2005), 5–21.

[54] Walter Pohl, "Das Papsttum und die Langobarden", in Matthias Becher and Jörg Jarnut (eds), *Der Dynastiewechsel von 751: Vorgeschichte, Legitimationsstrategien und Erinnerung* (Münster, 2004), 145–61; Erik Goosmann, "Carolingian kingship, apostolic authority and imperial recognition: Pippin the Short's Italienpolitik and the quest for royal legitimacy", in Stefan Esders, Yaniv Fox, Yitzhak Hen and Laury Sarti (eds), *East and West in the Early Middle Ages: The Merovingian Kingdoms in Mediterranean Perspective* (Cambridge, 2019), 342–3.

[55] Łewond, *History*, in Sergio La Porta and Alison Vacca (trans.), *An Armenian* Futūḥ *Narrative: Łewond's Eighth-Century History of the Caliphate* (Chicago, 2024), c.34, 280; Ibn Aʿtham, *The Book of Conquests*, in Károly Czeglédy (trans.), "Khazar raids in Transcaucasia in 762–764 A.D.", *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 11, 1960, 79; al-Balādhurī, *The Conquest of the Lands*, in Hugh Kennedy (trans.), *History of the Arab Invasions: The Conquest of the Lands* (London, 2022), 218; al-Yaʿqūbī, "The history", 1105.

[56] Al-Yaʿqūbī, "The history", 1119.

[57] On the curious nature of this name, see Boris Zhivkov, *Khazaria in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries* (Leiden, 2015), 233 and n. 37.

[58] Al-Balādhurī, *The Conquest of the Lands*, 216; al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*. Volume 25: The End of Expansion: The Caliphate of Hishām A.D. 724–738/A.H. 105–120, trans. Khalid Yahya Blankinship (Albany, 1989), 69–70; David J. Wasserstein, "The Khazars and the World of Islam", in Peter B. Golden, Haggai Ben-Shammai and András Roná-Tas (eds), *The World of the Khazars* (Leiden, 2007), 373–86; Karim Alizadeh, "Overlapping social and political boundaries:

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0041977X25000217 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Khazars "the greatest frontier".[59] They had dangerous connections to various opponents of Baghdad. Byzantine Emperor Constantine V (r. 741–775) had married a Khazar princess, Tzitzak-Irene, and their son, the future Leo IV (r. 775–780), was known as "the Khazar".[60] The Khazars were also prone to intriguing with rebels in sensitive places such as Tbilisi.[61]

Yazīd was successful in his high stakes dealings with the Khazars. A female relative of the qaghan entitled Khātūn, described as his sister in the Armenian history of Łewond and as his daughter by Arabic writers such as Ibn Aʿtham and al-Balādhurī, arrived in Armenia and married Yazīd, probably in around 760.[62] This was a very practical piece of diplomacy. The real military danger posed by the Khazars was demonstrated when the marriage backfired. Sadly for all involved, the Khātūn died in childbirth shortly after the wedding. Suspecting foul play, the qaghan invaded in 762 and again in 764, sweeping across Armenia and into Mesopotamia, defeating any opposition.[63] As this demonstrates, al-Manṣūr had good reason to want peace with the Khazars.

But the marriage was also an opportunity to display the power of the Caliphate. Given that the wedding took place in 760, we might expect negotiations to have begun in 759 when Yazīd was appointed. This was the year after the unusually large embassy was sent to China, forming part of a wider pattern of contact. While Łewond gleefully focuses on the destruction caused by the Khazars, the Arabic sources describe the spectacle of the arrival of the Khātūn, with particular attention paid to the gifts she bore.[64] According to Ibn Aʿtham, the Khātūn and her train brought with them:

> 4000 mares with their colts, 1000 mules, stallions and mares, 1000 men, 10000 Khazarian camels of the small breed, 1000 Turkish camels of the Bactrian type, 10000 sheep and ten covered wagons the doors of which were covered with silver and golden plates, with sable furs spread out inside, covered with brocade. They also took with them another twenty wagons in which the various utensils, golden and silver vessels and other things were carried.[65]

This sort of display made an impression, positioning the Caliphate and al-Manṣūr at the centre of the world. It also placed al-Manṣūr in a longer tradition of kingship. The Sasanian king, Pērōz I (r. 459–484), had wed his sister to the king of the Huns, while Khusrow I had married the daughter of the Khazar qaghan.[66] This was recorded in Arabic histories and al-Manṣūr could therefore portray himself as the heir to the Sasanians in his handling of the great empires of the steppe. That such emphasis was still placed upon the spectacle of the wedding, despite the disastrous ending, speaks to the power of the moment and

borders of the Sasanian empire and the Muslim Caliphate in the Caucasus", in A. Asa Eger (ed.), *The Archaeology of Medieval Islamic Frontiers: From the Mediterranean to the Caspian Sea* (Boulder, 2019), 151–2.

[59] Tasha Vorderstrasse, "Buddhism on the shores of the Black Sea: the North Caucasus frontier between the Muslims, Byzantines, and Khazars", in Eger (ed.), *The Archaeology of Medieval Islamic Frontiers*, 168.

[60] Thomas S. Noonan, "Byzantium and the Khazars: a special relationship?", in Jonathan Shepard and Simon Franklin (eds), *Byzantine Diplomacy* (London, 1992), 109–32.

[61] Alison Vacca, "The rebels of Early Abbāsid Albania", in Jost Gippert and Jasmine Dum-Tragut (eds), *Caucasian Albania: An International Handbook* (Berlin, 2023), 504–05.

[62] Łewond, *History*, c.36, 287; Ibn Aʿtham, *The Book of Conquests*, 80; al-Balādhurī, *The Conquest of the Lands*, 218–19.

[63] Al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*. Vol. 29, 14–15; Czeglédy, "Khazar raids", 75–88.

[64] Nicholas J.B. Evans, "The mobile court of a Khazar royal woman", in Claudia Rapp, Ekaterini Mitsiou, Johannes Preiser-Kapeller and Paraskevi Sykopetritou (eds), *Courts on the Move: Perspectives on the Global Middle Ages* (forthcoming).

[65] Ibn Aʿtham, *The Book of Conquests*, 80.

[66] Alison Vacca, *Non-Muslim Provinces under Early Islam: Islamic Rule and Iranian Legitimacy in Armenia and Caucasian Albania* (Cambridge, 2017), 98–9.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0041977X25000217 Published online by Cambridge University Press

was something that could be conveyed to audiences across the Caliphate, even after the marriage went sideways.

Perhaps the most spectacular of the more hostile relations maintained by al-Manṣūr were those with Byzantium. They also demonstrate one of the clearest illustrations of the evolution of al-Manṣūr's reign, which can be observed in his relations with Constantine V. The Byzantine emperor had taken advantage of civil war in the Caliphate to launch a series of invasions, sacking Melitene in 751.[67] After an initial period of fighting, a treaty was made between the two empires in 757.[68] This peace was kept until 763, when al-Manṣūr authorized the beginning of annual raids on the Byzantine frontier.[69] The expeditions became so regular as to be a part of the routine of the year, with al-Ṭabarī commenting in 767 when one did not take place.[70] These attacks were known as summer campaigns and they were generally accompanied by members of the ʿAbbāsid dynasty.[71] Among the ranks of the commanders were familiar faces such as Yazīd b. Usayd al-Sulamī, the erstwhile husband of the Khātūn, who led the summer campaigns of 772 and 774.[72] The purpose of these raids was not to gain territory, but rather to acquire booty, glory and fight the infidel.[73] Many of the participants were religious volunteers, come to serve God on the battlefield.[74]

Unlike most of the other polities discussed, al-Manṣūr did not get to choose whether to engage with Constantinople. He could make choices about whether to aim for war and peace, or how close he wanted that interaction to be. But Byzantium was the Caliphate's most powerful neighbour and that meant that some form of contact was necessary to manage their relations. Picking a fight with Constantinople was not a move to be taken while distracted by internal threats. This probably explains why al-Manṣūr made peace in 757, to allow him to concentrate on other issues. By 763, when the summer raids started, the caliph had dealt with many of the more immediate domestic problems.

This authorizing and organizing of summer raids on Byzantium is another example of the way in which, from the 760s, al-Manṣūr was using his management of foreign powers to build domestic legitimacy. The Byzantine Empire was the Caliphate's great rival, the archetypal enemy and competitor.[75] Conquest does not seem to have been a priority and the border with Byzantium did not change much under al-Manṣūr. By waging war on them, al-Manṣūr was fulfilling his duties as the leader of the Islamic world by punishing the infidel. Moreover, these campaigns moved possible opponents to the mountains of Cilicia rather than in the streets of Baghdad, where they might cause trouble.[76] The leaders of the Byzantine frontier had been the most loyal adherents of the last Umayyad caliph, Marwān II (r. 744–750). Setting them against Constantine provided these figures with an outside opponent and a place of honour within the ʿAbbāsid regime.[77] War with Byzantium gave al-Manṣūr a chance to present himself as a military commander. The caliph inspected the army outside his capital in 774 before it marched to the frontier, dressed in the distinctive

[67] Al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*. Vol. 28, 48; Michael Bonner, *Aristocratic Violence and Holy War: Studies in the Jihad and the Arab-Byzantine Frontier* (New Haven, 1996), 50–1.

[68] Al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*. Vol. 28, 55.

[69] Al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*. Vol. 29, 13.

[70] Al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*. Vol. 29, 49.

[71] For a summary of the raids on Byzantine territory, see E.W. Brooks, "Byzantines and Arabs in the time of the early Abbāsids", *English Historical Review* 15, 1900, 728–47, 84–92; Bonner, *Aristocratic Violence and Holy War*, 62.

[72] Al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*. Vol. 29, 70, 79.

[73] John Haldon and Hugh Kennedy, "The Arab-Byzantine frontier in the eighth and ninth centuries: military organisation and society in the borderlands", *Zbornik Radova Vizantoloshkog Institute* 19, 1980, 113.

[74] Michael Bonner, "Some observations concerning the early development of *jihad* on the Arab-Byzantine frontier", *Studia Islamica* 75, 1992, 5–31.

[75] Farouk Omar, *Abbāsiyyāt: Studies in the History of the early ʿAbbāsids* (Baghdad, 1976), 25.

[76] Bonner, *Aristocratic Violence and Holy War*, 146.

[77] Bonner, *Aristocratic Violence and Holy War*, 65.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0041977X25000217 Published online by Cambridge University Press

headgear of a *ghāzī*.[78] But al-Manṣūr was also demonstrating his power and his capacity to control external peoples of the world.

This preoccupation appears particularly with al-Manṣūr's concern to humiliate Constantine and the Byzantines. In his *Chronicle*, Theophanes notes that the male Christian captives sent back in a prisoner exchange in 769 had been forcibly shaved.[79] This not only stripped them of their masculinity, it also had implications of criminality, with judicial shaving being a common punishment in Byzantine law.[80] Perhaps the high point came in 772, when Constantine sought peace from al-Manṣūr and paid him the *jizya* or tax owed by non-Muslim subjects of the caliph.[81] This did not prevent further raids in 773, 774 and 775. Having stabilized the frontier, al-Manṣūr was more concerned with impressing his domestic audience than with keeping peace treaties.[82]

Force on the frontiers – smaller powers

If al-Manṣūr had to tread carefully with the Khazars and Byzantines, elsewhere on his borders he could be more aggressive, demanding tribute and submission, and sending armies to punish the recalcitrant. Much of this activity was on the eastern border, where the political chaos of the An Lushan rebellion created a power vacuum that al-Manṣūr could fill.[83] Many of these lands were also territories that had been claimed by the Sasanian kings, allowing the caliph to strengthen his claim to their mantle. In several cases al-Manṣūr declared himself to be enforcing old agreements made during the Conquest period, thus restoring the Caliphate after the turmoil of the ʿAbbāsid revolution.

In 768 the caliph appointed Maʿn b. Zāʿida to be governor of Sistan.[84] Among Maʿn's first actions was to demand tribute from the Hindu Zunbil dynasty, claiming precedent from 711.[85] Dissatisfied by the gifts of "camels and Turkish tents and slaves" that were sent, the governor invaded Zabulistan, taking large numbers of prisoners.[86] Al-Balādhurī reports that al-Manṣūr generously received a Zunbil deputy named Māwand, giving him a salary and title. In addition to playing into the caliph's desire to be seen to restore the borders of the Umayyad world, the presence of Māwand and his 500 men in Baghdad served to remind a domestic audience of al-Manṣūr's global reach.

Al-Yaʿqūbī reports that during the reign of al-Manṣūr, the formerly Buddhist king of Bamiyan, just to the north of the Zunbils, converted to Islam, marrying his daughter to a Muslim commander.[87] Their descendants would become leading figures in the region when Bamiyan was incorporated into the Caliphate a generation later.[88] More aggressively, al-Manṣūr sent one of his clients, al-Layth, to attack the kingdom of Ferghana.[89] Al-Layth

[78] Al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*. Vol. 29, 79.

[79] Theophanes, *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor: Byzantine and Near Eastern History, AD 284–813*, trans. Cyril Mango, Roger Scott and Geoffrey Greatrex (Oxford, 1997), 613.

[80] Marie-France Auzépy, "Prolégomènes à une histoire du poil", *Mélanges Gilbert Dagron, Travaux et Mémoires* 14, 2002, 2–3.

[81] Al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*. Vol. 29, 70.

[82] Al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*. Vol. 29, 76, 79, 86.

[83] André Wink, *Al-Hind: The Making of the Indo-Islamic World*. Vol. 1 (Leiden, 1990), 116–17; Jonathan Karam Skaff, "Barbarians at the gates? The Tang frontier military and the An Lushan rebellion", *War and Society* 18, 2000, 23–35.

[84] Al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*. Vol. 29, 60.

[85] C.E. Bosworth, *Sīstān under the Arabs from the Islamic Conquest to the Rise of the Ṣaffārids (30–250/651–864)* (Rome, 1968), 68–9, 82–3.

[86] Al-Balādhurī, *The Conquest of the Lands*, 397.

[87] Al-Yaʿqūbī, "The geography", 124–5; Robert Haug, *The Eastern Frontier: Limits of Empire in Late Antique and Early Medieval Central Asia* (London, 2019), 35.

[88] Al-Yaʿqūbī, "The geography", 126.

[89] On al-Layth's career, see Al-Yaʿqūbī, "The geography", 140; and Al-Yaʿqūbī, "The history", 1155.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0041977X25000217 Published online by Cambridge University Press

besieged the capital of Kashgar until the king of Ferghana paid tribute, sending an envoy with gifts to Baghdad.[90] Much of this activity was presented as restoring errant neighbours to their true allegiance. Thus al-Balādhurī commended al-Manṣūr and his successors because on the eastern frontier they:

> used to appoint their agents who would penetrate the borders and outlying districts of the enemy lands and make war on those who had broken their oaths of allegiance, those who had a contract but had broken their covenant and those who had refused to fulfil the terms of their peace agreements.[91]

Given al-Manṣūr's interest in the Persian past, it is also probably relevant that these regions were believed to have been under Sasanian overlordship.[92] The caliph once again followed the legacy of his imperial predecessors.

These campaigns also extended into India. In about 758, a year that has appeared before in this discussion, al-Manṣūr appointed Hishām b. ʿAmr at-Taghlibī as governor of Sind.[93] At-Taghlibī sent a fleet to Narind, possibly off the coast of Gujarat.[94] He also "conquered Kashmir, taking prisoners and slaves".[95] Further conquests included Multan and Gandava, held by rebel Arabs, and Qandahar, where at-Taghlibī destroyed the Buddhist temple and replaced it with a mosque. This was a level of aggression that had not been seen in almost half a century and would not be renewed until the reign of al-Maʾmūn (r. 813–833).[96]

Makuria

The Christian Nubian kingdom of Makuria fits somewhere between these last two categories. On the one hand, as we will see, al-Manṣūr's governor in Egypt would attempt to treat the kingdom in the same manner as the Zunbils, demanding tribute and the restoration of an earlier agreement. On the other, Makuria was rather more dangerous, with its king having recently invaded Egypt, and there is no hint that the caliph had any interest in returning the favour.

In 758, the same year that an unusually large embassy was sent east to China and an army was marching into India and the year before an important marriage was broached with the Khazars, the governor of Egypt dispatched a letter south to the Christian Nubian kingdom of Makuria.[97] This governor, Mūsā b. Kaʿb, was newly appointed, and had been one of al-Manṣūr's chief lieutenants before he became caliph, supporting him in the civil wars that followed his accession and acting as the head of his secret police.[98] It therefore seems likely that he was following the caliph's instructions when he sent the letter. Dealings between the ʿAbbāsids and Old Dongola were somewhat spasmodic. King Ioannes of Makuria waited until Caliph al-Maʾmūn was close by in Egypt in 832 before raising a legal complaint with

[90] Al-Yaʿqūbī, "The history", 1122; Haug, *The Eastern Frontier*, 172.

[91] Al-Balādhurī, *The Conquest of the Lands*, 420.

[92] Arezou Azad, "Ecology, economy, and the conquest of Khurasan", in Andrew Marsham (ed.), *The Umayyad World* (London, 2020), 332–4.

[93] Al-Balādhurī, *The Conquest of the Lands*, 433.

[94] For the geography, see Wink, *Al-Hind*. Vol. 1, 210.

[95] Al-Balādhurī, *The Conquest of the Lands*, 433.

[96] Al-Balādhurī, *The Conquest of the Lands*, 433; Wink, *Al-Hind*. Vol. 1, 123.

[97] Martin Hinds and Hamdi Sakkout, "A letter from the governor of Egypt to the King of Nubia and Muqurra concerning Egyptian-Nubian Relations in 141/758", in Wadād al-Qāḍī (ed.), *Studia Arabica et Islamica 1* (Beirut, 1981), 209–29; Derek A. Welsby, *The Medieval Kingdoms of Nubia: Pagans, Christians and Muslims on the Middle Nile* (London, 2002), 70–3.

[98] Al-Yaʿqūbī, "The history", 1097; and Al-Yaʿqūbī, "The geography", 81.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0041977X25000217 Published online by Cambridge University Press

him.[99] The embassy sent by Caliph al-Muʿtaṣim (r. 833–842) in 835 was unusual enough to draw extended attention in the sources and to prompt King Zakharias III to send his son, the future Georgios I, to negotiate.[100] There was nothing routine about Mūsā's letter, and its dispatch indicates a serious diplomatic engagement by al-Manṣūr.

The letter Mūsā sent to the Makurian king, Kyriakos, was found at the archaeological site of Qaṣr Ibrīm in southern Egypt.[101] Mūsā touches upon a number of issues, complaining about the Makurians harbouring a wealthy fugitive named Saʿd and about the mistreatment of specific visiting Muslim merchants. His most pressing order of business is the resumption of the long-standing *baqt* or pact between Makuria and the Caliphate. This agreement was first made following the unsuccessful Muslim siege of the Makurian capital of Old Dongola in 652. The exact terms of this pact were open to dispute, as was its nature.[102] At its heart was the regular sending of 360–400 slaves on an annual or semi-annual basis from Nubia to the Caliphate. Arabic sources often described this as tribute, while the Makurians seem to have understood it as a gift in exchange for shipments of grain and other foodstuffs.[103] According to Mūsā's letter, Kyriakos had not been keeping up his end of the pact, probably for at least the past two decades as the Caliphate went into civil war in the early 740s.

On one level, this is an extremely practical message, concerned with particular legal cases that needed to be addressed. It was also an assertion of ʿAbbāsid power on the southern border of the Caliphate, returning to business as usual under the Umayyads. This was especially important as Kyriakos had been getting involved in Egyptian politics by corresponding with the Patriarch of Alexandria.[104] When the Patriarch was arrested by the authorities in around 748, a Makurian army had marched into Egypt and forced them to release him.[105] As the letter indicates, al-Manṣūr was also concerned about his regime's enemies finding safe haven in Makuria. Al-Masʿūdī recounts a story about ʿAbd Allāh, the son of Marwān II, the last Umayyad caliph, seeking refuge in Nubia, before being ejected by the king, although he offers another account in which ʿAbd Allāh returns to the Caliphate of his own accord after failing to find sanctuary in Africa.[106] By insisting on returning to the pact, al-Manṣūr made it clear that further interventions from Old Dongola would not be tolerated, helping him to secure his power in Egypt, which was a vital region because of its wealth.

The role of the slaves themselves in al-Manṣūr's diplomacy requires further consideration. Slavery was practised throughout the Caliphate and enslaved people from Africa were particularly important.[107] Because slaves were routinely manumitted and the offspring of free men inherited their father's status even if their mother was enslaved, there was enormous demand for new slaves. While they came from across Afro-Eurasia, the majority of slaves in ʿAbbāsid Egypt came from sub-Saharan Africa.[108] The 360–400 slaves sent by the king of Makuria were a small drop in a much greater wave of forced movement, particularly

[99] Al-Masʿūdī, *Les Praires d'Or*, 134–5.

[100] Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle*, 12.19, in J.B. Chabot (ed.), *Chronique de Michel le Syrien* (Paris, 1899), 316–21.

[101] J. Martin Plumley, "An eighth-century Arabic letter to the King of Nubia", *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 61, 1975, 241–5.

[102] For a recent summary, see Robin Seignobos, "La frontière entre le *bilād al-islām* et le *bilād al-Nūba*: enjeux et ambiguïtés d'une frontière immobile (VIIe–XIIe siècle)", *Afriques* 2, 2010.

[103] Al-Balādhurī, *The Conquest of the Lands*, 249–50; Jay Spaulding, "Medieval Christian Nubia and the Islamic world: a reconsideration of the *Baqt* Treaty", *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 28, 1995, 577–94.

[104] Welsby, *The Medieval Kingdom*, 73.

[105] John the Deacon, "Life of the Patriarch Michael", in Giovanni Vantini (ed.), *Oriental Sources Concerning Nubia* (Heidelberg; Warsaw, 1975), 43–4.

[106] Al-Masʿūdī, *Les Praires d'Or*, 136–9; 140.

[107] Craig Perry, "Historicising slavery in the medieval Islamic world", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 49, 2017, 133–8.

[108] Jelle Bruning, "Slave trade dynamics in Abbāsid Egypt: the papyrological evidence", *JESHO* 63, 2020, 685–6.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0041977X25000217 Published online by Cambridge University Press

because, despite the claims of the Arabic sources, the pact seems to have been irregularly in force.

The relatively small number of people being sent as a result of this letter was not going to sate the demand of the Caliphate for slaves. They would, however, act as a physical demonstration of al-Manṣūr's power. Although in reality the Caliphate and Makuria dealt with each other on fairly equal terms, Arabic histories would present the sending of slaves as tribute rather than a diplomatic gift or part of an economic transaction, in a manner that would be familiar to the Tang emperor.[109] That the slaves were intended for display is suggested by the renegotiation of the terms by al-Manṣūr's son and successor, al-Mahdī (r. 775–785), to also include a giraffe.[110] Al-Masʿūdī noted that:

> It was custom in Nubia to send a giraffe as a present to the kings [of Persia], in the same way as it is [now] given as a present to the kings of the Arabs and their successors from the ʿAbbāsid dynasty.[111]

In addition to being an impressive animal, giraffes thus connected the caliph to the Sasanian past. Reopening relations with Makuria served a number of immediate needs, but it also provided al-Manṣūr with another foreign source of prestige and legitimacy at precisely the same time he was in contact with the Tang.

Conclusion

Al-Manṣūr's global ambitions were not always positively received within the borders of the Caliphate. Writing in the late eighth century, the Armenian historian Łewond says that during the reign of al-Saffāḥ, the future caliph was sent by his brother "to circle through all the lands of his kingdom", beginning in Armenia, before travelling to Khurasan, then Egypt and into Africa.[112] He did not make a good impression on these travels, with Łewond quoting Hosea 5.1 to comment that "wherever he reached, he ravished avariciously 'like a net spread on Tabor' [and] hunted the lives of men".[113] There is little evidence for this itinerary actually taking place, with Martin-Hisard arguing that this was part of a narrative written to depict the wide geographical ambition of al-Manṣūr's reign.[114] If so, it suggests that Łewond was aware of how the caliph sought to portray himself on a global stage, even if he thought that said stage had no need of al-Manṣūr's star turn. The Armenian historian reminds us that there was more than one way for a universal monarch to be received.

This piece is not a comprehensive account of the foreign policy of al-Manṣūr. The relations briefly outlined here were all very different because they involved different powers. Nor were they all purely prestige politics. They were also concerned with practical affairs, such as the mistreatment of merchants or warding off invasion. But what this has sought to show is that from about 757 al-Manṣūr engaged in diplomatic activity in every direction to an unprecedented degree. These relations placed emphasis on the acquisition of exotic and valuable gifts and the reception of envoys from distant places at his court in front of the political elite and the people in the capital. These gifts included Chinese silk, enslaved

[109] Sylvie Denoix, "Islamic historiography on early Muslim relations with Nubia", in Jelle Bruning, Janneke H.M. de Jong and Petra M. Sijpesteijn (eds), *Egypt and the Eastern Mediterranean World: From Constantinople to Baghdad, 500–1000 CE* (Cambridge, 2022), 105–09.

[110] Al-Balādhurī, *The Conquest of the Lands*, 250.

[111] Al-Masʿūdī, *Les Praires d'Or*, 128.

[112] Łewond, *History*, c.34, 280.

[113] Łewond, *History*, c.34, 280.

[114] Bernadette Martin-Hisard, *Łewond Vardapet, Discours historique*, trans. Bernadette Martin-Hisard (Paris, 2015), 138, n. 673.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0041977X25000217 Published online by Cambridge University Press

people from Makuria and Khazar livestock. This fit in with a wider ideological programme of universal monarchy that drew upon Sasanian precedent, which was expressed by parallel projects such as the patronage of Persian culture and the founding of the Round City of Baghdad.

In this reading, al-Manṣūr's contacts were not motivated by strategic or military interests. This does not make them unimportant. Rather it means that their importance lies not in the content of the words their envoys exchanged with them, but in the fact that they were speaking at all. The gifts described and enumerated are not meaningless distraction, but essential for conveying the impression that al-Manṣūr was respected by rulers across the world, casting a shadow over all the peoples of the earth. This suggests the importance of considering the wider context of diplomatic relations. Apparently bilateral relationships make considerably more sense when understood as part of al-Manṣūr's broader range of activity along the borders of the Caliphate. It also indicates the potential significance of a domestic audience for diplomacy. Al-Manṣūr sought to portray himself as a colossus bestriding the narrow world, but the people who needed to be convinced of that fact were those in his own lands.

Tracking al-Manṣūr's foreign relations across Afro-Eurasia demands that we work with diverse sources and contexts. Yet it is rewarding because it offers solutions to problems and mysteries on a more local scale. In doing so, it reveals a shared world of early medieval diplomacy that crossed continents. Monarchs in the Caliphate, China and Francia might all have been thinking about a domestic audience when they reached out to exotic contacts abroad. They also all modelled themselves on specific forebears when they did so. But the success with which they bargained, blandished and blustered for gifts and other tokens of recognition speaks to a common set of assumptions and understandings of how power was demonstrated.[115] That communication with the outside world was a sign of authority is not to be taken for granted, as a brief examination of the *Haijin* policies of Ming and Qing China or the *Sakoku* era of Tokugawa Japan might convey.[116] Al-Manṣūr laboured to bring the world to him, but his primary audience was very much at home.

Acknowledgements. The author would like to thank the Kollegforschergruppe "Migration und Mobilität in Spätantike und Frühmittelalter" at the Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen and the "Medieval Histories" group at the University of Oslo for their comments. They bear no responsibility for any errors.

[115] See the comments of Karam Skaff, *Sui-Tang China*, 4–9, 166–8.

[116] John K. Whitmore, "*Haijin*, Melaka, and the Cham/Việt coast", *JESHO* 65, 2022, 415–45; Louis Cullen, "*Sakoku*, Tokugawa policy, and the interpretation of Japanese history", *The Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan*, fourth series, 18, 2004, 17–31; Joshua Batts, *Pacific Overtures: Tokugawa-Habsburg Relations and the Limits of Diplomacy, 1600–1625* (Cambridge, forthcoming).

Cite this article: Ottewill-Soulsby, Sam. (2025). "The circle of the world: the global diplomacy of Caliph al-Manṣūr", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0041977X25000217