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Transregional and Regional Elites – Connecting the Early Islamic Empire

The Early Islamic Empire at Work Volume 1

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The Rise and Fall of the Early 'Abbāsīd Political and Military Elite

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Abstract: This paper explores the composition and role of the military and political elite of the early 'Abbāsīd caliphate (750–809) whose support enabled the caliphs to maintain sovereignty over their far-flung domains. It considers the importance of different groups, including members of the 'Abbāsīd family, military commanders from Khurāsān and members of powerful and wealthy families like the Muhallabīs and the Shaybānī tribal chiefs. The paper concludes with a discussion of the reasons for the disappearance and effective extinction of this elite in the years after the great civil war that followed Hārūn al-Rashīd's death in 809.

Keywords: Caliphs; armies; political power; Syria; Khurāsān

The governance of the early 'Abbāsīd caliphate was a remarkable political and organizational achievement. For half a century, between the establishment of the dynasty in 132 H/750 CE and the death of Hārūn al-Rashīd in 193 H/809 CE, the area from Tunisia in the west to Sind and Central Asia in the east was governed effectively and largely peacefully from Iraq. From 145 H/762 CE, the city of Baghdad served as the administrative capital, though the distances which separated it from the far-flung provinces were enormous: it is over 2,000 kilometres from Baghdad to Merv, the political centre of the great province of Khurāsān, and 1,500 kilometres from the capital to the Holy City of Mecca.

The *barīd* postal system inherited from the Umayyads and Sasanians was surprisingly effective at communicating urgent messages over these huge distances.¹ When the caliph al-Rashīd died in the year 809 at Tūs (near Mashhad in north-east Iran) a messenger brought the news to Baghdad in twelve days, traveling 1,900 kilometres at an average speed of 150 kilometres per day. Similar

I will not be dealing with the bureaucratic elite of the *kuttāb* or the religious elite of the *fuqahā'* and *qādīs* that would require a whole other study. For the general history of early 'Abbāsīd caliphate, Kennedy 2016; El-Hibri 2010, 269–304; Bennison 2009. For earlier studies of the 'Abbāsīd elite with full references to sources, Crone 1980, esp. 173–189, and Kennedy 1981/2016, 73–86.

1 On the *barīd* and the distances covered, see Silverstein 2007, 191–193.