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CHAPTER 31

The *Ālim*-Caliph: Reimagining the Caliph as a Man of Learning in Eighth/Fourteenth and Ninth/Fifteenth-Century Egypt

01 Haziran 2022

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Two centuries after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, the caliphate, Islam's signature leadership institution, had already lost much of its actual political and religious authority, and the caliph himself had become little more than a so-called "symbol of the *sharī'a*." After the Mongol conquest of 'Abbasid Baghdad in 656/1258, the caliphal office was re-established and supported for nearly two and a half centuries (659–923/1261–1517) by the reigning sultans of Cairo. Building on the traditional importance of the caliphate, the late medieval Syro-Egyptian Sultanate of Cairo strengthened its claims to sovereignty while increasing the caliph's profile as a man of learning.¹

Although Annemarie Schimmel's 1942 study on the significance of the Cairo caliphate's 'Abbasid officeholders has contributed to a holistic understanding of the institution, there are still many areas of the topic worthy of further study.² In addition to examining changing conceptions of the caliphate in the eighth/fourteenth and ninth/fifteenth centuries, this chapter will illustrate the caliphs' ties to educated circles in Cairo, as well as some of the reasons the caliph re-emerged as a scholar in late medieval Egypt.

The growth of an influential scholarly class had gradually undermined the religious authority of both the Umayyad and early 'Abbasid caliphs, causing them to grow into the role chiefly as temporal leaders. When the 'Abbasid caliphs of the third/ninth century championed the doctrines of the Mu'tazila theological movement, they were ultimately forced to cede their authority over interpreting sources of religious law to the *'ulamā'*.³ For a time, the caliphs

1 For important analysis and commentary on the re-establishment of the 'Abbasid caliphate in Cairo, see Hassan, *Longing* 66–88; Aigle, *Mongol empire* 244–254; Heidemann, *Aleppiner Kalifat* 195–202; Holt, *Some observations* 501–504; Amitai-Preiss, *Mongols* 56–63.

2 Schimmel's early contributions included historical details of the 'Abbasid caliphs of Cairo as well as discussion of their burials, living standards, legal rights, succession, and ceremonies. See Schimmel, *Kalif* 20–25.

3 Donner, *Muhammad* 27; Kennedy, *Caliphate* 84–85. For an image of the second-third/

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