It might be said that ours is a postcolonial world of neo-imperialism, but the confusion does not end there: describing empires in history, as a growing body of literature teaches us, is no simple thing. What do Islamic historians mean when they speak or write about the Abbasid “Empire”? In what follows I shall argue that this shorthand designation deserves the kind of careful scrutiny that the philologist characteristically applies to a text: swords may be more truthful than books, but it is with words that we think, learn and teach. More than a generation of scholarship has outlined some of the ways in which political and social elites exercised authority and power—so much so, in fact, that one can even discern a chastening critique of crudely absolutist models of pre-modern Islamic politics. This said, much more remains to be done, especially to take down the bogey of an early Abbasid Empire as monolithic hegemon.

In what ways does speaking of empire advance or impede our understanding of how social and political power was exercised in the late eighth century, the very heyday of Abbasid rule? I approach the problem inductively. First I shall examine events that took place in the northern Iraqi city of Mosul in 177/793–94, when, at the hands of a certain al-ʿAṭṭāf b. Sufyān al-Azdī, it temporarily fell out of the political community that we usually call the “Abbasid Empire.” Little of sig-

1 The literature is huge, but a reasonable start can be had in P. F. Bang and W. Scheidel, eds., The Oxford Handbook of the State in the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Bang and C. A. Bayly, eds., Tributary Empires in Global History (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); J. Burbank and F. Cooper, Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010); and C. Sinopoli, “The Archaeology of Empire,” Annual Review of Archaeology 23 (1994): 159–80 (with a massive bibliography that remains useful). Remaining close to the Arabic texts, but wishing to remain accessible to non-Islamicists, I use both Islamic and Gregorian dating; all dates that begin with the digits 1, 2 or 3 are hijri.

2 As Abū Tammām reminds us in his Amorium qaṣīda, which is one of many texts that I had the privilege of learning from Ahmad Mahdavi-Damghani, for whom this contribution is dedicated in deep gratitude and respect. I am also very grateful to Andrew Marsham for reading a version of this contribution and making several useful suggestions.

nificance seems to have been said about these events, at least in part because the primary sources know so little about them. The great exception can be found in detailed accounts that survive only in the history of Mosul by Yazīd b. Muḥammad al-Azdī (d. ca 945). Still, many details of how al-ʿAṭṭāf ruled the city are absent, perhaps because they promised to document the embarrassing scale of Mosuli complicity in rebellion, as we shall see; al-ʿAtṭāf’s rule was yet another example of Mosuli restiveness, which dominated its eighth-century history. Moderately more can be said about the events that ended it, however, including the measures that Hārūn took to restore direct Abbasid control (insofar as we can speak of “control”), and these can help us identity at least some of the leading figures in the events. All in all, al-Azdī gives us enough evidence to reach some reasonable conclusions about how al-ʿAtṭāf’s brief rule fits within the Mosuli context of early Abbasid imperialism. “The Roman empire is too often seen as a whole, too seldom as a collection of provinces,” Wickham has written. The same thing is true of Islamic politics, as I shall seek to show.

Having made some sense of the events within Mosul’s political and fiscal history, I shall then draw some equivocal conclusions about empire, especially social and political power in one province and what is generally understood to be the apogee of Abbasid rule. I have the benefit of a running start. In 1981 Hugh Kennedy wrote an important article, based largely on al-Kindī’s and al-Azdī’s histories, which proposed that the provincial histories of Egypt and Mosul in the early Abbasid period reflected not “an absolute military dictatorship,” but instead a “system of government” that negotiated local and central interests—“a careful arrangement of alliances and compromises.” This “system,” in his view, broke down during the civil war that broke out upon the death of Hārūn al-Rashīd in 809. What follows might reasonably be described as a follow-up contribution

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5 See below.
6 For an overview see Robinson, Empire and Elites.
7 C. Wickham, Framing the Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean, 400–800 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3.
to the project of understanding empire by focusing not upon metropolis, but upon province.

An appropriate place to start is al-Azdi’s text. Al-Azdi’s work was composed, on the basis of eighth- and ninth-century accounts that had come to him in both oral and written form, during the 930s. For Mosuli history these accounts were generally written or reported by Mosulis, a point of some principle for our author, who remarks that locals know more of local history than those (nonlocals) who (merely) “collect and compile accounts.” Many of his informants were very well placed, and, it might be imagined, voiced opinions that belonged to the city’s establishment. One such informant was Ḥafṣ b. ʿUmar al-Bāhilī, who was related through clientage to descendants of the celebrated commander Qutayba b. Muslim al-Bāhilī (d. ca 96); these included Saʿīd b. Salm, who served as governor of Mosul from 172–73 (788–90). Coming from a family that owned an estate in the nearby town of Bāfakhārā, and transmitting here on the authority of unnamed shaykhīs, Ḥafṣ had an understanding of the events that was invaluable to al-Azdi. Another well-placed informant was Aḥmad b. al-Muʿāfa of the Shurayḥid family, to whom al-Azdi owed the account that narrates the decisive negotiations between

between al-ʾĀmin and al-Maʿmūn also marks for him the end to the Abbasids’ “strategies for containment” so successfully followed in the provinces; see Kennedy, “The Decline and Fall of the First Muslim Empire,” Der Islam 81 (2004): 3–30.


10 Al-Azdi, Taʾrīkh al-Mawṣil (Cairo: Lajnat Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-Islāmī, 1967), 228. A newer edition (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmīya, 2007; here p. 440) based on the same single manuscript, supplements the surviving text (years 101–224) with two takmilas (years 16–100 and 228–334), which consist mainly of material drawn from Ibn al-Athīr’s Kāmil, Ibn al-Jawzī’s Muntazam, and al-Dhaḥabi’s Taʾrīkh; although this may confuse the unwary reader, the edition is far more accessible, and I will cite it accordingly.

11 Al-Azdi, Taʾrīkh, 499 (as governor in 172), 511 and 515 (as informant); for the family, P. Crone, Slaves on Horses: The Evolution of the Islamic Polity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 136 ff.

12 Which lay on the Tigris, apparently about eleven kilometers south of Mosul; see al-Azdi, Taʾrīkh, 416 ff. (with note 2 thereto); and J. M. Fiey, Assyrie Chrétienne (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1965), 2:490.
the Mosulis and Hārūn’s chief qāḍī, Abū Yūsuf. In at least one case, ʿAlī b. Ḥarb (d. ca. 875–80), a Mosuli expert in ḥadīth, akhbār, and genealogy who also came to receive caliphal patronage from al-Muʿtazz (r. 252–55/866–69) through to al-Muʿtaḍid (r. 279–89/892–902), we can attach a name to an unequivocal written source.  

Al-Azdī was working from a wide variety of local sources, and knew that these could be in some conflict; he openly acknowledges confusion and contradiction, and his task seems to have been to compose as full and harmonious an account as he was able. “That which I have narrated,” he writes of a composite account about Hārūn’s entrance into the city after al-ʿAṭṭāf’s departure, “came from a number of my shaykhs, for all that they disagreed in the exact words that they transmitted on the authority of those who preceded them.” This is suggestive of a fairly sophisticated historiographical program, which produced, inter alia, the most informative city history of the early period. But how plentiful and reliable was his local material to begin with? Since there is no real way of controlling so much of it, we are left with the text itself. Of one thing we can be fairly certain, however: Mosuli history in this and other problematic moments was a history selectively transmitted. Al-Azdī’s annual entries are not infrequently short, but year 178 is especially economical, and, almost nearly so, 179: as Mosul temporarily fell out of Abbasid rule, the Mosulis seem to have lost interest in their history. This is understandable. To what good purpose would stories of the townsfolk’s complicity have circulated during the ninth century? What interested al-Azdī

13 For the account, see below; and on the Shurayḥids, Robinson, Empire and Elites, 155 f. One is tempted to suppose that the transmitter named ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Sufyān b. al-ʿAṭṭāf (al-Azdī, Taʾrīkh, 518) was a descendant of al-ʿAṭṭāf himself.


15 “Akhbarāni bi-mā dhakartuhu min ḥādhā jamāʿ atūn min shuyākhnā ‘alā ikhtilāf alfāẓihim fi-hi amman taqaddamahum.” Al-Azdī, Taʾrīkh, 516. His confusion about governors and their terms even leads him to apologetics: he’s had to piece together material from a variety of kutub, he writes, and he’s put down what he’s found, without straying from “truthfulness”; see the Taʾrīkh, 471.

16 On the coinage, see below.

17 And, not coincidentally, nor are al-Ṭabarī’s, including during the period in question. In two cases (124 and 152) entire years are missing, the two having dropped out of the manuscript tradition (presumably due to a negligent scribe) upon which Ibn al-Athīr relied; see Robinson, “A Local Historian’s Debt.”
appears only in the entry on year 180, which narrates al-ʿAṭṭāf’s departure from, and Hārūn’s entrance into, the city, which were preceded and followed by a crucial set of negotiations. In fact, one would not be forcing things to discern a strain of Mosuli pride—a mix of courage, political nous, sangfroid, even insouciance—that runs through the first- and second-person testimony that narrates Hārūn’s restoration of Abbasid rule. As much as the Mosulis tempted fate, they skillfully averted catastrophe.

Here it must be emphasized that al-Azdī could only work with the hand that he had been dealt—and many cards were missing. Even a matter as apparently straightforward as the governorship was a source of chronic frustration: over and over he volunteers his uncertainty about the Mosuli governors’ identity or the timing of their service in the city, often falling back upon unresolved contradictions or inferences. There were multiple sources for this confusion, but the most important was the governors’ fairly regular turnover (including, in some cases, second terms) and the complex administrative geography of the north, which alternately married and divorced Mosul from the Jazira. Such ambiguities did not apply in the case of the city’s qaḍīs, who differed from its governors in at least two important respects: they were frequently Mosulis, and they tended to serve longer terms. It is little wonder, then, that al-Azdī evinces many fewer problems in listing qaḍīs than he does governors. Be this as it may, it should not surprise that even when he does his best by working from inference—“[b]y all indications,” he writes, “the governor [in year 155] was Mūsā b. Kaʿb,” for example—he could get things wrong: perhaps because he was too deferential to his historiographic model, he seems to have followed al-Ṭabarī in confusing Mūsā b. Muṣʿab with Mūsā b. Kaʿb.20

Now, the published numismatic evidence can dissolve some of the fog in this and other cases, but the coins remain far too spotty to do anything more than

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18 In these respects, the narratives resemble those of the massacres of 133.
19 Similarly the administrative frontier between Iraq and Mosul; for the reflex of this confusion in conquest narrative, see Robinson, Empire and Elites, 20 ff.
21 The coins unambiguously place Mūsā b. Muṣʿab in Balad (which lay on the Tigris, to the north of Mosul) in 155/very late 771–72 (thus N. Lowick, Early ʿAbbāsid Coinage: A Type Corpus, 132–218 H/AD 750–833 [London: British Museum Press, 1999], 329), and so at least provide a starting point from which to judge the confusing and contradictory information provided by al-Azdī (Taʾrīkh, 449, where conflicting reports have either Mūsā or Khālid b. Barmak in charge; see also 454), amongst others (including al-Ṭabarī). The Syriac sources are subject to no such confusion (Robinson, Empire and Elites, 156 f.). In fact, Mūsā is put in Balad in 772–73 by the Zuqnīn
offer limited help. This said, they do occasionally allow us precious glimpses at local arrangements. For example, we have several specimens from al-Mawṣil dated to 145 that were struck in the name of Hishām b. ʿAmr al-Taghlibī, just as we have several specimens struck in the late 140s and 150s in the name of the amīr al-Ṣaqr b. Najda, another of the city’s notable Azdis, and scion of a family that produced local learning too. Both figures are known to al-Azdī, the former as the last Umayyad governor (r. 128–33), the latter as a commander of the city’s rawābiṭ no later than 148; in neither case does our author identify them as Abbasid governors, however. Hishām, who had ingratiated himself to the Abbasid house by refusing Marwān II as he fled Abbasid armies during the revolution, was a favorite of the dynasty, and governed Sind; by contrast, al-Ṣaqr b. Nadja seems to have been an entirely local figure, who is otherwise known only to al-Azdī. In short, the texts apparently tell one story, the coins another.

The conflict can be resolved by distinguishing between the formal authority possessed by governors appointed by the caliph, and the effective authority that they not infrequently delegated to subordinates. Al-Azdī, as some other historians, was working from sources (including lists) that seem to have recorded only (or mainly) governors’ names, while the coins, such as they are, at least sometimes record both governors and those subordinates. This distinction—between (formally appointed) governor and his subordinate—is more or less what the legend on a fals struck in 145 tells us in describing arrangements that obtained during the governorship of Jaʿfar b. Abī Jaʿfar (145–47 /48): “mimmā amara bi-hi Hishām ibn ʿAmr ʿāmil al-amīr Jaʿfar ibn Amīr al-muʾminīn” (struck by Hishām b. ʿAmr, the agent for the commander [governor], Jaʿfar, the son of the Commander

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23 Shamma, A Catalogue ofʿAbbasid Copper Coins, 70; and Lowick, Early ʿAbbāsid Coinage, 331; Robinson, Empire and Elites, 159 f.

24 See Crone, Slaves on Horses, 167 f.
of the Faithful). For this and other reasons, a systematic understanding of provincial politics requires a command of both the historical and numismatic evidence, and, perhaps counterintuitively, cannot necessarily set much store by the nomenclature. Such an understanding must also accommodate the idea that provincial politics were determined by the confluence of the local and imperial.

II

Let us examine one illustration of this truism in some detail. The chronology of events in question has to be approximated. It is in his entry on year 177 (late April 793 to mid-April 794) that al-Azdī begins his account, which has al-ʿAṭṭāf take control of Mosul “for years” from the Abbasid Muḥammad b. al-ʿAbbās, who was responsible for the ʿsalāṭ and ḫarb (that is, the “governor,” who possessed theoretical and symbolic authority over ceremonial prayer and making war) and an obscure mawlā named Minjāb, who was in charge of levying taxes (literally, the kharāj). Little can be said about either figure’s tenure in the city, or, for that matter, how one is to resolve the author’s confusion about precisely how ʿAbd al-Malik b. Ṣāliḥ, an Abbasid with several governorships to his name (including an earlier stint in the city), and who later served as governor of Medina, was caught up in the events. "In this year, al-ʿAṭṭāf b. Sufyān al-Azdī formed a coa-

25 Lowick, Early ʿAbbāsid Coinage, 331. Al-Azdī occasionally makes mention of governors appointing deputies; see, for example, Taʿrīkh, 454 (which has Khālid b. Barmak deputize Khālid b. al-Ḥasan b. Barmak over Mosul). That al-Ṣaqr b. Najda arrogated to himself authority beyond his command of the rawābiṭ can be inferred from al-Azdī, Taʿrīkh, 431—but this may be forcing things.

26 Al-Azdī uses a variety of terms and locutions, including ʿalā..., wālī, ʿāmil, and amīr, as do the coins (thus Hishām b. ʿAmr, who appears as amīr in an undated fals in Shamma, Catalogue of ʿAbbasid Copper Coins, 70). Meanwhile, an inscription cited by al-Azdī (Taʿrīkh, 470) commemorates al-Mahdī’s expansion of the city’s congregational mosque ʿalā yad ʿāmilihi Mūsā b. Muṣʿab. The chronicler from Zuqnīn, who uses Arabisms as a matter of course, usually employs amīrā; for a discussion, see Harrak, The Chronicle of Zuqnīn, 25 f. There is a lesson herein for data miners-to-be.

27 Forand’s discussion of the governors (see notes 4 and 45) contains many errors, but remains the standard, faute de mieux.

28 We might expect that taxing would fall to a non-Arab client of the Abbasid house, and indeed this seems to be the only thing known about Minjāb, whose name is a muddle to all the copyists, and who pops up along with other clients only later; see al-Ṭabarī, Taʿrīkh, 3:1016; and the anonymous Kitāb al-ʿUyūn waʾl-ḥadāʾiq (Fragmenta Historicorum Arabicorum [Leiden, 1869–71]), 438.

29 Al-Azdī, Taʿrīkh, 492 ff. (appointment in 170 and dismissal in 171) and 511 (confusion about his possible reappearance in 177); Forand, “The Governors of Mosul According to al-Azdī’s Taʿrīkh...
lition [taḥālafa] against Ḥārūn,” al-Azdi writes by way of introducing events that will dominate that next ten pages or so of his text; the narrative tag was rewritten by Ibn al-Athir, who copied generously from this section of al-Azdi’s work, but lacked his more subtle understanding of the events.\(^{30}\) To al-Azdi, it apparently seemed that al-‘Aṭṭāf sought to preserve the appearance of Abbasid rule: the notional governor may have been Muḥammad b. al-‘Abbās, and Minjāb the notional tax agent, but “he [al-‘Aṭṭāf] had taken all effective authority, [Minjāb] being under his control” (ghālib ʿalā al-amr kullih wa-huwa fī yadihi). There is not a hint that such authority was considered legitimate, nor that al-‘Aṭṭāf sought caliphal sanction. Such as it was, al-‘Aṭṭāf’s rule was over by 180 (early March 796 to early March 797), when, according to multiple sources, Ḥārūn al-Rashid arrived in Mosul and restored direct Abbasid rule.

Who belonged to this “coalition”? Of al-‘Aṭṭāf himself, nothing can be said beyond what al-Azdi tells us. What is clear is that he was from that part of Mosul’s long-standing and land-holding Azdi élite that could mobilize military force: he was one of the city’s commanders (quwwād), and one who could attract a following of considerable size—some four thousand men, we read, a force that included “irregulars from the countryside” (ṣaʿālik al-balad), who had “rallied to him.”\(^{31}\) The ṣaʿālik\(^{32}\)—in the Mosuli context, it appears all or mainly “southern” Arabs\(^{33}\)—stand in obvious contrast to the city’s formally constituted (and mustered) military forces, which go by a variety of names in this period: al-aḥdāt, al-maʿūna, al-shurṭa, al-rawābiṭ (all local militias, the last being an especially fast-moving force that


\(^{31}\) Is the number believable? Perhaps: in 171 Rawḥ b. Ṣāliḥ, a Hamdānī commander of the rawābiṭ, led a force of exactly that size; see al-Azdi, Taʾrīkh, 498 f.


\(^{33}\) At least to judge from the Kindī, Azdi, and Hamdānī tribesmen who constitute its leadership, according to al-Azdi; Bonner (Aristocratic Violence, 55 and 68) not unreasonably ties the loss of stipends and status amongst Jaziran Arabs to ṣaʿālik numbers.
seems to have operated outside of the city against pastoralists, including Khārijites),\(^{34}\) and, of course, \textit{al-ḥarb}.\(^{35}\) We have no evidence for any resistance against al-ʿAṭṭāf, and one is entitled to infer that al-ʿAṭṭāf was commander of one of these militias, and it was with it (fortified by \textit{ṣaʿālīk}) that he took control of the city.\(^{36}\)

We also have a handful of names, figures who were implicated in the events, and so exempted from the general amnesty that would eventually be announced: ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz b. Muʿāwiya, al-Muʿāfā b. Shurayḥ, Birawayh al-Raḥabi, Yaʿlā al-Thaqafi and a certain Muntaṣir. Taken together, the figures suggest support from the city’s establishment. At least two are explicitly identified as landowners (Birawayh and Muntaṣir), their estates (along with al-ʿAṭṭāf’s) being confiscated after the movement’s failure, to be turned into \textit{ṣawāfī} lands, which for generations they remained;\(^{37}\) a thousand-dinar bounty was also placed on Birawayh’s and Muntaṣir’s heads, the latter fearlessly remaining in the city and escaping the manhunt only because of the oversight of Hārūn’s herald, we read.\(^{38}\) Al-Muʿāfā b. Shurayḥ was certainly a figure of local significance: son of Shurayḥ b. Shurayḥ (d. 133), who was a victim of the massacre of that year, brother of Bakkār b. Shurayḥ (d. 163), \textit{qāḍī} of the city for two terms in the 150s and early 160s, and tied by marriage to the most infamous of the city’s governors in this period, Mūsā b. Muṣʿab,\(^{39}\) al-Muʿāfā was nothing if not part of the city’s Azdī establishment. As it happens, he was the only ringleader to be arrested, a fact that may not be unrelated to his ability to call in favors from a group of Yamanīs (al-Ḥasan b. Qaḥṭaba, ʿAbd Allāh b. Mālik al-Khuza’ī and ʿAbd Allāh’s brother, Ḥamza), who, having experience in both the Jazira and Mosul, were embedded in caliphal and

\(^{34}\) On which see Robinson, \textit{Empire and Elites}, 159 f.

\(^{35}\) Which in this context means the authority to muster a salaried army on the caliph’s behalf, be it for making war on the frontier or against Khārijites who proved too much of a match for the \textit{rawābiṭ}; a good example comes in 178 (al-Azdī, \textit{Taʾrīkh}, 472), when Harthama b. Aʿyan and Muḥammad b. Farrūkh, dispatched by al-Mahdī against a TAMIMI Khārijite named Yasīn, come to Mosul, then set out from the city and defeat Yasīn in heavy fighting. Cf. Ibn al-Athīr’s gloss regarding al-Ḥasan b. Qaḥṭaba’s army in 162 in al-Azdī, \textit{Taʾrīkh}, 463, where he adds “stipended [soldiers], setting aside the volunteers.”

\(^{36}\) Cf. the case of al-Muʿāfā h. ʿImrān (d. 185 or 186), Mosul’s most celebrated second-century scholar, who was a “man of immense wealth and numerous estates”; see al-Dhahabi, \textit{Taʾrīkh al-İslâm} (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-İslāmî, 2003), 4:978. For more details, see Robinson, “Al-Muʿāfā b. ʿImrān and the Beginnings of the \textit{Tabaqāt} Literature.”

\(^{38}\) Al-Azdī, \textit{Taʾrīkh}, 516 f.

\(^{39}\) His term was interrupted only by ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd b. Abī Rabāḥ, who held the post in 159 and 160; see al-Azdī, \textit{Taʾrīkh}, 454 and 458; on the Shurayḥids, Robinson, \textit{Empire and Elites}, 155 f.
local patronage networks. Mālik al-Khuzāʿī had been the governor of the city from 142–144/45, a post to which his son ‘ Abd Allāh (d. 213) succeeded in 173 for two years. With local standing and pull from men such as these, it is little wonder that al-Muʿāfā got off lightly—only a year of captivity in the location of his choice: Mosul. If the accounts are to be trusted—and I do not see why they should not—there is more than a whiff of theatre in these measures, as also in Hārūn’s showy entrance into the city, as we shall see. The punishment does not fit the crime, it would appear, the imprisonment perhaps being intended less to punish or deter than to display what Althoff would call the “rules” of medieval politics.

Whatever the precise composition of al-ʿAṭṭāf’s city-rural coalition—indeed, perhaps even because it was a city-rural coalition—it did not last. In 180 Hārūn arrived in Mosul, having travelled up the Tigris, via the town of al-Ḥadītha, which lay at the juncture of the Tigris and the Greater Zab, about fifty kilometers south of the city. Al-ʿAṭṭāf responded by leading his own force to Marj Juhayna, a district of villages on the western side of the Tigris, about a day’s ride south from Mosul, thus not far from al-Ḥadītha, which lay on the opposite bank of the river. We read that Marj Juhayna’s “learned and pious men” (shuyūkh and ṣulaḥāʾ) dissuaded al-ʿAṭṭāf from attacking the Abbasid army, and prevailed upon him to vacate the town; their argument is not spelled out, but al-Azdī’s source, here Ḥafṣ b. ʿUmar al-Bāhilī, may have had access to the shuyūkh in question. Al-ʿAṭṭāf complied, disappearing to the north, into what our sources conventionally call Armenia—and so from the historical record, it seems.

This was not the end of the problem, however, for al-ʿAṭṭāf’s departure had the result of leaving Mosul vulnerable to Abbasid retaliation, especially, as one is entitled to surmise, since the Mosulis were perceived to be complicit. In order to negotiate their way out of danger, they accordingly dispatched to Marj Juhayna a delegation of their own, which was comprised of the city’s “notables” (wujūh) and “learned people” (wa-man kāna bi-hā min ahl al-ʿilm). Coming within memory of the gory massacre of 133, and within a generation of the Mosulis’ involvement in a rebellion led by Ḥassān b. Mujālid (wherein al-Manṣūr noted their failure to make

40 On the descendants of Qaḥṭaba b. Shabib, see Crone, Slaves on Horses, 188 f.
41 At least one son of his (Aḥmad) transmitted his father’s derring-do: al-Azdī, Taʾrīkh, 516.
good on earlier agreements), the townsfolk had good reason to be fearful of Abbasid retribution. The members of this delegation thus had to be chosen carefully. It seems to have especially featured anṣārīs who could carry favor with the caliph’s chief qāḍī and negotiator, Abū Yūṣūf (d. 182), himself an anṣārī and one, according to al-Azdī, who was partial to the town. One such figure was al-ʿAbbās b. al- Faḍl b. ʿAmr (Abū al-Faḍl al-Anṣārī; d. 186), a native Basran, faqīh, and traditionist, who settled in Mosul, and after whom a mosque in the city was eventually named; according to one report, he seems to have been rewarded by Hārūn with the qāḍī-ship of the city, but thought better of it and quickly resigned from the post. In addition, the delegation included Mūsā b. al-Muhājir (d. 201), a Mosuli faqīh and traditionist whom posterity remembered as a follower of Sufyān al-Thawrī (d. 161), two other learned men, Saʿd and ʿAtīq, about whom almost nothing can be said, as well as others who go unidentified.

What took place, as transmitted by Ḥafṣ b. ʿUmar on the authority of anonymous shaykhs, is a pleasing and edifying piece of narrative that has Abū Yūṣūf broker an arrangement whereby the caliph could make good on his oath to kill the Mosulis while doing little harm to the city. Its heart is the kind of resourceful casuistry for which the jurist was well known, but what we are left missing are the terms of the Mosulis’ capitulation. First, he directs the Mosulis to produce a real din of prayer calling, the effect of which so impresses Hārūn that he turns in wonder to Abū Yūṣūf: “‘Those are muezzins?’ ‘Yes, Commander of the Faithful: the people are [very pious] Muslims, among them people of goodness, Qurʾān-readers, and people of [religious] knowledge and understanding.’” Abū Yūṣūf then proposes that “[i]f you enter [the city] at night, you won’t find anyone to kill, and


Al-Azdī, Taʾrīkh, 516.

An ability, to judge from al-Masʿūdī (Murūj al-Dhahab [Beirut, 2012], 3:416), which was exactly what recommended him to the Abbasid family. On the origins of legal devices in connection with oaths, see S. Horii, “Reconsideration of Legal Devices (ḥiyal) in Islamic Jurisprudence: The Ḥanafis and Their ‘Exits,’” Islamic Law and Society 9 (2002): 318 f. As is well known, Abū Yūṣūf himself wrote on ḥiyal.

Cf. the altogether fuller account of the terms set to effect the capitulation of the governor of Egypt in 826, which is preserved by al-Kindī and described by M. Tillier, “Le cadi et le sauf-conduit (amān): Les enjeux juridiques de la diplomatie dans l’Orient abbasside,” Islamic Law and Society 19 (2012): 201–21.
it’s not incumbent upon you to kill someone you can’t see.” Having been directed to do so by Abū Yūsuf, the Mosulis duly disappear from sight, leaving the caliph one or two people whom he has killed.

Precisely what happened is impossible to know, of course, but in a society where oaths mattered—“believers are judged by the terms they enter into,” as the Prophet said⁴⁹—at the very least we have to assume that the events had verisimilitude.

Whatever one thinks of the story, there is little reason to doubt the other measures that Hārūn took to recompose Abbasid rule. One was to raze the city’s walls, a collective punishment that seemed draconian enough to merit mention in sources that are otherwise ignorant of al-ʿAṭṭāf’s rule.⁵⁰ Here, once again, one is inclined to think that the measure may actually have been largely symbolic.⁵¹ Another was to dismiss the city’s qāḍī, Ismāʿīl b. Ziyād al-Duʿali. Of Kufan origins, the “learned and abstemious” Ismāʿīl had been appointed by Hārūn himself in 174, but the causes for his removal could not be made clearer: Ismāʿīl, Hārūn alleged, was “partial” to the people of the city. Indeed, the Mosulis lauded his conduct and wrote down [hadīth] on his authority.⁵² By contrast, his replacement, the learnedʿAbd Allāh b. Khalīl, had “compositions” (muṣannafāt) to his name, but “the people found fault with his conduct,” their complaints reaching Hārūn as late as year 188.⁵³ Knowing that he was about to be dismissed, Ismāʿīl still had enough time to exercise his prerogative as qāḍī to document the ownership of Wāʾil b. Shaḥḥāj’s properties in the name of his son, ʿIsār. The Banū Shaḥḥāj were a powerful family in the city, and one can only speculate about how they had conducted themselves during al-ʿAṭṭāf’s interregnum.⁵⁴

Meanwhile, both Minjāb, the tax agent, and the discredited governor, Muḥammad b. al-ʿAbbās, were dismissed, and their responsibilities combined in the person of the well-connected and well-travelled Yaḥyā b. Saʿīd al-Ḥarashī, a descendant of a storied Qaysī from northern Syria.⁵⁵ The appointment of a ‘north-

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⁴⁹ Al-Azdī, Taʾrīkh, 418 f. (adduced by al-Maṣūr in connection with the Mosulis).
⁵⁰ Al-Dīnawarī, al-Akhbār al-ṭiwāl (Leiden: Brill, 1888), 385 f.; al-Ṭabarī, Taʾrīkh, 3:645, guessing that Hārūn was responding to Khārijītes.
⁵¹ Cf. the case described by Althoff, Family, Friends and Followers, 150.
⁵² On Ismāʿīl, see al-Azdī, Taʾrīkh, 504, 506, 508, and 518 f.; see also al-Dhahabī, Taʾrīkh al-Islām, 4:581; Ibn Ḥajar, Tahdhib al-Tahdhib, 1:249 f. (552); and al-Mizzī, Tahdhib al-Kamāl (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Risāla, 1998), 1:468 (446).
⁵³ Al-Azdī, Taʾrīkh, 518 f., 535, and 543.
⁵⁴ Wāʾil himself had been in charge of the city’s shurṭa in 146; see al-Azdī, Taʾrīkh, 404 and 519; on the Shaḥḥājīs, Robinson, Empire and Elites, 154 f.
⁵⁵ On Yaḥyā and his family, see Crone, Slaves on Horses, 144 f. Waxing theoretical, al-Azdī explains elsewhere (Taʾrīkh, 401, in year 145) that Mosuli practice was for governors to have author-
erner’ after Sufyān’s Azdī rule cannot have been coincidental. In any event, Yaḥyā was directed to recoup the taxes lost to Baghdad during the two- or three-year interregnum, and he collected some six million dirhams, we read; given what other sources describe as Mosul’s annual revenue in this period—no less than twenty-four million according to one budget—the figure is relatively modest; it is dwarfed, for example, by the cost that Hārūn is said to have spent on the one-hundred-thousand-man army that he sent into Byzantium twelve years earlier. Even so, al-Azdī has it that the exactions necessary to make up the shortfall forced Mosulis to flee to Azerbaijan, brought villages into ruin, and opened districts to lawlessness.

III

Given northern Mesopotamia’s geography, along with the state’s evolving military and political culture, we might expect various forms of resistance from tribesmen, be it passive or active, such as refusing to appear when called up (takhalluf) and abandoning long campaigns (both passive) or, especially for those who have fallen off the dīwān and out of favor, banditry and other forms of rural opportuni-

56 Or one million (al-Azdī, Taʾrīkh, 518).
58 Thus al-Ṭabarī, Taʾrīkh, 3:504 (where exact sums of 194,000 dinars and 21,414,800 dirhams are given). This was an astounding sum, of course, for an exceptional army; cf. the numbers given in ca. 178 for the army returning from Transoxania with al-Faḍl b. Yaḥyā in the anonymous Kitāb al-ʿUyūn waʾl-Ḥadāʾiq, 296 (1,500,000 dirhams). The size and salaries of Abbasid armies remain open to dispute; for an overview, H. Kennedy, The Armies of the Caliphs (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 78 ff. and 96 ff.
59 See the discussion in P. Crone, “Were the Qays and Yemen of the Umayyad Period Political Parties?,” Der Islam 71 (1994): 36 ff.; and Bonner, Aristocratic Violence, 32 ff.
ism (all active).\textsuperscript{60} And given the potent activist model that the first generation of Arabian tribesmen had bequeathed to subsequent generations of Muslims, nor should we be surprised that such active resistance could be given a measure of ideological coherence by Khārijism, which was endemic in the Jaziran countryside throughout the eighth century. In fact, Khārijite rebellions in the Jazira and Mosul were so numerous and regular that when the Mosulis explained the undercollection of taxes by adducing a Khārijite episode in 175, it is hard to know if the explanation was genuine or convenient.\textsuperscript{61} Since the Mosuli elite was known to flirt with Khārijites, this may well have struck the Abbasids as a bit rich.\textsuperscript{62} All in all, Khārijism in northern Mesopotamia highlights the limits of both the state’s effective power (especially in rural districts) and the efficacy of its ideological program: there was a steady succession of Khārijites (especially Shaybānīs and Tamīmīs) in part because they had northern Mesopotamia’s geography on their side, and in part because they also had a compelling construction of Islam on their side.\textsuperscript{63}

But matters were surely different in the miṣr of Mosul, the state’s political and military hub. What, beyond restiveness, resentment, or geographic liminality, can explain the Mosulis’ ill-advised and short-lived bid, predicated as it apparently was upon a rural-urban coalition? To propose an answer we must first backtrack and make some general comments about economic and social context.

The early Islamic economic and social order should be understood as an elaboration upon late-antique patterns in the eastern Mediterranean. While contraction and simplification are the rule elsewhere (even in Byzantium, where there was greater continuity than in the post-Roman West),\textsuperscript{64} in the heartlands of the Islamic Middle East the trajectory is continuity in settlement and trade through the seventh and into the eighth century (varying by region, of course), fostered by

\textsuperscript{60} Of course there are illuminating parallels in the late-Roman West; see R. Van Dam, \textit{Leadership and Continuity in Late Antique Gaul} (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), 16 ff.

\textsuperscript{61} Al-Azdī, \textit{Taʾrīkh}, 504 f. The Khārijite in question is al-Faḍl b. Saʿīd, on whom see below.

\textsuperscript{62} For such episodes, see Robinson, \textit{Empire and Elites}, 147 f.

\textsuperscript{63} That the Jazira was an infamous breeding ground for Khārijites is clear; for the sources, see Robinson, \textit{Empire and Elites}, 111n18. To that list of Marwānid rebellions (110 f.) can be added the incomplete enumeration to year 184 that follows, which is drawn from Khalīfa b. Khayyāt, al-Azdī, al-Ṭabarī and Ibn al-Athīr: al-Burayka (year 133), al-Mulabbad al-Shaybānī (137), Ḥassān b. Mujālid al-Hamdānī (148), ʿAbd al-Salām b. Hāshim al-Yashkuri (162), Yasin/Bāsir al-Tamīmī (168), ʿAmr (169), al-Sāḥsāh (171), al-Faḍl b. Saʿīd al-Rādānī (173), Kh/Jurāsha b. Sinān (176), al-Walīd b. Ţarīf (178 or 79), and Abū ʿAmr (184).

the survival of state structures, practices, and institutions, including coinage and taxing. Conquest in the seventh century had not only put an end to over a century of ever-intensifying warfare between Byzantine and Sasanian armies in northern Mesopotamia, but, one imagines, it also (more invisibly) lowered transaction costs by removing borders and increasing the flow of information. Uniform coinage facilitated exchange, and was struck in sufficient number to ensure a degree of monetization. As the eighth century unrolled, one can discern increasing administrative size and complexity, which culminated in the great taxing machine that was the centralizing and bureaucratic early Abbasid Empire.65 Already in the Marwānid period northern Mesopotamia had established itself as an important part of the interregional network of trade, but in the extraordinarily detailed and contemporaneous testimony of the Zuqnīn Chronicle, which was written in about 775, we have what can be compared to a high-resolution snapshot of the accelerating integration of the northern Syrian countryside into this network in the 760s and early 770s. The picture is not pretty, and much of the chronicler’s lachrymose account focuses on the infamies and deprivations of Mūsā b. Muṣʿab.66

A full accounting of fiscal practices and, crucially, how they related to trade is a subject for another place; three points can be made here. The first is about wealth and the grain market. The grains of the Jazira’s rain-fed and irrigated plains and valleys were invaluable to the explosive urbanism of southern Iraq,67 in addition to the burgeoning conurbation of al-Rāfiqa/al-Raqqa, with its industrial center and well-settled hinterlands.68 The archaeological and literary evidence for settlement in the middle Euphrates and Balīkh combines nicely, and leaves no doubt that the late Umayyad and early Abbasid period saw a substantial increase in set-

65 Non-Islamicists, often thinking comparatively or diachronically, and working with archaeological and numismatic evidence, sometimes find it easier than do Islamicists to recognize the enormous scale of the political and economic achievement. As good an example as any is the proposal that the late eighth and early ninth centuries mark the second of the Mediterranean’s three great trade cycles; see C. Wickham, “The Mediterranean around 800: On the Brink of the Second Trade Cycle,” Dumbarton Oaks Papers 58 (2004), 161–74.
66 See above, notes 20 and 21. And note that al-Kindī (Wulāt Miṣr, 148) speaks of his corruption as well.
tlement, driven in large measure by large-scale investments in irrigation. Jaziran grains (mainly wheat and barley) were shipped downriver, sometimes already milled into flour, Mosul apparently playing an enormous role in the river-borne trade. That the city was wealthy and populous in the mid-eighth century is made clear by the scale of its building already in the late Umayyad period (especially the large-scale installation of mills in the city’s purpose-built canal), the enlargement of its walls, and property speculation, along with stray anecdotes relating to mortality; we read that thirty thousand Mosulis died in the massacres of 133, and an epidemic in 773–74 is said to have killed as many as one thousand in a single day.

That the prosperity came in some large measure from growing and trading grain is just as clear, and not merely because the city’s built geography was so clearly conditioned by milling: the chronicler from Zuqnin is at some pains to describe the wealth of Mosulis living in the Jazira, which he explicitly attributes to landowning and money lending. For him, measuring the scale of natural disaster (especially drought and epidemic) usually means measuring its effect upon grain prices and, occasionally, the damage done to the infrastructure of milling. His was not merely a monetized society, but a highly price-sensitive one.

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70 For the epidemic, *Zuqnin Chronicle*, 358 ff./305 ff.; and Robinson, *Empire and Elites*, 81 (where a guesstimate of fifty thousand is made for the mid-eighth-century city). Cf. M. Decker (*Tilling the Hateful Earth: Agricultural Production and Trade in the Late Antique East* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009], 84 and 150 f.), where Edessa’s population is estimated to have been somewhere between thirty and fifty thousand, apparently the largest in this part of Byzantine Oriens. Kennedy (“Feeding the Five Hundred Thousand,” 177) puts Baghdad at its height at five hundred thousand, and Basra (earlier) at two hundred fifty thousand.

71 *Zuqnin Chronicle*, 254/224 f.

72 For example, a flood in 762–763 is said to have swept away millstones on the Tigris, and by this we are presumably to understand mill installations such as those that lay in the river or its canals; see the *Zuqnin Chronicle*, 228/205; and, for the city’s milling industry, Robinson, *Empire and Elites*, 78 f. (including a ten-year canal project). Mills were both expensive and crucial to the Jaziran economy, which is why they are singled out for protection in treaty texts (al-Balâdhuri, *Futūḥ al-buldân* [Leiden: Brill, 1866], 174), and subject to legal scrutiny (thus Abû Yûsuf, *Kitāb al-Kharāj*, 93 [reading al-ʿarba]).

73 According to a view ascribed to the early Abbasid Yaḥyā b. Muḥammad, the Mosulis were of three kinds: Khārijites, thieves, and merchants; see al-Balâdhuri, *Ansâb al-ashrâf* (Beirut: Steiner, 1978), 281.
The second point I wish to make is about the fiscal information. The Zuqnin Chronicle is commonly said to document the operation of a rapacious taxing regime in the 760s and 770s—and this it surely does. What often goes unmentioned is how it also documents a minutely measured and audited rural society, the information and data gathered up by swarming tax agents, census takers, assessors, surveyors, and record-keeping scribes, all apparently working closely with small armies of specialized tax collectors targeting differential tax categories, accompanied by soldiers, sealers, and branders. There is nothing surprising about this; after all, there was a lot riding on the accuracy of the records. Thus was rapacious taxing predicated upon a massively comprehensive record of tax liability—of people, properties (including churches and monasteries) and agricultural produce and goods, down to the single beehive. The flood of personnel and scale of the record keeping may have been unprecedented—this (year 769–70) is the first time one reads of tax fugitives (jawālī) in northern Mesopotamia—but the accounts are probably exceptional only in the glimpse they allow us at rural conditions. Although it is difficult to measure the regularity of the flow of information from the tax-producing, rural hinterland to provincial and imperial capital, there is no question that Mosul, as geography would suggest, was not only an entrepôt for goods and people travelling downriver, but also for intelligence. Jazirans and Mosulis alike, we read, would take their complaints about the noxious Mūsā b. Muṣʿab directly to the caliph in Baghdad. Here one is entitled to point out that al-ʿAṭṭāf’s rebellion reflects a striking failure of intelligence, one that contrasts sharply with al-Manṣūr’s success in aborting Ismāʿīl b.

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74 Namely (if one believes the numbers), fifty-four million dirhams (the Jazīra, Diyār Rabi’a and Muḍar, and Mosul), at least according to the budget that survives from Hārūn’s time; see al-Ali, “Ibn al-Muṭarrif’s List of Revenues.”


76 Here it is worth noting that when al-Mahdī directed Ḥarrūn to hasten from al-Raqqa to Baghdad by the barīd, he made his way from Ḥarrān to Baghdad via Mosul “in a matter of days”; see al-Azdī, Taʾrīkh, 466. Traveling from Mosul to Baghdad “in haste down the Tigris,” as Ibn Shaddād has it, meant covering the distance in just over two days; see The Rare and Excellent History of Saladin, trans. D. S. Richards (Burlington, VT: Aldershot, 2002), 57. More generally, A. Silverstein, Postal Systems in the Pre-modern Islamic World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), esp. 80 and 107.

77 Zuqnin Chronicle, 313/271.
ʿAlī’s bid for independence in 142; in that case, it was the caliph’s knowledge of
Ismāʿīl’s alliance with the chief of the rawābit, Ibn Mishkān, that was crucial.78

Be that as it may, there is no doubt that governor and caliph alike could access
impressively detailed information about the fiscal bureaucracy, land tenure, reve-
nuess and the like, tax agent and caliph communicating directly with each other in
the early Abbāsid period, as an illuminating account from the year 176 tells us.79

Al-Azdī preserves a wide variety of documents that give some indication of the
flow of such information. One such document had been in the possession of the
qāḍī al-Ḥārith b. Jārūd, who passed it on to his sons; it seems to have been part of
an archive of “old” material (some written on parchment) relating in part to tax-
ation, which was under the authority of the qāḍī in 146.80 The letter, apparently
reproduced in something very close to its entirety, was written on 13 Shawwāl 152
(22 October 769), on behalf of al-Manṣūr, to Ismāʿīl b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Qasrī, gover-
nor of the city in 151 and 152. It takes up charges of embezzlement levied against a
number of officials (agents, scribes, assistants, and accountants),81 and instructs
the governor to act upon information that the caliph has sent to him in a reg-
ister (daftar), which recorded their names, their domiciles, and the accusations
against them. Another account also illustrates the minute scale of record keeping.
When, in 782 or 783, collection from an estate in the region of Mosul dropped
well below its multiyear average (ʿibra),82 news of the shortfall was transmitted
to Baghdad, and al-Mahdī himself took the matter up and called the governor

79 Al-Wāqidī apud al-Ṭabarī (al-Ṭabarī, Taʾrīkh, 3:627 f.) recounts how the recently appointed
ʿUmar b. Mihrān handled temporizing and dissembling taxpayers in Egypt: “[I]n those days, the
tax agents would correspond [directly] with the caliph,” we read: one infers that the practice
had fallen into desuetude by the time of al-Wāqidī (d. 823). By providing Hārūn all manner of
information (names, sums, etc.), ʿUmar made good on his threat to deliver one of the shirkers
to Baghdad, but the measure had only mixed results because others failed to deliver the third
installment (najm), forcing him to summon the “taxpayers and merchants,” the latter, one sup-
poses, acting as money lenders. For najm as “installment,” see http://hum.leiden.edu/lias/form-
ination-of-islam/topics-state/arab-fisc-term.html#n.
80 Al-Azdī, Taʾrīkh, 405, 413 and 429; cf. W. Hallaq, “The Qadi’s Diwan (sijill) before the Otto-
mans,” Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies 61 (1998): 415–36; and, more gen-
erally, I. Bligh-Abramski, “The Judiciary (qāḍīs) as a Governmental-administrative Tool in Early
81 ʿUmmāl, kuttāb, aʿwān and qasāṭīr.
82 For the definition, see C. E. Bosworth, “Abū ʿAbdallāh al-Khwārazmī on the Technical Terms
of the Secretary’s Art: A Contribution to the Social History of Medieval Islam,” Journal of the Eco-
nomic and Social History of the Orient 12 (1969): 135 f. (it documents two- or three-year horizons
for averaging).
to account. "It happens that I am familiar with the issue," explained Mūsā b. Muṣʿab, the North’s most infamous governor, "since it [the estate, ḍayʿa] is adjacent to mine... Its yield [that was to be the basis for the tax collection] was transferred to another estate, and both [of the estates] are [now] owned by another man."\(^\text{83}\) The caliph found the explanation unpersuasive, and transferred Mūsā to Egypt. The rebellion of al-Faḍl b. Saʿīd al-Rādānī started in Balad in 173, where he was promptly bought off for one hundred thousand dirhams; but he reappeared in 175 near Nisibis with five hundred men under his command, and made his way northwest (as far as Khilāt), then headed southeast, eventually being killed on the Zāb. The result was a reduction in tax revenue, which al-Azdī’s sources can identify by category.\(^\text{84}\)

The third point to be made here regards tax liability. The expansion and fiscal integration of swathes of the northern Mesopotamian countryside had manifold effects in the 760s and 770s. One was to enrich Mosuli landowners and grain merchants, who profited from the interdigitation of market and fisc. Another was to subordinate a religio-ethnic elite under the new political order. Sedentarization must have been a complex, start-and-stop process, sometimes sponsored by the state by granting land;\(^\text{85}\) but the Zuqnīn Chronicle makes it clear that no later than the mid- to late 760s, Muslim Arabs (ṭayyāyē) had fallen off the Abbasids’ diwān, purchased lands and cattle, and taken to agriculture, as much as they might have wanted to re-enroll in the caliph’s army.\(^\text{86}\) Settlement in this case must mainly have been a reflex of dynastic change. Having lost their status as members of the ruling elite, these demobilized Arabs now shared the same fate as the Christian peasants of the Jazira, subject not only to the regime of census and assessment (taʿdīl) that until this point (772–73) had been restricted to non-Arab Christians.\(^\text{87}\)

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83 And so, one presumes, there was an over-collection elsewhere—or so he was claiming; al-Azdī, Taʿrīkh, 248 f.; on Mūsā, see Robinson, Empire and Elites, 156 ff.
84 Al-Azdī, Taʿrīkh, 504 f.
85 Thus we read that already in Muʿāwiya’s time Arabs were being settled in the Jazira; see al-Balādhuri, Futūḥ al-buldān, 178. For settlement on the frontier in the early Abbasid period, see P. von Sivers, “Land and Trade in the ʿAbbāsid Thughūr, 750–962/133–351,” Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient 25 (1982): 75 f.
86 As is made clear in at least two crucial passages; Zuqnīn Chronicle, 231/208 (in 766–67 the ṭayyāyē no longer receive the gzītā) and 251/222 (mustering in Ḥarrān in 767–68). The classic discussion remains C. Cahen, “Fiscalité, propriété, antagonismes sociaux en Haute-Mésopotamie au temps des premiers ʿAbbasides, d’après Denys de Tell-Mahré,” Arabica 1 (1954): 136–52; see also Kennedy, Armies of the Caliphs, 96.
but also to the humiliation, torture, and, to judge from our chronicler’s lugubrious catalogue of woe, the destitution that could come with being taxed so mercilessly.\(^8\)

So the beneficiaries of taxation—both materially and in status—had become taxpayers, and this at precisely the time that non-Arab converts were taking on increasingly prominent roles in the state. Whatever their precise construction of faith, to many Muslim Arabs of northern Mesopotamia it must have appeared a perversion of the natural order of things that they were to pay a humiliating tribute to a Jaziran governor, especially a non-Arab parvenu such as Khālid b. Barmak.\(^8\)

Arab rule—with all the privileges that it delivered or implied—was over.\(^9\) Echoes of the extension of tax liabilities into the pastoralist economy can be heard in al-Azdi. The first attestation we have for a tax agent specifically tasked with levying the kharāj and sadaqāt, the pastoralists’ tax that the Zuqnīn chronicler knows as ṣadaqāt al-māl, appears in 168/785, and three years later we read of a tax-levying expedition to the Taghib that went very badly.\(^9\)

One cannot fail to notice that the frequency of Khārijite rebellions in the Jazira and Mosul appears to correlate well with the extension of taxation into the countryside during the late 760s and 770s.\(^9\)

What does this context allow us to say about the events in question? It is impossible to avoid the obvious conclusion that taxing lay at or near the heart of the matter: it was Minjāb and his taxes that seem to have concerned al-ʿAṭṭāf, just as it was recouping the uncollected taxes that concerned Hārūn and his new governor, Yaḥyā b. Saʿid al-Ḥarashī. As a token of political subordination and a mechanism for surplus extraction, taxation was a perennial source of contention.

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88 Thus the Zuqnīn Chronicle, 269 f./237 f. (ṭayyāyē subjected to all manner of torture and humiliation). Various tortures are condemned by Abū Yūsuf, Kitāb al-Kharāj, 105, 109, and 119.

89 The awe that the Mosulis felt for Khālid b. Barmak, one Mosuli informant reported, was greater than they had for any other governor; see al-Azdi, Taʾrikh, 422 f.; and al-Ṭabarī, Taʾrikh, 3:383. On Khālid’s early career, see C. E. Bosworth, “Abū Ḥafs ʿUmar al-Kirmānī and the Rise of the Barmakids,” Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies 57 (1994): 268–82. According to the Zuqnīn Chronicle (266/234), Mūsā b. Muṣ‘ab employed a Zoroastrian administrator (Syr: ʿāmel).

90 The Zuqnīn chronicler reflects how the Syrian Arabs saw things: the “Persians” (parsāyē) had defeated the (Arab) Umayyads, the Arabs of Syria rebelled against the Persians, Abū Jaʿfar al-Mansūr was “the king of the Persians” (malkā d-parsāyē), etc. See the Zuqnīn Chronicle, 192/178 and 195/181.

91 Al-Azdi, Taʾrikh, 498 f. According to the Zuqnīn Chronicle (319/275), the effects of Mūsā’s calamitous taxing measures had reached some in Taghib a decade earlier. Needless to say, pastoralist and settled economies were intertwined.

92 For an unscientific sample, see above, note 63.
in virtually all provinces (as elsewhere), of course. To understand this particular episode, one needs to consider timing.

Above I noted the relatively modest sum (six million dirhams) that al-Ḥarashī was able to recoup. One can discount the figure for any number of reasons, but that it may be taken to suggest that revenues were down in this period is, as it happens, confirmed by al-Azdi himself, who describes a fall in wheat prices that took place a year before al-ʿAṭṭāf’s rebellion, the most recent drop in a period of volatility that is documented by the Zuqnin Chronicle. So we have a trigger: the fiscal system was embedded in a thoroughly monetized grain market (taxes were to be paid in coin by selling crops, often at gross disadvantage to cultivators), and even if prices were depressed, Baghdad expected the taxes all the same—and at levels that were unsustainable. For above all, the army needed to be paid in coin. One is inevitably drawn to the conclusion that something like a structural limit was being reached: Baghdad had been pressing too hard for too long. Al-Manṣūr had squeezed, Mūsā b. Muṣʿab had squeezed, and now Hārūn was squeezing anew, as Christian chroniclers are keen to record.

In sum, it seems likely that al-ʿAṭṭāf’s takeover was less the result of Mosuli audacity than desperate resourcefulness, the events ultimately being set in train by Baghdad’s increasing appetite for revenue. Landowners here and elsewhere had the means to turn the asynchrony of taxing season and agricultural yield to their advantage, and, in any number of ways, capitalize upon the vulnerable peasant—“the needy tiller who works with his own hand,” as Abū Yūsuf knows

93 In addition to the budget data, cf. the higher numbers reported by Qudāma b. Jaʿfar (6,300,000) and Ibn Khurdādhbih (4,000,000); see Robinson, Empire and Elites, 82.

94 Al-Azdi, Taʾrīkh, 506; for a discussion of these and other prices in the period, see now M. Campopiano, “State, Land Tax, and Agriculture in Iraq from the Arab Conquest to the Crisis of the Abbasid Caliphate (Seventh-Tenth Centuries),” Studia Islamica 107 (2012): 1–37 (for Mosul, 33 f.); and Campopiano, “Land Tax al-misāḥa and muqāsama: Legal Theory and the Balance of Social Forces in Early Medieval Iraq (6th–8th Centuries C.E.),” Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient 54 (2011): 258 f. However and whenever one sees the introduction of the muqāsama in the Sawād, it had not taken root in the Jazira in this period (if it ever did). In fact, as Cahen noted (“Fiscalité, propriété, antagonismes sociaux,” 138 f. and 144 f.), the anonymous chronicler from Zuqnin used a terminology that is archaic by the standards of the jurists, and there is no evidence of the muqāsama in operation in the world that he knew.


96 See, for example, Michael the Syrian, Chronique de Michel, patriarche jacobite d’Antioche 1166–1199 (Paris: Laroux, 1899–1924), 11:xxv.

97 See, for example, the Chronicle of 1234, published as Chronicon anonymum ad annum Christi 1234 pertinens (1916; reprint, Louvain: CSCO, 1974), 2:3/1 (“tribute,” mdattā).
him; these and other activities were profitable, if necessarily risky. But now the balance between gain and risk had been lost, and the Mosuli landowners took matter into their own hands. Seen from a broader perspective, this was no small thing: what we may have is an attempt on the part of a landowning elite to outfit itself with military force independent of the state. At the very least, we have an attempt to force Baghdad’s hand. That it failed reflects not merely something about Abbasid power at the end of the eighth century, but also something about the nature of early Islamic politics in general.

IV

Having reached some conclusions about the events of the mid-790s, we may now usefully turn to some concluding observations about the nature of Abbasid rule.

What we have in the late eighth century is a discernibly Islamic iteration of empire: a large and multinational polity that made hegemonic claims, which were both compelling and legitimating, and that featured an organizational hub and extracted wealth from subordinated populations, typically through tax or tribute. In this particular case, claims for legitimacy and hegemony were grounded in history (especially the Abbasid revolution), descent (consanguinity with the Prophet) and an imam-centric conception of the religio-political order, a model of reciprocal loyalty between ruler and elite being periodically reaffirmed.

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98 Abū Yūsuf, Kitāb al-Kharāj, 122, which stipulates a lower rate for the peasant, but effectively concedes coerced selling. As Cahen puts it crisply: “Les paysans ne peuvent l’acquérir [coinage to pay the tax] que par la vente immédiate de leur récolte” (“Fiscalité, propriété, antagonismes sociaux,” 143).

99 Wickham, Framing the Middle Ages, 68. Such practices are described by the Zuqnīn Chronicle (Robinson, “One Monk’s Economics”), and proscribed by Abū Yūsuf (for one example, Kitāb al-Kharāj, 105). The most sophisticated discussion of the Kitāb al-Kharāj belongs to N. Calder (Studies in Early Muslim Jurisprudence [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993], 121 ff.), but the argument that the final redaction belongs to al-Khaṣṣāf and the mid-third century is unpersuasive. I see no reason to disbelieve that it belongs in the late second century.


101 For some of the competing definitions of “state” and “empire,” see the literature cited in note 1 above; for one recent Middle Eastern case study, K. Barkey, Empire of Difference: The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

and reenacted by ceremonial.\footnote{A. Marsham, \textit{Rituals of Islamic Monarchy: Accession and Succession in the First Muslim Empire} (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).} The state’s finances were drawn principally from agricultural surpluses that were extracted through taxes on the land levied in coins, either from the Iraqi hinterland or the empire’s heterogeneous provinces. Income (net of structural inefficiencies, leakage, embezzlement, graft, etc.) was redirected chiefly towards maintaining tools of coercion (especially armies and the administrators who supported them) and modes of persuasion, such as a wide variety of ceremonial events and rituals, in addition to ongoing performances of status and entitlement, such as the possession and consumption of wealth.

Late eighth-century Baghdad thus served as the organizational and ideological center of an economic and political network of cities and towns that was tied together by the flow of information, goods, coins, people, and power. And provincial cities, such as Mosul, were the primary sites where Baghdad’s hegemonic claims had to be translated into effective policies and politics. Al-Azdī, to whom we owe so much of our understanding of Mosuli politics, understood some version of this idea—that metropolis and provincial capital were partners in the creation and maintenance of empire. This is the case in two respects.

First, our author tells us the Mosuli elite was the product of conquest, Arab tribal settlement, Umayyad and Abbasid investment and patronage, and the considerable wealth that came from the city’s political, military, and economic role within a province that was tributary to the caliphs. We may not be able to map the distribution of the elite’s social power in any detail, nor know whether non-Muslims played any real part in it,\footnote{When Muslims built Mosul on the opposite side of the river from Nineveh, they symbolically left behind the ancient and late-antique world. Cf. the altogether more prominent role of Christian notables in Jaziran towns and cities, such as Edessa, Amida, Nisibis, and Mayyāfāriqīn.} but we have enough evidence to know that the ingredients were descent (especially from settler tribes, such as the Azd and Hamdān), landowning, office holding, and religious learning. Such social power explains why locals had prerogatives (such as militias) that Baghdad respected, and produced qāḍīs whom Baghdad was content to appoint. Power, one might say, had to be refracted through the provincials in order to be projected effectively. In this sense, there certainly was a “system,” as Kennedy would have it, one that mediated between provincial capital and imperial metropolis.

On the other hand, al-Azdī also provides for us a more or less continuous narrative of provincial ambivalence about this system. For throughout the eighth century Mosulis had been given to testing the caliphs’ limits, Umayyad and Abbasid alike:
by sheltering or supporting Khārijites;\textsuperscript{105} switching sides as soon as the opportunity presented itself and putting up imprudent opposition to the imposition of Abbasid rule (in 132–33); providing a setting for Īsā b. ‘Alī’s attempt to resist dismissal by the caliph (in 142); and throwing their lot in with al-‘Aṭṭāf b. Sufyān. Here the pattern was not to ask for permission, it appears, but to ask for forgiveness, in this last case by leveraging the connections Mosulis had made with those with close ties of loyalty or kinship with Baghdad. In other words, it appears that the Mosulis knew that the caliphs’ oaths, pledges, threats, and ultimatums were made as a matter of course; they were part of the rhetoric of power and rule, one of its “rules,” and could be managed as such.\textsuperscript{106} The negotiating that took place in Marj Juhayna, which opened the way for the re-imposition of direct Abbasid rule in 180, was thus more than just the denouement of one episode of Mosuli restiveness. In fact, practices of face-to-face negotiation carried out to avert the threat or risk of violence appear frequently enough that they can be said to have both symbolized the brokered nature of Abbasid rule and constituted a crucial tool in the very conduct of politics.\textsuperscript{107} Unacknowledged in theory, they were as much part of the “system” of rule (and of “rules”) as any other institutionalized practice.

Such as it was then, the “system” that tied province to metropolis was already in clear disrepair before the civil war that broke out upon Hārūn’s death, and resulted in the emergence of local autonomy signaled by the power of local chieftains. How al-Azdī understands the politics of the matter is worth noting:

When caliphal authority (al-sulṭān) weakened, and the protection (al-ḥimāya) [it afforded] diminished, the people of Mosul rallied around ‘Alī b. al-Ḥasan al-Hamdānī [a local chieftain] so that he would take control of the region and protect its sub-districts. From this time until the passing of the Banū al-Ḥasan, they would let enter [into the city] a caliphally appointed governor (al-wālī min wulāt al-sulṭān) only if they found him satisfactory, their being in effective control all the while.\textsuperscript{108}

\textsuperscript{105} Examples for which we have explicit evidence for Mosuli favor include Bahlūl b. Bishr (in 119), Bisṭām and/or Sa‘īd b. Baḥdal (126), al-Ḍaḥḥāk b. Qays (128), and al-Ḥassān b. Mujālid (148).

\textsuperscript{106} As far back as Marwān II, a caliph had pledged to execute the Mosulis’ fighting men (muqāṭila) and enslave their offspring (al-Azdī, Taʾrīkh, 259), but here too nothing came of the threats. The unacknowledged “rules,” it could be argued, would have been violated. (I borrow the term and idea from G. Althoff, *Spielregeln der Politik im Mittelalter: Kommunikation in Frieden und Fehde* [Darmstadt: Primus, 1997]). Here it could also be said that the wanton violence of the revolutionary period (see Robinson, “The Violence of the Abbasid Revolution”) took place at a moment of intense religio-political charge, precisely when those rules of engagement had been suspended.

\textsuperscript{107} On Abbasid diplomatics in this context, see Tillier, “Le cadi et le sauf-conduit.”

\textsuperscript{108} Al-Azdī, Taʾrīkh, 563 (year 195).
Might protection be one key to understanding empire? This is Bang’s view, and it should be tested for the eighth century. For whatever else the caliphs offered the Mosulis in the way of legitimacy and status, the violence that their armies could effect, be it threatened or actualized, was meant to offer them protection from the endemic unruliness, lawlessness, and banditry that put their trade, travel, and prosperity at risk. And on those occasions when caliphal armies were not up to the task, Abbasid governors could still buy off those who threatened order. Of course the Mosulis paid for this protection with their taxes. So although there is no doubting that the dissolution of order resulting from the civil war opened up opportunities for locals across the empire to assert themselves, already earlier in the second Islamic century the Mosulis were weighing the possibility that ever-rising taxes were too high a cost to pay. They sought an alternative, but their experiment came too early in the history of the caliphate.

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Buying off Khārijites was common practice. One instance comes in the rebellion of al-Faḍl b. Saʿīd al-Rādānī (see above), and another in al-Mulabbad, who, having inflicted a series of crushing defeats on Abbasid armies, was bought off by Ḥumayd b. Qaḥṭaba, the governor of the Jazira, for one-hundred thousands dirhams; see, for example, Khalīfa b. Khayyāṭ, Taʾrīkh (Najaf: Maṭbaʿat al-Ādāb, 1967), 444; al-Ṭabarī, Taʾrīkh, 3:120 ff.; al-Azdī, Taʾrīkh, 365 ff.; and al-Balād- huri, Ansāb al-Ashraf, 3:248 f.


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