

He does not engage with earlier scholars who have seen the stone thrower at Amida as an onager, and his interpretation of Procopius' "wooden tower" as a trebuchet is debatable. Likewise while he is correct in asserting that the trebuchet serves as a benchmark for tracing subsequent technological diffusion, the related assertion that it required "similar resources and infrastructural support to maintain" as its predecessor (i.e. the onager) might be questioned. The lengthy "Corpus Obsidionum (Catalog of Sieges)" covers pages 457–764 and lists sieges chronologically by the name of the city/fort, the date, with source, secondary literature, and translations, original quotations and/or summaries.

The volume is a major achievement and the author deploys his arguments with a wealth of supporting detail. The "Corpus Obsidionum" will prove a very valuable resource. The assertion of continuity from late Rome to the early middle ages will, however, perhaps not find universal agreement.

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MAAIKE VAN BERKEL, NADIA MARIA EL CHEIKH, HUGH KENNEDY and LETIZIA OSTI:

*Crisis and Continuity at the Abbasid Court: Formal and Informal Politics in the Caliphate of al-Muqtadir (295–320/908–32).*

(Islamic History and Civilization. Studies and Texts.) xiii, 262 pp.

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This recent work on the caliphate of al-Muqtadir (295–320/908–932) is unique in a number of ways and offers much to the field of medieval Islamic studies. That it is a multi-authored work – a rarity today – is the first thing that awakened this reviewer's notice. The authors, each a specialist in Abbasid history, take on the daunting challenge of producing a "polyphonic reading" of a pivotal point in Abbasid caliphal history and succeed in their individual and collective approach. Approaching al-Muqtadir's caliphate from myriad vantage points (e.g. Harem, bureaucracy, military), the authors highlight important institutional developments (formal politics) while also focusing on the impact of key individuals (informal politics) on the socio-political arena. Arising from a series of panels held at the biannual School of 'Abbāsīd Studies, the goal of the work was to revisit the period just prior to the collapse of effective caliphal political power in the early fourth/tenth century and provide an explanation of both its political and cultural dynamism.

The authors divide the work into three sections, each addressing a major aspect of al-Muqtadir's caliphate, with each author writing two chapters. In addition, there are separate introductory and concluding chapters; no specific authors are given for these, leading one to conclude that they were a collaborative effort. Hugh Kennedy provides a helpful timeline at the beginning of the work along with a serviceable map of the region. There is also a useful appendix in which Judith Ahola and Letizia Osti make expert use of textual evidence in a bid to recreate Baghdad during al-Muqtadir's period, including detailed maps. Although Louis XIV's court is often alluded to throughout the work, the authors build upon the early twentieth-century historiography on al-Muqtadir's period, making fresh use of the descriptive (e.g. Miskawayh, 'Arīb, Hilāl al-Šābi') and prescriptive (e.g. manuals,

treatises) textual sources. There is a small amount of overlap between the chapters, but this comes across more as an ongoing conversation among the authors than mere repetition.

Part I, “Histories and stories”, consists of two chapters: chapter 1, by Hugh Kennedy, addresses the entirety of al-Muqtadir’s reign and serves as a strong narrative foundation for the later chapters, introducing readers to the key figures and important events and developments. In addition to making short work of the misogynistic reasoning medieval and (some) modern scholars had used to explain the failure of al-Muqtadir’s reign (a sentiment the other authors of this work convey in their respective chapters), Kennedy’s focus is directed at the central role the *ghilmān*-based military played in the eventual collapse of effective caliphal power. The sentiment Kennedy conveys in his “grand narrative” leading up to and following the “year of destruction” (311/923–4) is that the caliphal administration, although functional, was merely treading water. A disproportionately large military was sapping the dwindling resources of the caliphate, and when challenged by renewed Qarāmīṭa and Byzantine threats, the overtaxed system collapsed. While Kennedy provides an interesting analysis of the comparative accounts dealing with al-Muqtadir’s accession, the abortive coups of Ibn al-Mu‘tazz and al-Qāhir, and al-Muqtadir’s death in 320/932, his attention to the military role in all these affairs stands out. Letizia Osti, who authors chapter 2 (“The Caliph”), addresses the historiographic development of al-Muqtadir’s reign over the centuries. She breaks down the imagery of “the disastrous Caliph” into its constituent parts, providing an interesting analysis of accounts from Ibn Ṭīqṭaqā, al-Mas‘ūdī and others. Issues addressed include al-Muqtadir’s youth – an issue that was used against him well into his caliphate – as well as his personal qualities and vices. The picture that emerges, according to Osti, is that al-Muqtadir comes to represent the failure of the Caliphate in the eyes of the chroniclers.

In Part II, “Scribes and soldiers”, Maaïke van Berkel addresses the vizierate and bureaucracy (chapters 3 and 4) while Hugh Kennedy goes into more detail on the military (chapter 5). In this section we find some internal debate among the authors as van Berkel gives precedence to the role the civilian administration played in al-Muqtadir’s caliphate while Kennedy privileges the military’s influence on affairs. Each of the chapters, however, underscores the complexities and vulnerabilities of both the civilian and military institutions. The intricacies of both systems are laid bare, as are the lives and careers of the key players (e.g. Ibn al-Furṣṭ, ‘Alī b. ‘Īsā, Mu‘nis al-Muzaffar). The descriptions of the military breakdown and payment methods, as well as the interactions among secretarial families and entourages add essential detail to the central focus of the work. Kennedy and van Berkel make expert use of the descriptive and prescriptive material available, laying their respective cases before the readers to judge for themselves.

In the third and final section of the work, “Women and courtiers”, the role of the chamberlain and harem (chapters 5 and 6 by Nadia Maria el Cheikh) and education (chapter 8 by Letizia Osti) address the interesting interplay between the public and private spheres of al-Muqtadir’s reign. The chapters in this section are organized in a similar fashion to those of Part II; the “larger than life” figures (e.g. Shaghab, Umm al-Musa, Naṣr al-Qushūrī) are integrated into a fascinating analysis of diverse avenues to power that were open to many in the court. These avenues, as Osti points out in chapter 8, were open to well-connected scholars too. What we take from these chapters is that the “private” court of al-Muqtadir functioned in many ways like that of the “public” face of the caliphate.

The one irony that sticks out in this ambitious work is that of all the voices represented throughout the chapters, the one that was noticeably missing was that of

al-Muqtadir. As each of the authors addressed the notion of an “absent caliph” at one point or another throughout the work, I believe that this irony was not lost on them. The four authors are to be commended for taking on this unique task and succeeding in integrating their own methodologies and research into a singular study.

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PETRA M. SIJPESTEIJN:

*Shaping a Muslim State: The World of a Mid-Eighth-Century Egyptian Official.*

(Oxford Studies in Byzantium). xxvii, 524 pp. Oxford: Oxford

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*Shaping a Muslim State* is one of the most useful studies on the history of Arab/Islamic Egypt to appear in many years. As the title suggests, it treats the further consolidation of Umayyad imperial control some three generations after the Muslim conquests. It is, in this sense, a significant contribution to Late Antique and early Islamic studies alike. The scholarship on display is admirable: the book is clearly written, closely and sensibly argued, and thoroughly documented (Sijpesteijn’s notes contain very nearly as much information as the main text). One is accustomed to being told that this or that new book is essential reading. The phrase has become hackneyed, which is a shame: one needs it still precisely for this sort of work. There is very much to learn here and, indeed, a single reading of *Shaping a Muslim State* hardly suffices.

On offer, in part, is a close study of a partial second/eighth-century archive from the Fayyum (Arsinoite in the Greek/Byzantine record). It contains thirty-nine letters, the surviving portion of what was certainly a much larger body of documents. Sijpesteijn, a dogged researcher, uncovered these from the holdings at the University of Michigan and other collections, and on the basis of previous discoveries by fellow papyrologists. Oxford University Press, to its credit, chose to reproduce the documents in a set of very legible plates, allowing one, in effect, to read along. This is no easy task given the age and physical condition of the documents and the fact that they were often written in a quick and informal style. It is a further measure of Sijpesteijn’s abilities that she has been able to assemble the archive and make it so readily accessible.

The letters were held by one ‘Abd Allah ibn As‘ad, a previously unknown mid-ranked Arab administrator. The bulk of the letters are those sent to Ibn As‘ad by Najid ibn Muslim, his immediate superior, the pagarch of the Fayyum. These have mostly to do, as one would expect, with the collection and dispersal of tax revenue, although, as Sijpesteijn indicates, they speak as well to the commercial and private affairs of the Arab administrators and their interlocutors. The Arabic literary sources appear to say nothing of either Ibn As‘ad or Najid ibn Muslim: the letters offer all that can be made of their careers in service to the late Umayyad state. There is unfortunately too little therein to allow for more precise dating. Sijpesteijn, in a discussion of *amir*, a term that occurs in a number of the letters, sees it as a reference to the Umayyad governor of Egypt (rather than, say,