

The Meadows of Gold

The Abbasids

by

Mas'udi

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In this selection, Harun al-Rashid worries about which son to appoint as his heir.

THE SUCCESSION

This is what Asma'i relates:

'I found myself near Rashid in the course of one of his evening gatherings and noticed that he was quite extraordinarily agitated. Sometimes he would sit, sometimes lie on his side, at others he would recline and murmur these lines:

Consign the affairs of the worshippers of God
To a trustworthy man who does not vacillate,
One who is devoid of weakness or weariness.
Disdain the advice of flighty minds
Who do not understand what even
The people themselves have understood.

When I heard these words, I guessed that the Caliph was meditating some important plan. Soon, he ordered Masrur, the eunuch:

"Fetch Yahya!"

A few minutes later, Yahya the Barmakid was with him.

"O Yahya," the Caliph said to him, "the Prophet – may the prayers and peace of God be upon him – died without making a will. Islam was then in all the vigour of its youth, the faith was new-born, unity reigned among the tribes, to whom God had given security after fear and power after humiliation. But the tribes were not slow to rebel against Abu Bakr – and you know what happened then. Abu Bakr, having handed on the succession to Umar, the Islamic community recognized him and accepted him as Caliph. But Umar entrusted the choice of his successor to the deliberations of an advisory council and you are not unaware that as a result of the ensuing civil discord, authority was taken from the hands which should have possessed it.

I myself wish to establish the succession. I wish to make certain that it passes to a man whose behaviour I approve and whose actions I respect, to a man whom I am certain will rule ably, without either weakness or fear. I am speaking of Ma'mun.

The choice of the House of Hashim, however, inclines towards Amin, despite the fact that he is a slave to his passions, his whims, which are indeed his sole rule of conduct, and despite the ease with which he dissipates his fortune and consults women – even slave girls – as to his plans.

Ma'mun, on the other hand, deserves only praise. His judgement is sound and

the most important matters can be confided to him. Now, if I show my preference for Ma'mun, I unleash the anger of the House of Hashim against us; if I make Amin my sole heir, I am not confident of his acceptance by the people. Tell me how you see this matter. Give me some advice, the virtue and efficacy of which will be recognized by one and all, for you are – by God's grace – a man of inspired counsel and rare understanding."

"O Commander of the Faithful," replied Yahya, "all faults are forgiveable and all errors can be rectified, except those concerning the succession to the throne, for an error of this kind is full of dangers and such a mistake cannot be undone. But this is neither the time nor the place to talk of it."

Rashid understood that his counsellor wanted to talk with him in private and ordered me to draw aside. I rose and went to sit in a corner where I could hear what was being said. They began a long discussion and their debate lasted all night long. They only parted after having decided that the Caliphate would pass to Ma'mun, after Amin.'

ZUBAIDA'S OPINION

One day, Zubaida came to Rashid and said to him:

'You are unjust to your son Amin. You give him the government of Iraq and (then strip him of supplies and officers – but you give all these things to Ma'mun.'

'And who are you,' replied Rashid, 'to discuss our actions and choose our agents? I have given your son the government of a country at peace and to Ma'mun a country at war. Now the ruler of a rebellious province has far more need of troops than the ruler of one at peace. In any case, we fear your son's intentions towards Ma'mun, but we have no fear regarding Ma'mun's intentions towards your son Amin, should he succeed to the Caliphate.'

Trouble in paradise! Rashid's will is going to be disrupted. Here are Amin's concerns about appointing his son as heir after him instead of his brother al-Ma'mun.

TROUBLE BETWEEN AMIN AND MA'MUN

When Amin was meditating the overthrow of Ma'mun, he sought the advice of Abd Allah ibn Khazim, who answered him:

'O Commander of the Faithful, I beseech you! Do not be the first Caliph who has violated his promise, broken his engagements and trampled his oath of allegiance underfoot.'

'May God silence your tongue!' replied Amin. 'Abd al-Malik ibn Salih was better advised than you when he said: "Two bull camels cannot share the same herd."'

He then gathered his generals and consulted them; all approved of his plans. Only Khuzaima ibn Khazim, when his turn came, spoke as follows:

'O Commander of the Faithful! He who lies to you does not serve your interests and he who tells you the truth does not betray you. Do not encourage your officers to vote for the deposition of your brother, for it is you whom they will one day depose. Do not incite them to break their sworn oath, for later they will violate the oath they swore to you. He who deceives shall be defeated, he who perjures himself shall be betrayed.'

At this point, Ali ibn Isa ibn Mahan* came in. The Caliph said to him, smiling:

'Be the leader of our cause, the eyetooth of our dynasty, you who do not revolt against the Imam and do not violate the obedience which is due to him.'

And he gave him greater honours than any he had bestowed up to that day, to reward him for having been the first of the generals to agree to the deposition of Ma'mun. Next he appointed him to the command of a very numerous army and sent him towards Khurasan.

When Ali ibn Isa ibn Mahan approached Rayy and learned that Tahir ibn Husain was in that town, he cried, convinced that such an adversary could not resist him:

'By God! Tahir is no more than a thorn on one of my branches, a spark of my fire. A man like him is not competent to lead an army. Scarcely will he have glanced at our countless host and he will be a dead man. Can the lamb stand up to the horns of the ram? Does the fox dare face the onslaught of the lion?'

As his son was advising him to send scouts on ahead in order to find a favourable place to pitch camp, Ali replied:

'To fight such a one as Tahir there is no need for elaborate plans, precautions or prudence. He cannot escape from these alternatives: either he will entrench

himself at Rayy and the inhabitants, rising against him, will do our work; or else he will leave the shelter of his walls and at the mere approach of our cavalry will take flight.'

When his son replied: 'A spark can well become a blaze!' Ali cried:

'Hold your tongue! Tahir is not a rival worthy of me! Brave men are concerned only with enemies that are their equals.'

Then, continuing on his march, Ali ibn Isa ibn Mahan reached the town of Rayy with his army. Once there, he saw with what care Tahir had fortified it and prepared it for battle, and he turned off to the right and pitched camp in a nearby village. While his troops were spreading over the countryside, Tahir, at the head of 4,000 horsemen, came out to assess the strength of his enemy's troops. Convinced that he would not be able to get the better of such a numerous and well equipped army, he announced to his officers:

'We will fight like the Kharijites.'*

So he divided his cavalry into squadrons and himself marched against the main force of the enemy with 700 horsemen drawn from Khwarizm and Khurasan.

A brave horseman rode out to challenge him. It was Abbas ibn Laith, the freedman of Mahdi. Tahir swooped down upon him, holding his sword in both hands, and Abbas was overthrown. At the same moment, a certain Dawud Siyah – David the Black – threw himself on the general Ali ibn Isa ibn Mahan, who was riding a chestnut horse, and in the confusion cut him down with a single stroke of the sword. The soldiers then flung themselves on Ali, fighting over his ring and his head. A certain Tahir ibn al-Raji cut his throat. Another seized a tuft of hair from his beard and a third his ring. The blow of the sword which Tahir struck with both hands against Abbas ibn Laith was the cause of the flight of the army of Baghdad and its defeat. From that time, in memory of his way of striking, Tahir was nicknamed Dhu al-Yaminain, 'The Man with Two Right Hands'.

Here is the account of Ahmad ibn Hisham, one of the commanders of Ma'mun's army:

'I went to Tahir's quarters. He thought I had been killed in the battle. My page was carrying Ali ibn Isa's head in a nosebag, which he threw down in front of Tahir. Soon the body of this general arrived, the hands and feet tied together as one ties up a beast of burden that has just died. Tahir had these remains thrown down a well, then he wrote of his triumph to Fadl ibn Sahl, Dhu al-Riyasatayn, in the following words:

'May God grant you long life and may He overthrow your enemies! As I write these lines, I have before me the head of Ali ibn Isa ibn Mahan, and his ring is on my finger. Glory to God, Lord of the Worlds!'

Ma'mun received this news with delight and it was from that day that he was addressed by the title of Caliph.

MISCELLANEOUS ANECDOTES

The pact concluded between Amin and Ma'mun, dictated by Rashid, was deposited in the Ka'ba and it set forth that whichever of the two should betray his brother was to be considered as having forfeited his rights and the Caliphate was to belong to the one who had been the object of the treachery.

Yasir, one of the eunuchs and confidential advisors of Zubaida, tells how she went to her son Amin in floods of tears during the siege of Baghdad. He spoke to her as follows:

'Silence! It is not with the worries and despairs of women that crowns are bound on. The affairs of the Caliphate cannot be sustained by the breasts of wet-nurses. Away! Away!'

It is also said that Tahir, who considered Amin a weak character, was walking one day in his garden when he received a letter in the hand of Amin himself, which was framed as follows:

'In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate! Know, Tahir, that since our accession, whosoever has revolted against our authority has expiated his crime at the sword's edge. Tremble therefore for your life—or else give up your plan.'

He who tells the story adds:

'This letter seemed to produce a lingering impression on Tahir, for later, when he returned to Khurasan, he showed it to his intimates and said to them:

'By God! This is not the letter of a weakling, but of a man who has been led astray.'

There have not been, from the past until the present year of 332 AH/ 944 AD, any other Caliphs born of Hashimite fathers and mothers, except Ali ibn Abi Talib and Muhammad ibn Zubaida (Amin). This is why the poet Abu al-Ghul,* speaking of the latter, said:

A king whose father and mother were both
From the source from which burst forth
Muhammad, the dazzling light of our Nation.
They drank, in the protection of the valleys
Of Mecca, the pure, unmixed waters of prophecy.

VI:435-436

§§ 2639-2642

Eventually al-Ma'mun besieged Baghdad. The only defenders are the townspeople who support al-Amin, but have no weapons. The result is predictable.

THE NAKED ARMY

Harthama ibn A'yan sent Zuhair ibn Musayyab al-Dabbi from his camp in the eastern quarter to occupy al-Matir near Kalwadha. He levied a tithe on all boats laden with merchandise coming from Basra and Wasit. Next, he set up mangonels directed against Baghdad and made camp in the marshes at Kalwadha and al-Jazira.

As the people suffered from his assaults, gangs of vagabonds and prisoners marched against Zuhair. They went into battle almost naked, wearing only short trousers or drawers. They had made themselves a sort of helmet out of plaited palm-leaves, which they called *khūdh*. Their shields were made of these same leaves and of reed mats coated with tar and stuffed with sand and gravel.

Each band of ten men was commanded by an *'arīf*, ten *'arīf* by a *naqīb*, ten *naqīb* by a *qā'id*, and ten *qā'id* by an amir. Each of these officers had human mounts, proportionate to the number of men he commanded. Thus the *'arīf* had, as well as his soldiers, a certain number of men who served as horses. Similarly, the *naqīb*, the *qā'id* and the amir had as mounts men who were naked, with bells and pompoms of red and yellow wool round their necks. They had bridles and bits and had made themselves horse-tails out of brooms and fly-whisks. The *'arīf* went against the enemy mounted on one of these men and preceded by ten soldiers, each wearing his palm-leaf helmet and carrying a reed-mat shield. The *naqīb*, the *qā'id* and the amir marched into battle with similar equipages.

The curious gathered in large numbers to watch the battles of these men against the horsemen on the other side, who were excellently mounted and provided with breast-plates, coats of mail and armour, including arm-guards and armed with lances and leather Tibetan shields.

The struggle between the naked soldiers and the forces armed as we have described began. At first the battle turned against Zuhair, but reinforcements arrived from Harthama and the naked warriors fled. The men who were acting as horses shed their riders and, with swords at their backs, all fled behind the ramparts of the city.

A great number of dead drawn both from among the combatants and the onlookers were left on the field of battle. The following lines by the blind poet describe the attack led by Zuhair, with the help of his mangonels, and the massacre of the crowd and the naked soldiers:

The Naked Army

Do not go near the mangonels or the stones,
For you saw the corpse they are laying in the grave;
It is that of a man who came out early in the morning
To see the show. The only news he left with was his death.
He didn't want to learn the result of the battle
From hearsay; little did he know what fate had in store.
You who work the mangonels, what have you done?
It is your hands that have taken his life;
You cannot give it back to him. This
Was not the outcome he hoped for, but alas
Man's wishes are powerless against fate.

Assorted anecdotes about al-Ma'mun after the civil war.

THE CALIPH AND THE POET

Mubarrad and Tḥa'lab* relate that Kulthum al-Attabi was standing at the door of Ma'mun when Yahya ibn Aktham went by. Kulthum said to him:

'Would you tell the Caliph I am here?'

'I am not a chamberlain,' said Yahya.

'I know,' retorted the poet, 'but you are a man of merit and a man of merit is a man who helps.'

'But you are taking me out of my way.'

'God,' proceeded Kulthum, 'has given you rank and fortune. These two blessings will increase if you are grateful; if you are ungrateful, they will wane. I am today more generous to you than you are to yourself, since I am offering you an opportunity to increase your good luck and you are turning it down. Anyway, the title has to be paid on everything, and a powerful man works off his share by giving to those in need of assistance.'

So Yahya went in and told Ma'mun the story and he had Kulthum brought into his presence. Ishaq ibn Ibrahim al-Mawsili was present at the audience. Ma'mun invited the newcomer to sit down and asked after his health and his affairs. He replied with a felicity of expression and an elegance which charmed the Caliph. Ma'mun then began to make jokes, and the old man, feeling that he was being treated lightly, said:

'O Commander of the Faithful, you have to fondle them before they will give milk.'

Ma'mun did not understand what the poet meant and looked at Ishaq, who tipped him a wink. Then the Caliph said:

'A thousand dinars!'

They were brought and set down in front of Kulthum. Then he continued with his conversation, egging Ishaq on to make fun of their guest. Ishaq therefore began to contradict him, whatever topic of conversation came up, and never allowed him the last word. Kulthum was very surprised at this and not realizing whom he was talking to, said:

'Would you permit me, O Commander of the Faithful, to ask this man his name and lineage?'

'Go ahead!' said the Caliph.

Then Kulthum said:

'Who are you, and what is your name?'

'I belong to the human race,' answered Ishaq, 'and my name is Kul Basal –

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"Eat Onions".'

'As to your descent,' replied Kulthum, 'that is obvious. But your name is unbelievable. No one is called "Kul Basal".'

'Oh, how unfair!' burst out Ishaq. 'Isn't Kulthum – "Eat Garlic" – a name? And onions taste better than garlic.'

'Curse you!' cried the poet. 'Here is a finely salted wit! No, I have never come across anyone more amusing to talk to. Would the Commander of the Faithful allow me to offer him the present with which he has honoured me, for truly, he has defeated me.'

'No,' said Ma'mun, 'keep your part intact. We are going to give him an equal sum.'

Ishaq then went back to his house and kept the poet with him there for the rest of the day.

MA'MUN JUSTIFIES HIMSELF TO THE SUFIS

According to Yahya ibn Aktham, the Caliph Ma'mun presided over a discussion on jurisprudence every Tuesday.

When the jurisconsults and other scholars presented themselves for their debate with him, they were shown into a room spread with carpets and told:

'Remove your shoes!'

Next a meal was served and it was announced:

'Partake of food and drink, then wash again, and if anyone's shoes are uncomfortable, take them off, and if anyone's *qalansuwa* – headdress – is too heavy, remove it.'

When the meal was over, braziers were brought and incense burned. They breathed in the fragrance and scented their garments. Next, they went to Ma'mun who invited them to draw near and began the most delightful and moderate discussions, quite devoid of arrogance or pedantry. This continued until sundown, when a second meal was served and, after eating their fill, they went away.

Yahya proceeded with his story as follows:

'One day, the Caliph was in such a meeting when his chamberlain, Ali ibn Salih, came in and said:

"Commander of the Faithful, a man wearing white clothes of coarse cloth, worn tucked up, is at the threshold of the palace. He asks to be allowed in so as to take part in the debate."

I understood that it was some sufi and wanted to make a sign to the Caliph not to let him in, but he forestalled me and said:

"Give him permission to enter."

A man entered whose robe was tucked up and who was holding his sandals in his hand. He stood at the edge of the carpet and said:

"Greetings! May the mercy of God and His blessings be upon you!"

Ma'mun returned his salutation and the stranger asked:

"Would you permit me to draw near?"

"Do so," said Ma'mun, "and be seated."

Once the man had taken his place, he said:

"May I speak?"

"Speak of whatever you wish," replied Ma'mun, "but in such a way as to be

approved by God."

The stranger proceeded thus:

"Do you owe this throne upon which you sit to the unanimous agreement and full consent of the Muslims, or do you owe it to the violence you have used against them, abusing your strength and power?"

Ma'mun answered:

"I owe it neither to their consent, nor yet to the use of violence. A ruler who, before me, had charge of the Muslims and whom they supported whether they wished to or not, handed on to me and to another the exercise of this authority after his death. He had those who were present swear to recognize it and he demanded on my behalf and on behalf of another the oath from the pilgrims assembled at the inviolable House of God in Mecca – and, willingly or unwillingly, they swore it. He who together with me had been invested with power followed the road on which he had started out and when I came to power I felt the need to be recognized by the Muslim people of both east and west with their unanimous and freely expressed approbation, but, after having reflected, I believed that if I left them to their own devices the rope of Islam would unravel, trust in oaths would vanish and the state be broken up. I realized that evil-doing and disorder would prevail in the midst of civil discord, Almighty God's laws would lose their strength, that access to the Holy House would become impossible and the war against the unbelievers would be abandoned, since my subjects would no longer be united under one authority which would direct them. Lastly, brigands would infest the roads and the weak would be handed over, defenceless, to the oppressor. I have, therefore, taken power in order to protect the Muslims, fight their enemies and ensure the safety of the highways, and so I will lead the Muslims by the hand until they choose, by their unanimous will and approbation, a leader who pleases them and I can resign my authority into his hands and become a simple subject, like any other Muslim. Be, therefore, my representative in the community of the Muslims and when they are unanimous in their choice, I will abdicate in his favour."

"May peace be upon you!" replied the unknown man, "and may God grant you His mercy and His blessings!"

And he went away.

Ma'mun told the chamberlain Ali ibn Salih to have him followed in order to find out where he would go. The chamberlain fulfilled his mission and returned and said:

"Commander of the Faithful, I sent someone to follow this man. He went to a mosque, where fifteen men like him and wearing similar clothes were assembled.

"Well, have you seen the man?" they asked him.

"Yes," he answered.

"What did he say?"

"Nothing but good. He said that he held the government of the Muslims in his hands to assure the safety of the roads, to uphold the pilgrimage and the holy war, to protect the weak against the oppressor and to prevent the violation of the holy

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Ma'mun Justifies Himself to the Sufis

laws, but, that when the people should cast their votes for a leader unanimously chosen, he would hand over the power to this last and abdicate in his favour.'

'We can see no harm in that,' replied those who were listening. Then they parted."

Ma'mun then turned to me and said:

"Yahya, we have satisfied these people using the simplest language."

I answered:

"My lord, I give thanks to God, who inspired you in the choice and honesty of your words as well as your actions."

VII:38-43

§§ 2726-2728

(Omitted: VII:43-49; §§ 2728-2734. The misdemeanours of the qadi of Basra, Yahya, and his relations with Ma'mun.)