

The Meadows of Gold

The Abbasids

by

Mas'udi

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ABU JA'FAR MANSUR

Abu Ja'far Abd Allah ibn Muhammad ibn Ali ibn Abd Allah ibn al-Abbas ibn Abd al-Muttalib, known as Mansur, was proclaimed Caliph while he was on the way to Mecca. His uncle, Isa ibn Ali, received the oath of allegiance first in the name of Mansur and then in the name of Isa ibn Musa, who was to be his successor, on Sunday*, 12 Dhu al-Hijja, 136 AH/754 AD. Mansur was then forty-one years old, since he was born in the month of Dhu al-Hijja in 95 AH/713 AD. His mother was a Berber slave girl called Sallama. He died on Saturday, 6 Dhu al-Hijja, 158 AH/775 AD, having ruled twenty-two years less nine days. He was on the pilgrimage and had nearly reached Mecca, when death surprised him at a place called 'The Garden of the Bani Amir', on the high road to Iraq. He was then sixty-three years old. They buried him at Mecca, his face uncovered because he was wearing the *ihram*.

According to another version, however, he died at al-Batha', near the Well of Maimun, in which case he would have been buried at al-Hajun, in the sixty-fifth year of his age.

They say that his mother Sallama said:

'When I was pregnant with Mansur, I saw in my dreams a lion which emerged from my side and crouched, roaring, his tail beating the ground, while from all around lions appeared and, gathering about him, bowed their heads to the ground.'

According to Mada'ini, Mansur himself told the following story:

'On my way to Syria, I had as travelling companion a blind man* who was going to offer Marwan ibn Muhammad a poem he had composed in his honour. I expressed a wish to hear it, and he recited:

Would that I knew where the scent of musk had gone!
The happiness we knew at al-Khaif has vanished
Since the passing of the Banu Umayya
And the chiefs of the Abd Shams.
They preached from the *minbars* like champions,
Never were their voices stilled.
Their words were beyond criticism;
They went straight to the heart,

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Without ambiguity. They were full
Of forbearance, and even when
Restraint was despised, their
Faces shone like freshly minted gold.

'This poet,' continued Mansur, 'had hardly finished when, by God, I felt as if someone had struck me. Nevertheless his conversation was pleasant and he was an experienced travelling companion.'

'Later, in the year 141 AH/758 AD, I was performing the pilgrimage. In fulfilment of a vow, I had dismounted at al-Hamara, between the two hills of Zarud, and was walking on foot across the sands when once again I came across my blind man. I signed to my escort to stay behind, went up to him, took his hand and greeted him.'

"Who are you?" he asked. "And may God take my life in place of yours! I am not quite sure I know you."

"It is I," I said, "your companion on the road to Syria in the days of the Umayyads, when you were on your way to Marwan."

'At once he greeted me and, sighing, recited the following lines:

The women of the House of Umayya lament,
For their daughters are orphaned.
Their good fortune slept, their stars set,
For fortune does sleep and stars do set.
Their high *minbars* are vacant;
May peace be upon them until I die.

"How much did Marwan give you?" I asked the poet.

"He made me rich. Having entreated him, I will never have to entreat another."

"But how much?" I insisted.

"Four thousand dinars, a gala robe and two riding camels."

"Where was this?" I asked.

"At Basra," he answered.

"Do you recognize me now?" I asked.

"As my travelling companion, yes, but by my life, I know nothing of your family."

"I am Abu Ja'far Mansur, the Commander of the Faithful."

"O Commander of the Faithful," he replied, trembling, "forgive me, for your cousin Muhammad, may the prayers and peace of God be upon him, has said: 'Hearts are steeped in love for those who do them good, in hate for those who bring them ill.'"

Abu Ja'far Mansur ended his story as follows:

'My first thought was to punish him and then I thought of the fact that he was sacrosanct because of his status as pilgrim and travelling companion. I ordered

Musayyab to free him and it was done. Later, in the evening, I wanted to enjoy }
his conversation and had him sought. But the desert had swallowed him up.' ✓

A CONVERSATION WITH THE KING OF NUBIA

Fadl ibn al-Rabi' tells us:

At a gathering before Mansur, at which Isa ibn Ali, Isa ibn Musa ibn Muhammad ibn Ali, Salih ibn Ali, Qutham ibn al-Abbas, Muhammad ibn Ja'far and Muhammad ibn Ibrahim were present, the conversation turned to the Umayyad Caliphs, their conduct, the policies they followed and the reason their power was stripped from them. Mansur said:

'Abd al-Malik was an arrogant tyrant who did not care what he did. Sulaiman's only ambition lay in his belly and his balls. Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz was like a one-eyed man among the blind. The only great man of the dynasty was Hisham. As long as their standards remained high and their conduct not base, the Umayyads held the government which had been given to them with a firm hand, protecting, preserving and guarding the gift granted them by God. But then their power passed to their effeminate sons, whose only ambition was the satisfaction of their desires and who chased after pleasures forbidden by Almighty God. They knew not that God works slowly and believed themselves safe from His snares, although they had renounced their right to the Caliphate and had made light of God's truths and the duties of good government. Then God stripped them of their power, covered them with shame and deprived them of their worldly goods.'

Salih ibn Ali then said:

'O Commander of the Faithful, when Abd Allah, the son of Marwan fled to the land of the Nubians with a small number of followers, the king of that country asked them about their position and state, and what had befallen them, and how they had comported themselves. When he had collected this information, he rode to see Abd Allah, and questioned him on various events involving him and his family, including the causes of their disgrace. He said things which I can no longer remember, after which he expelled him from his country. The Commander of the Faithful could summon Abd Allah and have him tell his adventures himself.'

As a result of this, Mansur had Abd Allah brought from prison and when he stood before him, he said:

'Abd Allah, tell me your story and the story of the King of Nubia.'

Abd Allah replied as follows:

'O Commander of the Faithful, I had been in Nubia three days when the king

A Conversation with the King of Nubia

came to see me. Although I had had a valuable carpet spread out for him, he sat on the ground. I asked him why he refused to sit on our carpet and he replied:

'Because I am a king and the duty of a king is to humble himself before the power of God, who has made him great.'

Then he said to me:

'Why do you drink wine when your Book forbids it?'

I answered.

'Our slaves and our followers have the audacity to do so.'

'Why,' he went on, 'do you allow your cavalry to trample the fields when your Book has forbidden you destruction?'

'These are again our slaves and our followers, who have behaved thus in their ignorance.'

'Why,' proceeded the king, 'do you wear brocade and silk and gold, in spite of the prohibitions of your Book and your religion?'

I retorted:

'As power fled from us, we called upon the support of alien races who have entered our faith and we have adopted these clothes from them.'

The King bowed his head in silence, sometimes fidgeting, at others scratching in the sand, while he murmured:

'Our slaves . . . our followers . . . foreigners who have embraced our faith!'

Then he lifted his head and said:

'It is not the way you tell it! No! Your people permitted themselves what God forbade. You broke God's commandments and oppressed those you ruled. Then God stripped you of your power and dressed you in the ignominy of your crimes. The limit of God's vengeance cannot be known. I fear that his punishment may fall upon you while you are in my country, and strike me along with you. The rights of the guest last for three days. Take the provisions you need and ride out of my country.'

I obeyed his order.

This story made a great impression on Mansur. He reflected a while in silence and took pity on his prisoner and decided to free him, but Isa ibn Ali reminded him that the man had already received the oath of allegiance as Marwan's heir and he had him led back to prison.

LOYALTY TO HISHAM

In the tenth year of the Caliphate of Mansur, 148 AH/765 AD, Abu Abd Allah Ja'far ibn Muhammad ibn Ali ibn Husain ibn Ali ibn Abi Talib died. He was buried at the cemetery of al-Baqi', with his father and grandfather. He was sixty-five years old and it is said that he was poisoned. Their tomb in the cemetery of al-Baqi' is sealed by a slab bearing this inscription:

'In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. Glory be to God who shall raise up the nations and make dry bones live! Here is the tomb of Fatima, the daughter of the Messenger of God, may the prayers and peace of God be upon him, the Queen of all the women of the world; the tomb of Hasan ibn Ali ibn Abi Talib; the tomb of Ali ibn al-Husain ibn Ali; the tomb of Muhammad ibn Ali, and that of Ja'far ibn Muhammad, may God be content with them all!'

After having first employed Ibn Atiyya al-Bahili as vizier, the Caliph Abu Ja'far Mansur gave these duties to Abu Ayyub al-Muriyani, who came from Khuzistan. He had decided in Abu Ayyub's favour for several reasons, among them that he had served as secretary to Sulaiman ibn Habib ibn al-Muhallab, who had condemned Mansur to be whipped. He wanted to flog Mansur to pieces, but his secretary, Abu Ayyub, managed to rescue him. This was the origin of the close relationship between the two. Nevertheless, after appointing him vizier, Mansur suspected him of various crimes, above all extortion and treachery. For a long time he meditated his ruin. Every time the vizier entered the Caliph's presence, he thought his time had come, yet every time he withdrew safe and sound. It was this which led people to say that he carried with him a magic ointment with which he took care to anoint his eyebrows before appearing before Mansur – and hence the popular expression, 'the ointment of Abu Ayyub'. Nevertheless, he perished in the end, and Aban ibn Sadaqa acted as secretary to the Caliph until he died.

The military tactics employed by Hisham in one of the campaigns which he had waged were mentioned in the presence of Mansur, who thereupon sent for a certain person living in the town of Rusafa, founded by Hisham, in order to question him about them. When the man was brought before him, the Caliph asked:

'You were one of Hisham's officers?'

'Yes, O Commander of the Faithful,' the man replied.

'Well then,' continued Mansur, 'explain to me his manoeuvres, undertaken in the war of such-and-such a year.'

Loyalty to Hisham

The officer replied:

'He did such and such, may God be pleased with him! He manoeuvred in such and such a way, may God have mercy upon him!'

These phrases of blessing angered Mansur.

'Get out!' he cried, 'And may God's wrath fall upon you! You tread my carpets with your feet and yet you dare call down blessings on the memory of my enemy!'

The old man rose, muttering:

'Your enemy fastened about my neck a necklace of gratitude which will be torn away only by him who washes my corpse.'

Mansur ordered him back and asked:

'What did you say?'

'Hisham', answered the old man, 'gave me a place secure from want and saved my face from the shame of beggary. Since I first saw him, I have needed to knock at no door, whether of Arab or Persian. Is it not, then, my duty to bless his name and perpetuate his memory?'

'It is well!' cried the Caliph. 'Blessed be the mother who bore you! I bear witness that you are born of one who was never a slave and are the descendant of a noble house!'

And after having listened to his account, he ordered him to be given a sum payable at the treasury.

'Commander of the Faithful,' said the old officer, 'I accept, not from need but because your gifts honour and your generosity sheds lustre upon the recipient.'

He therefore accepted the gift and Mansur said to him:

'Man beloved by God, die when you like; you belong to God, and if your people had none but you, you would be the cause of their lasting renown.'

And turning to his courtiers after the man had gone, he added:

'It is towards such men that generosity is beautiful and gifts well given and liberality praiseworthy. Would that I had men like him in my army!'

IN THE AUDIENCE HALL

One day Ma'n ibn Za'ida entered the presence of Mansur, who, when he saw him, said:

'Well, Ma'n, so it was you who gave one hundred thousand dirhams to Marwan ibn Abi Hafsa for this line:

Ma'n ibn Za'ida! Through him the Bani Shaiban
Heaps nobility upon nobility!

'Not at all, O Commander of the Faithful,' retorted Ma'n, 'the verses I rewarded were these:

At the battle of Al-Hashimiya*
You stood forth boldly with your sword
Before the vicar of the Merciful One.
You protected him and defended his life
Against the attack of lances
And sharp-bladed swords.'

'You did well, Ma'n,' said the Caliph.

It should be explained that Ma'n had been one of the companions of Yazid ibn Umar ibn Hubaira and he remained hidden until the insurrection of the Hashimiya, when a number of the people of Khurasan rioted. Ma'n, turbaned and with his face concealed, appeared at the scene of the uprising. When he saw that the crowd was about to attack Mansur, he threw himself, sword in hand, between them and the Caliph and when he had driven them off and put them to flight, Mansur said: 'Who are you?'

He uncovered his face and said:

'I am he for whom you were searching – Ma'n ibn Za'ida!'

Mansur did not let him leave until he had granted him an amnesty, a reward, and dressed him in robes of honour and conferred upon him a rank.

This same Ma'n went one day to Mansur, who said to him:

'How quick people are to envy your House!'

To which he replied:

'O Commander of the Faithful:

In the Audience Hall

Small birds envy the crane;
Who envies the low-born man?

According to Ibn Ayyash, known as al-Mantuf, 'He Who Plucks His Beard', Mansur was sitting one day looking out over the Tigris from the audience hall above the Khurasan Gate in the new town which he had just built and which bore his name: Madinat al-Mansur, The City of Mansur – in other words, Baghdad. Each of the gates, above the vault, had an audience hall with a view over the surrounding countryside. These gates, four in number, opened onto the principal streets, which were also vaulted and arched. They remain to our day, which is 332 AH/944 AD.

The first, the Khurasan Gate, was called 'The Dynasty Gate', because the dynasty of the Abbasids had its origins in Khurasan. Next came the Damascus Gate, facing Damascus, the Kufa Gate and the Basra Gate, so called because they led to those towns. I have described elsewhere the circumstances under which Mansur built this city and why he chose this site which lies between the Tigris and the Euphrates, and the Dujail and the Sarat – two canals branching off from the Euphrates. I have told the story of the founding of Baghdad, and why it was called by his name, and what people have said about it, described the Green Dome and its collapse in my own time, and given the legend of that other green dome built by Hajjaj in the city of Wasit, where it can still be seen in this year of 332 AH-944 AD. For all this information, see my *Intermediate History*, which this volume is only intended to supplement.

Mansur was sitting, then, in the audience hall over the Khurasan Gate when an arrow shot from who knows where landed at his feet. Mansur was terrified. Then he picked it up and began to twist it around in his hands. Between two of the vanes he read these lines:

Do you expect to live till Judgement Day?
Do you imagine there will be no Final Reckoning?
You will be asked to answer for your sins –
And then questioned on the state of the Believers.

Beside one of the vanes, Mansur read these lines:

When the days are fine, you are perfectly carefree
And do not fear the evil fate will bring;
Nights reassure you, but you are deluded;
For a clear night often brings grief.

And by the other vane:

Destiny takes its course, so be patient,
For nothing lasts. One day Fortune lifts

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A poor wretch to the skies;
The next, the mighty fall.

Finally, one of the arrow's sides bore the words: 'Hamadan – a man from this town is held unjustly in your prisons.'

Without a moment's delay, Mansur sent a number of his officers to search the prisons and dungeons of the town. In one of the cells of the gaol they found an old man near whom burned a lamp. A length of cloth was hung as a kind of curtain over the entrance to his cell. He was loaded with chains and facing Mecca and repeating this verse: 'Those who oppress will learn what misfortune has been prepared for them.' (Koran 26:227)

They asked him where he was from and when he said 'Hamadan', they took him at once to the Caliph. Questioned by Mansur, he answered that he came from Hamadan and that he was one of the leading men of the city.

'Your governor,' he added, 'on arriving in our country, learned that I owned a domain worth a million dirhams. He wanted to take it from me and when I would not let him, he clapped me in irons and sent me here to you on a charge of rebellion. It is for that reason that I was thrown into a dungeon.'

'How long have you been there?' asked Mansur.

'The past four years.'

The Caliph immediately had his chains struck off and ordered him to be treated with respect. He was given his liberty and allotted the best quarters. Then Mansur called him back and said:

'O Shaikh, I return your estate to you exempt of taxes for the whole of your lifetime and as long as I shall live. Furthermore, I appoint you governor of Hamadan, your homeland, and I deliver the man that was governor into your hands – he is at your mercy and I authorize you to treat him as you will.'

After thanking the Caliph and offering prayers for his long reign, the old man said:

'O Commander of the Faithful, I accept the estate, but I am not fit for the position of governor which you have offered me. As for the governor, I forgive him.'

Mansur gave him another large sum of money and splendid presents, and, when he took his leave, had him escorted to his country with due honour, after dismissing the governor and punishing him for having set aside the canons of justice and for having stepped off the high road of truth. In addition, he invited the old man to correspond with him and inform him of his state and that of his country and to shed light on the behaviour of his agents, especially as regards matters of war and taxes.

It was on this occasion that he recited these lines:

A man cannot trust Fate for a day,
For fate is both sweet and bitter;

In the Audience Hall

However long their good luck lasts,
All creatures are at the end cut down.

VI:168-175
§§ 2380-2386

(Omitted: VI:176-220; §§ 2387-2430. The revolt and assassination of Abu Muslim and its aftermath; Heretics; Alid revolts and their consequences; Mansur preaches; Amr ibn Ubaid; The death of Abd Allah ibn Ali with his slave girl; Of tyrants.)

THE DEATH OF MANSUR

Mansur was born in the same year that Hajjaj ibn Yusuf died, that is, 95 AH/713 AD. He often used to say:

'I was born in the month of Dhu al-Hijja, I was circumcized in that month and in that month I succeeded to the Caliphate; I believe that in that month I shall die.'

It came to pass just as he predicted.

Fadl ibn al-Rabi' tells the following story:

'I was with Mansur on the journey on which he died. When he reached one of the halting-places along the way, he sent for me. I found him sitting in a domed chamber, his face turned to the wall. He said:

"Didn't I tell you not to let the common people come into these rooms and write ill-omened things?"

"What is it, O Commander of the Faithful?" I asked.

"Don't you see what is written on the wall?:

Abu Ja'far, you are about to die, your years are up;

God's commandment has been revealed.

Abu Ja'far, can a soothsayer or astrologer put off

God's judgement? Or are you steeped in ignorance?"

"By God," I replied, "I see nothing written on the wall. Its surface is clean and white."

"Swear by God!," he said.

"I swear!"

"By God," he continued, "then my soul is warned that she may prepare for her near departure. Let us make haste to reach the sacred places of my Lord and His protection, fleeing my excesses and my sins."

We went on our way, which was very painful for the Caliph. When we reached the Well of Maimun, I said to him: "This is the Well of Maimun. You have entered consecrated ground." He uttered these words:

"God be praised!"

And he died that very day!

THE CHARACTER OF MANSUR

Mansur's prudence, the rectitude of his judgement and the excellence of his policies are beyond all description. He did not avoid the most extravagant generosity when there was something to be had in exchange, but he would refuse the smallest favour if granting it entailed loss. Like Ziyad, he might have said:

'If I had 1,000 camels and one became leprous, I would care for it as if I had only that one alone.'

He left 600,000,000 dirhams and 14,000,000 dinars. This great fortune did not prevent him from being miserly, nor did it prevent him from going into details which even a commoner ignores. Thus, he contracted with his cook that the latter should keep the heads, feet and skins, in exchange for providing the firewood and seasonings.

VI:221-222

§ 2431

(Omitted: VI: 222-223; §§ 2432-2434. Mansur's family; His wives and children enumerated. 'The more interesting anecdotes on Mansur and . . . other figures, together with his conversation and speeches, his life and the actions of his government are told at length with all their most interesting details in our Historical Annals and Intermediate History. Here we give only an outline, while calling the reader's attention to our earlier works. All help comes from God!')