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Politics of Access at the Court of the Caliph

Maaïke van Berkel

Introduction

In the Abbasid Empire (eighth-tenth centuries), the caliph's ear was the key to power. Anyone seeking political power at the highest level had to gain access to the caliph in some way or another, through personal interaction or intermediaries. Narratives describing the functioning of the court of the caliph pay lengthy attention to the rules and regulations orchestrating the accessibility of the ruler.

Court studies increasingly pursue questions on the accessibility of the pre-modern ruler. Most of these studies analyse European court cultures, discussing topics such as the balance between the prince's seclusion and his public display, the rituals related to the various forms of access, and the relations between ideas on access and the spatial arrangements of the palace.¹ For the pre-modern Middle East, most studies covering these topics focus on the Ottoman rulers and their court culture.² However, miscellaneous studies also deal with earlier eras. The accessibility of the Abbasid caliphs has so far received most attention in studies on the position of courtiers regulating access, especially chamberlains and eunuchs.³

Contemporary narratives on the politics of accessibility at the Abbasid court convey two seemingly contradictory messages. On the one hand, (ideal) descriptions of court life emphasise the numerous impediments outsiders encounter while trying to approach the caliph. They stress the spatial segregations within the palace, between the inhabitants of the palace and the outside world, and the role of the court attendants protecting the caliph from the world outside his private chambers. The ruler's inaccessibility and the selectness of the group of favourites able to approach him are pivotal elements in these narratives. However, a second discourse stresses (the ideal of) the accessible ruler who is personally dealing with the redress of wrongs and therefore

1 See, for example, Adamson (1999); Raeymaekers (2016); Starkey (1987); Weiser (2003).

2 See, for example, Necipoglu (1991); Sievert (2011); Talbot (2016).

3 See, for example, El Cheikh (2013); El Cheikh (2005).

constantly approachable for his people and the world outside his palace. Both discourses will be discussed in more detail in the first part of this chapter.

Whereas both discourses receive equal attention in contemporary characterisations of the politics of most Abbasid caliphs, the narratives on the eighteenth Abbasid caliph, al-Muqtadir (r. 906-932), focus almost exclusively on one ideal. Al-Muqtadir is presented as being protected by barriers and staff and almost inaccessible for any outsider. Is the ideal of the approachable caliph in decline in his age, an era characterised by political fragmentations and financial troubles? By analysing and contextualising the narratives on caliph al-Muqtadir's (in)accessibility and the messages they try to convey, the second part of this chapter will argue that the model of accessible rulership did not disappear, but was transferred to members of the caliph's entourage.

Models of Accessible and Distant Leadership

In his article on the court of the Prophet Muhammad, "Did the Prophet Keep Court," Michael Cook argues that on the basis of the account of Ibn Hisham (d. 833), historian and biographer of the Prophet Muhammad, we may draw the conclusion that Muhammad did not want to regulate or restrict access to him.⁴ There were no gate-keepers stopping and screening people at the entrance to the Medina mosque, there was no one guiding visitors and regulating access to the Prophet, Muhammad did not distinguish himself from the rest of the people in the mosque (in dressing or in seating), and no elaborate protocol existed to approach him. This style of open, accessible, leadership, Cook argues, is compatible with the style attributed to Muhammad in other (later) narratives and might thus seem plausible. On the other hand, Cook warns that there is reason for caution since "the tradition may not be innocent of conveying an appealing image of prophetic simplicity" as a way to criticise later court culture.⁵

If accessibility and simplicity were the ideal example of early Islam, how then did later rulers legitimise their pomp and inaccessibility and from where did our second model, the unapproachable majestic ruler, emanate? In her book on hierarchy and egalitarianism in Islamic thought, Louise Marlow demonstrates the co-existence in Islamic societies of, on the one hand, the egalitarian ideals associated with the Qur'an and the tribal past of the early Muslim community, and, on the other hand, the more hierarchical social models of the

4 Cook (2011) 23-29.

5 Cook (2011) 26. See also Morris (2017).

cultures the Muslims conquered, especially the Iranian court culture of gate-keeping, screening, regulating access, and protocol.⁶ According to Marlow, the Iranian hierarchical models entered the Muslim literature from the late Umayyad period (the second quarter of the eighth century) onwards.

Corroborating Marlow's argument, the Buyid secretary Hilal al-Sabi' (d. 1056) attests in his *Rusum dar al-khilafa* 'The Rules and Regulations of the Caliphal Court' to the decline of the accessibility of the caliph in the course of the first centuries of Islam. According to al-Sabi', this was due to the dramatic increase of protocol. Unfortunately, he remains rather ambiguous on when these developments took off and why. In the second chapter of the *Rusum*, discussing the rules of attendance at the caliphal court, he mentions that:

It was not the practice of old for a military leader, a vizier or a high dignitary to kiss the ground when he entered the presence of the caliph. But when he entered and saw the caliph, he would address him in the second person singular saying: Peace be upon you, O Commander of the Faithful, and may the mercy and blessings of God be upon you. [...] In the past it was the practice of the caliph to sometimes offer his hand, covered with his sleeve, to a military leader or vizier to kiss. [...] This practice has now been replaced by kissing the ground, and to this rule all people now comply. In the past the crown princes from among the sons of the caliphs, and members of the Hashemite House, the judges, jurists, ascetics, and readers of the Qur'ān kissed neither the hand nor the ground. They merely saluted, as we mentioned above.⁷

Despite Marlow's argument that from the late Umayyad period onwards the egalitarian model was "increasingly postponed to the next world," many later sources continue to emphasise the ideal of direct accessibility.⁸ Both models – of the accessible and distant ruler – continue to find expression in a wide variety of sources – historical annals, advice literature, and other literary texts – written from diverse perspectives and either presenting the models as such or describing the behaviour of actual historical situations and rulers as examples of good and bad governance. In one of the best-known mirrors for princes by the Saljuq vizier Nizam al-Mulk (d. 1092), for example, both ideals smoothly co-exist in the characterisations of good governance. The first quota-

6 Marlow (1997) 174-77.

7 Al-Sabi' (1964) 38-39; trans. Elie Salem with some modifications in wording: al-Sabi' (1977) 29.

8 Marlow (1997) 174.

tion emphasises the ideal of the accessible ruler personally dealing with complaints and inexhaustibly redressing wrongs:

It is absolutely necessary that on two days in the week the ruler should sit for the redress of wrongs, to extract recompense from the oppressor, to give justice and to listen to the words of his people with his own ears, without any intermediary. It is fitting that some written petitions should also be submitted if they are relatively important, and he should give a ruling on each one. For when word spreads throughout the kingdom that, on two days in the week, The Master of the World summons complainants and petitioners before him and listens to their words, all oppressors will be afraid and curb their activities, and no one will dare to practise injustice or extortion for fear of punishment.⁹

Similarly, at another instance Nizam al-Mulk argues that:

When the ruler is difficult of access the affairs of the people are put into suspense, evil-doers are encouraged, facts remain concealed, the army suffers harm and the peasants fall into trouble. There is no better rule for a ruler than to hold frequent audiences.¹⁰

Although Nizam al-Mulk seems to put more emphasis on the accessibility of the ruler and the disadvantages of having to deal with these matters through intermediaries, at other instances he focuses more on the necessary protocol, gatekeeping, and courtiers distancing the ruler from the ordinary people. An example of the latter is the description of the conduct of audiences:

It is necessary to have an organized system for giving audiences. First of all the relatives [of the ruler] come in, after them distinguished members of his entourage, then other classes of people. If they all come in at once, [the correct] distinction between humble and noble is not observed. Raising of the curtain is the sign that an audience is in progress; when the curtain is lowered it indicates that there is no admittance, except for persons who are summoned.¹¹

9 Nizam al-Mulk (2006) 13-14.

10 Ibid. 118.

11 Ibid. 117-18.

While Nizam al-Mulk's focus is more on the accessible ruler, the historian Hilal al-Sabi' highlights aspects of the distant type of ruler, a monarch surrounded by screens, barriers, pomp, and servants. By emphasising the vast dimensions of the residence, the number of servants and security personnel, and the detailed rules of attendance, he projects the image of an almost unapproachable ruler. According to al-Sabi', in the presence of the caliph, one should be dressed in clean cloths, perfumed with scents the ruler likes, appear with clean teeth, refrain from speaking without having been asked, avoid laughing, and avoid asking for clarifications or turning your back towards the caliph.¹² In addition, he emphasises the role of the chamberlain in regulating access:

On procession days, the chief chamberlain comes fully attired in black robe and black turban, wearing sword and belt. With the chamberlains and their lieutenants marching in front of him, he sits in the corridor behind the screen. Then comes the vizier, the commander of the army and all those who are supposed to attend the procession. When all are in their places, the chief chamberlain sends a note to the caliph to that effect. If the caliph wishes to give a general audience, he sends his private servant in charge of correspondence to bring the chief chamberlain. The latter enters alone, stand in the courtyard, and kisses the ground. He is then ordered to admit the people according to their respective ranks. [...]¹³

And he describes the elevated, and thus distant, position of the caliph: "it has been the tradition for the caliph to sit on an elevated seat on a throne covered with pure Armenian silk, or with silk and wool."¹⁴

Noticeably, these two seemingly contradictory discourses on the accessible and distant ruler remain dominant in advice texts after the demise of the Abbasids. In fact, they are not restricted to Islamic political thought. They appear in numerous characterisations of ideal governance, whether Chinese, Middle Eastern, or European.¹⁵ However, despite the striking similarities in discourse, the precise application of these models, the ways in which they are deployed to legitimise, promote, discredit, or disparage a specific ruler can best be understood from rather specific historical contexts. The second part of this

12 Al-Sabi' (1964) 38-46.

13 Al-Sabi' (1964) 107-08; trans. Elie Salem with some modifications in wording: al-Sabi' (1977) 63.

14 Al-Ṣābi' (1964) 125; trans. Elie Salem with some modifications in wording: al-Sabi' (1977) 75.

15 See, for example, van Berkel (2018).

chapter will analyse the historical circumstances under which al-Muqtadir's court operated and how his (in)accessibility was represented by (near-)contemporaries.

The Inaccessibility of Caliph al-Muqtadir

According to Charlemagne's biographer, Einhard, the great Carolingian Emperor often invited nobles, friends, and bodyguards to bathe with him at his palace in Aachen, thus creating the smallest possible distance between himself and those around him.¹⁶ Other sources tell us how the Byzantine envoys who arrived at Charlemagne's court could not distinguish the emperor from his entourage since court ritual did not emphasise his elevated position; on the contrary, ritual emphasised his approachability.¹⁷ Nothing could be more removed from the stories told about al-Muqtadir and the Byzantine envoys arriving at his court.

In the year 917, a Byzantine delegation visited the Abbasid court of caliph al-Muqtadir in Baghdad to negotiate a truce and discuss the exchange of prisoners of war. The description of this embassy is well-known. Almost all contemporary and near-contemporary sources describe the events taking place in vivid detail. While each author emphasises different aspects of the ceremonial pomp surrounding it, the message they try to convey is identical. All the narratives glorify the grandeur of the Abbasid court and the power of its main inhabitant, the caliph. Moreover, the most conspicuous elements of the caliph's majesty in these narratives is his inaccessibility.

Al-Muqtadir's lack of approachability is displayed in a series of physical and psychological barriers raised by his entourage, the dimensions and sublime decorations of his palace, and the immenseness of his retinue. When the Byzantine envoys reach Baghdad they are housed in the splendidly decorated palace of Sa'id ibn Makhlad in the neighbourhood of the caliphal palace. When they request an audience with the caliph to deliver the letter they brought from the Byzantine emperor, they are told, according to the tenth century chronicler Miskawayh, that:

this was a matter of great difficulty, only possible after a meeting with the caliph's vizier, informing the latter of their design, arranging the matter

¹⁶ Nelson (1987) 156.

¹⁷ Nelson (1987) 171.

with him and requesting him to facilitate the granting of the audience and to advise the caliph to accord their request.¹⁸

The vizier Ibn al-Furat indeed grants the envoys an audience, but our source, Miskawayh, makes it very clear that it is the vizier who is orchestrating the meeting and that the envoys are at his mercy. On the day of their meeting with the caliph the Byzantines are led through the streets of Baghdad and the alleys of the palace, in which a series of ceremonies take place showing off the court's grandeur. Civil and military officials of all ranks line up the streets to the palace, the cavalry on horseback and in full armour. Inside the palace the chamberlains guide the envoys through endless numbers of courtyards, vestibules, and passageways, all crowded with retainers and servants and all richly decorated with draperies, tapestries, curtains, and luxurious objects.

Finally, the envoys are brought in the presence of the caliph in the so-called Palace of the Crown. There the caliph is seated on an ebony throne covered with brocade. The vizier Ibn al-Furat and the highest military leader of the caliphate, Mu'nis, stand next to him. The caliph's sons sit in front of him. Lined up in this audience room are also the various military officers, all according to their rank. The envoys kiss the ground in front of the caliph and they are instructed to stand at a certain distance from him. Only the caliph's family, the vizier, and the military chief are allowed to be in his immediate presence, and, although the envoys are now in the same room as the caliph, they are not allowed to directly communicate with him. Interaction with al-Muqtadir is the exclusive preserve of the same small group of favourites. After the envoys have delivered their message through an interpreter, it is the vizier who answers them on the caliph's behalf. While here the caliph is described as visible at an elevated position, at other instances al-Muqtadir is said to have attended meetings from behind a curtain.

Obviously, the narratives on the Byzantine embassy to Baghdad – all written by or based on sources close to the Abbasid court – had an interest in exaggerating the grandeur of the palace buildings, its decorations, and the majesty of its main inhabitant, the caliph. Yet, the message they try to convey is clear: access to al-Muqtadir is extremely well-guarded, it is a privilege enjoyed by a happy few who, by the time they enter in his presence, will be completely overwhelmed by his sublimity and superiority. Whereas the narratives on the Byzantine embassy are the most vivid, detailed, and outspoken in presenting the image of al-Muqtadir as a distant ruler, numerous other characterisations of this caliph corroborate his inaccessibility. Indeed, there exists hardly any story

18 Miskawayh (1920-21) 1:53.

on his approachability. This caliph is definitely portrayed as the Persian style inaccessible, majestic ruler and not as the approachable tribal leader of early Islam.

Yet while stories on al-Muqtadir's accessibility are missing, these anecdotes do exist for some of his immediate predecessors. Stories abound on how al-Muqtadir's father, caliph al-Mu'tadid (r. 892-902), directly interacted with his lower officials and even the populace. These narratives range from his personal inspection and assignment of each low-ranking member of the cavalry to the summoning of a common cotton merchant to his palace.¹⁹ The same can be said about other immediate predecessors of al-Muqtadir.

Traditionally, historians analysed access in a binary way. Rulers were either seen as easily accessible or as distant and unapproachable. However, recent scholarship on pre-modern Europe has argued that it might be much more fruitful to approach accessibility as a nuanced and perhaps more gradual and differentiated phenomenon.²⁰ The narratives on Islamic rulers, most of which represent both models of access, endorse a more gradual and less binary approach. The one-sided focus on al-Muqtadir's inaccessibility seems to have been the exception rather than the rule. Then how can we explain al-Muqtadir's exceptional position? What message do authors describing the culture of access at his court try to convey? Do they seek to discredit a caliph, who, no longer represents the early Islamic ideals of accessible leadership, while at the same time glorifying the grandeur of his court? Or does this mean that the model of the egalitarian ruler had become less prominent?

A Young Caliph and His Approachable Representatives

Although there is virtually no narrative on al-Muqtadir as a public and approachable figure, the discourse on accessibility is vividly present in the sources. During the long reign of caliph al-Muqtadir, the ideal of accessible leadership seems to have been transferred to the caliph's main representative, the vizier. It is the vizier who is presented as talking directly to the people, listening to complaints and dispensing justice upon them. So, while al-Muqtadir is presented as a distant Iranian ruler, his vizier is often characterised as the more accessible early Islamic ruler.

Anecdotes on viziers who take it upon themselves to deal with public requests abound. These narratives cover both formal settings – such as the

19 See, for example, al-Tanukhi, (1971-73), 1:326-28, 2:248; See also Marmer (1994) 36-41.

20 See, for example, Weiser (2003) 13.

vizier's chairmanship of the petition procedures – and informal contexts such as the ways in which he is approached by passers-by in the street. Hilal al-Sabi', for example, narrates on how a small estate-holder from Baghdad's hinterland, wrote a petition to Ibn al-Furat, al-Muqtadir's famous vizier, complaining about an excessive tax assessment of his estates. When after an investigation in the archives by some of the scribes of the administration, his case is dropped, the man continues to show up at the vizier's office and even buttonholes him in the streets. In the end, the vizier investigates the matter himself, discovers that the petitioner is right, and restores justice upon him. Despite the obvious fictional elements in this narrative, it nevertheless depicts a situation in which the ideal of the accessible ruler is projected on the vizier, the main representative of the caliph. It is the vizier who needs to be available to the public, it is the vizier who directly restores justice upon the people.²¹ Similar anecdotes are told about al-Muqtadir's other viziers, riding the streets of Baghdad, talking to people, receiving gifts and repaying them generously.

A final question that needs to be pursued is why contemporary historians transferred the ideology of the accessible ruler from the caliph to the vizier. What was the precise historical context in which such a transfer was acceptable for their readership? Caliph al-Muqtadir was only thirteen years old when he ascended the throne in 908. The uncertain conditions surrounding his accession – his succession was controversial, and the young prince was first installed, then dethroned and then installed again – and his young age initiated a political power strife at his court during the early years of his reign. Unlike his immediate predecessors, his father and brother, he missed administrative and military experience and a personal bond with the military. Therefore, he seems to have depended more than his predecessors on court officials and family members. His mother and aunts, for example, became very prominent and powerful figures at his court. And so did his viziers. Particularly Ibn al-Furat, the first vizier after al-Muqtadir's re-installment to the caliphate, was said to have operated as a kind of father-figure to the young caliph. Many contemporary authors mention a story on how al-Muqtadir's mother invited the vizier to call the young caliph "his son" and take him on his lap during meetings.²² Whether fictional or not, these anecdotes demonstrate that the perceived relationship between the young caliph and his vizier was one of dependence. It is therefore also not surprising that the ideal of the accessible ruler talking to his subjects and dispensing justice upon them was also projected on the caliph's vizier rather than on this young boy himself.

21 Al-Sabi' (1904) 163-64.

22 Miskawayh (1920-21) 113; al-Sabi' (1904) 117.

We may thus conclude that the two models of good leadership – the distant and majestic monarch and the more approachable and egalitarian ruler – were still both highly valued in the days of caliph al-Muqtadir. The ideal of accessible leadership did not disappear, but was transferred from the caliph to his main representative, the vizier. The image which remained for the caliph himself was one of an inaccessible, highly distant, and remote ruler protected by palace walls, luxury, servants, soldiers, chamberlains, and his vizier. This transfer might have been rather convenient for those surrounding and representing him, especially for the vizier. It should not surprise us that the vizier Ibn al-Furat is said to have commented upon al-Muqtadir's accession to the throne:

For God's sake do not appoint to the post a man who knows the house of one, the fortune of another, the gardens of a third, the slave girls of a fourth, the estate of a fifth and the horse of a sixth; nor one who has mixed with the people, has had experience of affairs, has gone through his apprenticeship and made calculations of people's fortunes. [...] Why should you appoint a man who will govern, who knows our resources, who will administer affairs himself and regard himself as independent? Why do you not entrust this matter to someone who will leave you to manage it?²³

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23 Miskawayh (1920-21) 1:3; trans. Hugh Kennedy in Van Berkel (2013) 18.

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