Hugh Kennedy examines the life of one of the most powerful men in the world in the eighth century.

Not many of the great figures of early Islamic history are widely known in the Western world today. The achievements of caliphs such as the Umayyad Abd al-Malik (r.685-705) or the second Abbasid caliph Mansur (r.754-75) in consolidating their respective holds over the Muslim world and establishing administrative systems that maintained their vast empires, are virtually unknown outside the ranks of specialists in early Islamic history. Most people are aware that Arab Muslim civilization enjoyed a ‘golden age’ in early medieval times but the men and women who led and dominated this world are virtually forgotten.

There is, however, one exception to this, the Abbasid caliph Harun al-Rashid (r.786-809). A contemporary of Charlemagne, his caliphate (the title caliph comes from the Arabic khalifa meaning the deputy of God on earth) stretched from modern Tunisia, through Egypt, Syria and Iraq, to Iran and ex-Soviet Central Asia. Oman, Yemen and much of modern Pakistan were in his domains.

The vast empire the Abbasids ruled had been created by the Muslim conquests between 632 and 650. From 661 to 750 it was ruled by the Umayyad dynasty from their capital in Damascus. Considered impious and tyrannical by many Muslims, especially in Iraq, the Umayyads were overthrown by the Abbasids during the time of Harun al-Rashid. He, however, did not claim the title of ‘Abbasid’ until some time after his appointment as caliph in 786. In this article I wish to examine the nature of the caliphate in the time of Harun al-Rashid. A caliphate is a government and a society in which there is a single religious and political leader, and in which all political and religious authority is held in the name of God. The caliph is in this sense more than an emir.

Harun al-Rashid was born in June 766 AD at the Abbasid capital, Baghdad. He was the son of the former caliph, al-Ma’mun. He spent his early years in Baghdad and was educated and trained there in the administration of government. He was sent to Damascus in 780 at the age of 14 to be ruler in place of his father there, but the latter died before Harun arrived. He then assumed the governorship of Damascus and shortly afterwards was appointed caliph of the entire Islamic empire, the first Abbasid after the demise of his father.

Harun al-Rashid was a man of character, a man of energy and a man of determination. He was a strong leader who was able to use his political and military resources to good advantage. He was also a shrewd diplomat who knew how to use his influence to promote his policy objectives. He was a wise sovereign who always kept a close watch on the progress of his policies and who was never afraid to take action to correct any mistakes he might have made.

Harun al-Rashid was also a man of culture. He was a patron of the arts and a sponsor of literature. He was a lover of music and a benefactor of the sciences. He was a patron of education and a supporter of the arts. He was a man who was interested in the world around him and who was always eager to learn more about it.

Harun al-Rashid was a man who was able to inspire confidence in his followers and who was able to lead them to great things. He was a man who was able to make difficult decisions and who was able to follow through on his decisions. He was a man who was able to take risks and who was able to succeed.

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Left: Harun al-Rashid and the Barber, whose extended family provided the characters of several of the stories in the Arabian Nights, from a later Persian manuscript.

Above: A silver dirham of Harun.
and their supporters in 750. Harun inherited this empire from his shrewd grandfather Mansur and his popular father Mahdi.

The Abbasids claimed to be members of the family of the Prophet, descended from his uncle Abbas, though their claim was rejected by the Shi‘ites who believed, and still do believe, that only the direct descendants of his daughter Fatima and her husband Ali can be considered true leaders of the Muslim community.

By the time Harun succeeded, the Abbasid capital Baghdad was the largest city in the world outside China. Baghdad had been founded by Mansur in 762 and its growth had been phenomenal. By Harun’s reign it had already expanded far beyond the round city Mansur had built, and now, a vast, rambling, unplanned metropolis, it spread for miles on both sides of the Tigris.

Harun was not originally the designated heir-apparent, but took over power after the mysterious death of his elder brother, Hadi. When he died, the misguided provisions of his own will almost destroyed the Caliphate entirely. Harun’s reputation does not rest on his achievements as a politician or leader; he was at best an adequate caretaker of what he had inherited. Nor was he a great patron of culture; he left virtually no surviving architecture, and it was his son and eventual successor al-Ma‘mun (813–833) who fully established the reputation of the Abbasid court as a place of learning and scientific endeavour.

Yet later Muslims looked back to his reign as an era of extravagance and magnificence, before the Caliphate was plagued by the financial anxieties and problems that diminished and eventually destroyed it (the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad fell to the Shi‘ite Buwayhids in the mid-twelfth century). After Harun’s death, Baghdad was to endure the nightmare of prolonged civil war, but in his reign the city was both prosperous and innocent, and its inhabitants must have been aware that they lived in the finest city in the Islamic world.

It was not real achievements which kept the memory of Harun alive, but his role in the stories collected in Isfahani’s Book of Songs (c. 950) and the collection of traditional stories known as the Arabian Nights.

A tenth-century schematic map of Mesopotamia, showing the two rivers.

After the Sunni Abbasids took over the Caliphate in 750, the remaining Umayyads survived in Spain; the Maghrib declared its independence in 789.

During Harun’s reign, Ifriqiya – modern Tunisia and Libya – was only nominally under Abbasid control and became independent in 800; by the end of the ninth century, the Caliphate had shrunk to Iraq, Iran, and the Hijaz.

Here he is the caliph who explores the streets of his capital by night in disguise and joins in the lives and adventures of his subjects. He is accompanied by a small group of companions, notably his closest friend jafar the Barmaqid, his chief factotum the enigmatic Masrur, and the poet and court jester Abu Nuwas. All these are historical figures. The earliest known version of the Nights dates from the fourteenth century and many of the stories that we think of as typical of them, such as Ali Baba and Aladdin, date from well after that. However, cycles of stories about Harun and his court were already in circulation within a generation of his death and soon acquired a fantastical aspect. The eventual stories of the Arabian Nights were the reworking of an old tradition.

To take one such, the court poet Ishaq b. 'Abdillah al-Masudi is summoned to attend the Caliph without delay on pain of death. As he passes the high walls of a palace he finds a slave girl waiting by a basket that has been lowered from the top of the wall. She tells him to get in and, after protesting, he agrees and is raised to the roof where he is welcomed by a whole group of girls. When they find out that he is the great poet, they persuade him to remain for a week. On his return, he finds the Caliph is furious with him, his property is forfeit and his life is on the line. He escapes by promising Harun to take him to the girls to share his adventures. The two go together, the Caliph in disguise. By good fortune the girls realise who he is and hide discreetly; as Harun later explains to the poet, if they had appeared they would all have been killed. The girls were members of his harem who had displeased him and been confined to this out-of-the-way palace. In the event, poet and girls are restored to their ruler’s favour and financial rewards
Baghdad in the seventeenth century (engraved by I. Azelt) had little in common with the Abbasid city, which was sacked by the Mongols in 1258 and again by Tamerlane in 1401.

with a more nuanced view.

Harun was probably born in about 762 in Rayy, the ancient caravan city just south of modern Tehran, where his father, the crown prince Mahdi, was serving as viceroy in the east for his own father Mansur. His mother was Khayzuran ('the Reed'), a slave girl with whom Mahdi had fallen in love, plucked from obscurity and, against all convention married. Mahdi had many other women but Khayzuran remained his favourite and it was only her children who were considered for the succession.

It seems to have been at Rayy that the young Harun came into contact with a family who were to be immensely influential in his life, the Barmakids. The Barmakids hailed from the far east of the Islamic world, from the ancient city of Balkh in what is now northern Afghanistan. Here the family had been hereditary guardians of a great Buddhist shrine. After the Muslim invasions in the mid-seventh century, the leaders of

The ruins at Raqqa, Syria, where Harun built his favourite palace.

distributed to all.

The story can be traced to the mid-ninth century. It contains all the elements from which the Harun legend has developed: the atmosphere of wealth, luxury and danger, the Caliph in disguise, the poet as transgressor of social norms. We do not need to believe that this story describes actual events to realise that it conveys a real truth about how near-contemporaries regarded the ruler.

Recovering the historical Harun is problematic. The main source for all later accounts is the vast History of the Prophets and Kings, written by Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari, who wrote in Baghdad in the later ninth century (though he had no official court position) and whose work includes fragments of many earlier accounts. Following al-Tabari, most historians have contended themselves with describing a powerful, wise and well-behaved ruler. Reading between the lines of the Arabic chronicles, however, we may be able to come up
the family had converted and when the Abbasids took power from 747 onwards, the Barmakids had proved some of their keenest supporters. The family were rich and cultured and became indispensable in running the complex administration of the Caliphate. Yahya the Barmakid had accompanied Mahdi to Rayy and the two families had become very close. It was said (mostly by the Barmakids) that Yahya’s wife had nursed Harun while his own children had been nursed by Khayzuran.

Mahdi designated Khayzuran’s elder son as heir to the caliphate and he was given the regnal title of Hadi. He grew up a vigorous young man with a strong temper, very popular with the military. He also had a pronounced hare-lip. Harun, by contrast, seemed to have been shy and insecure but very much his mother’s darling. A Christian doctor who knew all the early Abbasid caliphs observed that Harun found it difficult to look men straight in the eye. In 777 his father took him on pilgrimage. It was a great occasion: Mahdi was magnificently generous to the people of the Holy Cities of Mecca and Medina and he announced that Harun would be heir after his brother. He was probably providing for an ‘heir and a spare’ in case Hadi died young but it was never going to be an easy arrangement.

In the event it was Caliph Mahdi who died prematurely in 785, apparently as a result of a hunting accident. Harun was with his father but Hadi was campaigning on the northeastern frontier of the Muslim world.

The Ribat of Monastir, near Tunis, a castle built in the 790s to protect the region from Christian attack.

A ninth-century Abbasid manuscript of the Koran.

Harun might have made a grab for the throne but instead he stuck to his father’s will: he, his mother Khayzuran and Yahya the Barmakid paid off the military (who always saw a succession as an opportunity to make financial demands) and safeguarded Hadi’s succession.

When the new caliph arrived hot foot from the frontier, he set about consolidating his position. The most important jobs went to his friends in the military while Yahya the Barmakid and other bureaucrats were effectively sidelined. He also made it clear that his mother Khayzuran should stay in the women’s quarters and mind her own business. Khayzuran was a powerful and wealthy woman, who expected to have her advice listened to. She was not amused. In the world of Abbasid court politics, women had little formal status but informally they could be immensely powerful, and increas-
For those backing the successful heir, position, palaces and estates would ensue. Those backing the failed prince faced obfuscation, poverty and even death. Harun might want to opt for the quiet life, but Yahya the Barmakid could not allow it and nor could Khayzuran.

In the winter of 785-6, the political atmosphere in Baghdad was thunderous: the two princes lived in different palaces, Hadi on the east bank of the Tigris, Harun on the west, and communications were increasingly strained. Then suddenly in the late summer of 786 the young Caliph died. Some people said that he had been ill for some time but stories began to circulate. It was alleged that Khayzuran had sent one of her slave girls to suffocate him as he slept. Whether or not there is any truth in the rumours, we can be certain that she used her inside knowledge of palace affairs to move quickly; on the night Hadi died, she and Yahya the Barmakids were able to mobilise their supporters before Hadi’s men even knew he was dead. By the morning the dead Caliph’s young son and his chief supporters were under arrest. There were a few executions. Harun was now the undisputed ruler.

The next fifteen years were a time of comparative peace and prosperity, in many ways the high point of Abbasid power and the ‘golden prime’ of Harun al-Rashid. The new Caliph was happy to leave day-to-day running of the administration in the hands of his mentor, Yahya the Barmakid, whom he referred to as his ‘father’. His mother Khayzuran died three years later. Her funeral took place on a rainy Baghdad day and the Caliph walked barefoot through the mud to her grave-side; but whether his emotions were of grief for the mother who had favoured him or relief at escaping from her overbearing presence, we shall never know; perhaps it was both.

Harun passed his time hunting and searching for new places to live. Although his name is always associated with Baghdad, he does not seem to have liked living in the city much. He spent more time than hunting lodges in the foot of the Zagros mountains to the east or on building a new palace at Raqqqa on the Euphrates, now in Syria. He shared his pleasures with the younger mem-

bers of the Barmakid family, the practical, competent Fadl and the more cultured and flamboyant Ja’far who, with the other Barmakids, provided the patronage for much of the court culture of the period. It was in their salons that political and religious ideas were discussed with surprising openness and freedom and it was they who began the translation of Greek learning into Arabic. Ja’far was also Harun’s constant and much loved companion in the Caliph’s probably mythical adventures in Baghdad that formed the bases of the Nights’ legends.

Under Harun and the Barmakids the Abbasid court hosted poets whose works are still read and enjoyed today, including the austere and fatalistic Abu’l-Ata’i and his rival, Abu Nuwas who in contrast celebrated, in uninhibited language, the pleasures of wine and loving young boys. With the empire internally largely at peace expeditions were still sent against the Byzantine empire almost every year: Harun himself had led one such during his father’s reign, but now he preferred to go on pilgrimage to Mecca, as he did seven times during his reign (the Abbasids had finally established themselves.

There remained the question of succession. Harun was still young but even young men could die suddenly, as his brother’s experience had shown: of all the Abbasid caliphs who ruled between 750 and 950, only one, Mansur (who died at sixty-three), reached the age of fifty. The Western principle of primogeniture had never been widely accepted in the Islamic world, where polygyny might lead to numerous sons by different women, any of whom might be eligible for the succession to the throne. In 802 Harun went on pilgrimage with the two sons whom he had singled out as his successors, Muhammad al-Amin, son of Zubayda, and Abd Allah al-Ma’mun, whose mother seems to have been a member of a powerful aristocratic family from north-eastern Iran. It was a grand and formal occasion. Harun seems to have wanted to set up a watertight agreement to prevent rivalry and misunderstandings. Solemn documents were drawn up and signed by both brothers, saying that Amin was to be succeeded by Ma’mun and the responsibilities that each had to the other. The documents were displayed in the mosque at Mecca, the most sacred place in Islam.

Then, on his return from the

A Byzantine cloisonné enamel water jug, one of the gifts from Harun to Charlemagne to commemorate his coronation.
pilgrimage, Harun made a dramatic move which baffled contemporaries and has baffled historians ever since. Without warning, he destroyed the power of the Barmaids. The patriarch of the family Yahya and his son Fa'il were imprisoned and their property confiscated. More shocking still, he ordered the execution of his close friend Ja'far. The Arabic accounts dwell with gusto on the details of this terrible night; the friendship of Harun to Ja'far when they parted that evening; the Caliph's sending of Masrur the eunuch with the instructions to bring Ja'far's head; Ja'far's disbelief when Masrur told him what his orders were: surely the Caliph was drunk and would repent in the morning? Could he not have one last interview? It was to no avail. The body of the darling of the Abbasid court was dismembered and displayed on the bridges of boats which crossed the Tigris in Baghdad, for all to see.

The court poets lamented the destruction of such generous patrons as the Barmaids, without, of course, going so far as to criticise the Caliph himself. For moralists it was a classic example of the fickleness of fortune. 'Put not your trust in princes' was the lesson.

Harun survived the fall of the Barmaids by six years, but the verse seems to have gone out of Baghdad court life. However, the Caliph was still young and might easily have ruled for another twenty years. He began a series of offensive campaigns against Nikêphoros, the new emperor of Byzantium, the only external enemy against whom a caliph would fight in person. He led a campaign in 803, and a much larger one in 806. No great victories were achieved but it was excellent PR for the Caliph to be seen leading the Muslim faithful in the jihad against the infidel.

In 809 Harun, now in his late forties, decided to lead a military expedition to the north-eastern province of Khurasan to remove an obstreperous governor. He never reached it but died, of natural causes, in a country house where the city of Meshed now stands. He was buried modestly, as were all Abbasid caliphs, in the garden. The tomb is now in the great shrine at Meshed but it is not Harun who is honoured under the vast turquoise dome but Ali Reza, a descendant of the rival house of Ali, who died there in 818. Harun's tomb is near Ali's, unhonoured and unloved by the Shi'ite inhabitants of the city.

The Caliph may have imagined that he had secured the future of the dynasty by the formal and public compact between Amin and Ma'mun made in Mecca in 802: but in fact he had opened the door for a dispute which now gave rise to a war between supporters of the two brothers. It brought havoc to Baghdad and lasted for eight disastrous years until Ma'mun became accepted as Caliph in 819.

Harun was not a great politician. As a soldier, he achieved some modest successes and avoided major disasters; but despite the vast resources he devoted to war, Byzantium survived for many centuries to come. As a person he could be generous, and the legends of his nighttime adventures in Baghdad may reflect a real sense of adventure, while his destruction of the Barmaids and his ill-advised plans for the succession both suggest a man who could be spiteful, vicious and stupid.

Harun lives on as a symbol of the moment when the Abbasid Caliphate and the city of Baghdad approached the height of their power and prosperity, before civil war and financial collapse undermined them. It was the last time that Iraq was the centre of a major empire; the Abbasids (though not native Mesopotamians) were the final successors of the kings of Sumer and Akkad, of the Babylonians, Achaemenids and Sassanians who had used the resources of the alluvial plain of southern Iraq to create mighty imperial systems. It is not surprising that later generations were to look back to Harun's age in wonder and admiration and ascribe greatness to its ruler.

FOR FURTHER READING

Hugh Kennedy is Professor of Middle Eastern history at the University of St Andrews. His The Court of the Caliphs: The Rise and Fall of Islam's Greatest Dynasty is published this month by Weidenfeld & Nicolson.