

AL-MANŞŪR AND THE CRITICAL AMBASSADOR

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Some time after the founding of Baghdad in 145/762, Abū Ġaʿfar al-Manşūr, the second caliph of the Abbasid dynasty (r. 754-775), granted an audience to a Byzantine ambassador from the emperor's court at Constantinople¹. When the caliph asked for the visitor's opinion of the nascent capital, the latter did not hesitate to point out its most serious flaw, namely that the presence of the markets within Baghdad's administrative core – the walled “Round City” – posed a serious threat to security. Though initially hesitant to act on the Greek's criticism, al-Manşūr eventually responded resolutely by ordering that the markets be transferred outside the walls to al-Karḥ, a district to the south which predated the caliph's city.

So, in any case, we are told. This account appears in at least four versions, each taking up about half of a printed page or less. The first appears in the chronicle of al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) in a collection of reports concerning the planning, building, funding and organization of Baghdad, all under the heading of the year 146. This version, in which the ambassador is given a tour of the city and explicitly asked for his opinion, is plain in style; in particular, the ambassador's critique is simply stated: “your enemies are with you in your city”, he says, these enemies being “the market-rabble” (*al-sūqa*).² The version appearing in the abbreviated history of Bar Hebraeus (d. 685/1286) is a simple abridgment of al-Ṭabarī's account and will not be treated here in detail.³ The last two versions both appear in the introduction to the *History of Baghdad*, a voluminous biographical dictionary by the preacher and *ḥadīth* professor al-Ḥaṭīb al-Baġdādī (d. 463/1071). The plainer of the two is quite similar to al-Ṭabarī's version, with the same tour at the beginning, although the market critique is now two-fold and more specific: “the markets are in (the city), and

1. I am grateful to Maya Maskarinec, Ryan Rittenberg and *BEO*'s anonymous reviewer for their helpful comments on drafts of this paper. I also profited much in the writing of this paper from the excellent Near Eastern Studies library at the Institut Français du Proche-Orient in Damascus.

2. ṬABARĪ, *Tārīḥ*, vol. 3, p. 323.

3. IBN AL-ʿIBRĪ, *Tārīḥ*, p. 212.

no one is barred from the markets, so the enemy enters as if he wants to shop. As for the merchants, they travel to remote regions and discuss news about you.”⁴ Finally, al-Ḥaṭīb’s alternative version, which he tells first, is greatly expanded to include three distinct criticisms of al-Manṣūr’s handiwork: insufficient water supply, the lack of gardens, and the dangerous proximity of his subjects (i.e., the need, yet again, to move the markets).⁵

This incident is somewhat anomalous since the Arabic sources mention few Byzantine visits to the caliphate in the mid-8th century. While reports of diplomatic contacts between the two empires abound for the early Umayyad period, they decline in the decades leading up to the Abbasid revolution and into the late 8th century.⁶ This decline in reports has been ascribed to the switch away from Greek as the Umayyad administrative language in the late-7th century, the violence of the Abbasid revolution, the transfer of the capital from Syria to Iraq, and the decade of internal struggles which followed the revolution.⁷ The end of any realistic possibility of capturing Constantinople in 718, and the outburst of two pre-Abbasid rebellions, in 740 and 744, may also have encouraged the caliphs to direct their attention towards internal affairs.⁸ At the same time, the scarcity of embassy accounts for the 8th century does not definitively demonstrate a paucity of official contact between the empires, since it may simply indicate our 9th-century Arab sources’ predominant interest in the internal affairs of the Islamic empire for this period.⁹ However that may be, the account of the critical ambassador stands out as one of the few reports of a Byzantine’s visit to a caliph during this time.

This paper is not about the tale’s veracity, but I should nevertheless mention the need for caution in assessing its historical value. Although there is no reason with regard to its content to discard the tale as fiction,¹⁰ the long interval between the 8th-century event and the production of accounts depicting it – over one hundred years at the least –

4. BAĞDĀDĪ, *Tārīḥ*, vol. 1, p. 80.

5. BAĞDĀDĪ, *Tārīḥ*, vol. 1, p. 78-79. I have not encountered this episode elsewhere. It is absent from a number of early narratives (9th and 10th cc.) of al-Manṣūr’s reign (MAS’ŪDĪ, *Murūğ*, vol. 4, p. 128-164; MAS’ŪDĪ, *Tanbīh*, p. 340-342; YA’QŪBĪ, *Tārīḥ*, vol. 2, p. 364-380; SĀ’ĪD B. AL-BIṬRĪQ, *Tārīḥ*, p. 38-40) and from descriptions of Baghdad by al-Ya’qūbī (9th c.) and Yāqūt (13th c.) (YA’QŪBĪ, *Buldān*, p. 233-254; YĀQŪT, *Mu’ğam*, vol. 1, p. 456-467). In annotating al-Ḥaṭīb’s text, LASSNER (1970, p. 246, 248) refers to al-Ṭabarī’s similar account but mentions no others. Earlier secondary literature primarily relies upon al-Ṭabarī’s account (e.g., LE STRANGE 1924, p. 66; cited by CANARD 1956, p. 103).

6. KENNEDY 1992, p. 136.

7. *Ibid.*, 136.

8. Emperor Leo III’s triumph over an Umayyad siege of Constantinople in 718 turned out to be decisive, and no similar attack occurred until the 780s, when, during the reign of al-Mahdī, the caliph’s son Hārūn forced the empress Irene to pay tribute (VASILIEV 1952, vol 1, p. 235-239); for Hārūn’s role in leading the expedition, ṬABARĪ, *Tārīḥ*, vol. 3, p. 506 (year 166). For the two pre-Abbasid rebellions of the 740s, see KENNEDY 1981, p. 40.

9. KENNEDY 1992, p. 136.

10. For example, the ambassador’s brazenness is not unlikely in itself. It was a standard practice for both empires to grant diplomatic immunity to foreign ambassadors (CANARD 1964, p. 37). It would not have seemed strange, then, for an ambassador to speak so openly.

makes it difficult to determine their reliability, a typical problem for this early period.¹¹ Furthermore, al-Ṭabarī's version of the account of the critical ambassador demands special caution because of the historian's own uncertainty as to the report's credibility, expressed by the absence of a firm chain of transmission between himself and his source (the *isnād* is of the form : “*ḍukira ‘an* [so-and-so] *anna...*”), as well as his inclusion of two additional alternative explanations for the ejection of the markets from the Round City.¹²

Regardless of the incident's historicity, later accounts of it allow for an understanding of the writers' perceptions of al-Manṣūr and Baghdad's early history. I will now examine the three versions of the Byzantine ambassador's conversation with al-Manṣūr found in al-Ṭabarī and al-Ḥaṭīb al-Baġdādī, addressing two interrelated questions. First, why was it significant to the writers of the accounts that the reason for the market transfer was an *ambassador*? Second, why was it significant that he was a *Byzantine* ambassador? Addressing these questions will shed light on later generations' interpretation of the role of Arab-Byzantine interactions during the crucial and formative years of al-Manṣūr's caliphate.¹³

We begin with the first question. All versions emphasize that it was an ambassador, a high-ranking foreign official, who confronted the caliph with his city's flaws.¹⁴ Why does it matter that an ambassador and not, for instance, one of al-Manṣūr's advisors provided this criticism? In addressing this question, I will focus on al-Ṭabarī's text since it seems most clearly to explain the narrative importance of this foreign criticism.

Al-Ṭabarī's version is reported as part of a collection of accounts relating to the main theme for the year 146, declared in its opening lines: “Among the events of that year was Abū Ğa'far (al-Manṣūr)'s completion of his city Baghdad.”¹⁵ Al-Ṭabarī then promises “a description of al-Manṣūr's construction of Baghdad.”¹⁶ However, the account of the critical

11. ROBINSON 2003, p. 50-52.

12. The *isnād*: ṬABARĪ, Tārīḥ, vol. 3, p. 322. Al-Ṭabarī used terms like *ḍakara/ḍukira* when he did not have a firm chain of transmission (BOSWORTH 2000). Two alternative explanations: ṬABARĪ, Tārīḥ, vol. 3, p.324. In one of these, the reason given for a market transfer is again the security concern, but the one who gives this advice is not named: “*qila li-Abī Ğa'far...*”

13. As part of her monograph on Arab Muslim perceptions of the Byzantines, EL CHEIKH (2004, p. 150-152) discusses the two versions of this account given in al-Ḥaṭīb al-Baġdādī, focusing on Muslim perceptions of Byzantine technical prowess: “These stories... indicate that the Muslims were receptive to Byzantine influence in certain realms. That the Muslims are said to have implemented the advice of the Byzantine envoy on such a vital question as the Abbasid capital is testimony to the Muslim acknowledgment that the Byzantines were world experts in urban design” (p. 151-152). The present paper has a narrower focus: rather than asking what this tale says about Muslim receptivity to Byzantine technical advice, I ask what it tells us about Muslim perceptions of Byzantine involvement in the founding of the Abbasid capital and the consolidation of the dynasty.

14. Al-Ṭabarī: “One of the Patrikioi of the Byzantines approached (al-Manṣūr) as an envoy”; ṬABARĪ, Tārīḥ, vol. 3, p. 323. Al-Ḥaṭīb, in his shorter account, calls the visitor the “Patrikios” of “a delegation from the Byzantine king” (BAĠDĀDĪ, Tārīḥ, vol. 1, p. 80), and in his longer account, “an envoy from the court of the Byzantine king” (BAĠDĀDĪ, Tārīḥ, vol. 1, p. 78). Equivalent to *patricius* (Lat.), *patrikios* was used as a title (LIDDELL & SCOTT 1978, s.v. πατρίκιος). On the high rank of Byzantine ambassadors to Arab courts, see CANARD 1964, p. 41.

15. ṬABARĪ, Tārīḥ, vol. 3, p. 319: “*wa-mimmā kāna fī-hā min ḍālik istitmām Abī Ğa'far madīnata-hu Baġdād.*”

16. ṬABARĪ, Tārīḥ, vol. 3, p. 319: “*ṣifat binā'i-hi iyyā-hā.*”

ambassador does not concern the construction of Baghdad but rather the market transfer. Along with the two other explanations for the market transfer which follow, it forms a discussion which would seem most suited to the entry for the year in which the markets were, in fact, transferred. But according to al-Ṭabarī himself, this event did not occur in the year 146 but instead a decade later: under the year 157, he narrates that “al-Manṣūr transferred the markets from the City of Peace (i.e., Baghdad’s Round City) to the Gate of al-Karḥ and other locations,” adding, “and we have already mentioned the reason for that.”¹⁷ This “mentioning,” of course, is the discussion under the year 146. Such extreme foreshadowing requires some sort of explanation, especially since the account of the critical ambassador gives the impression that the caliph did not wait long before acting on the ambassador’s suggestion: “when the Patrikios departed, (al-Manṣūr) ordered that the market be expelled from the city.”¹⁸ Even if we are supposed to imagine a significant delay between al-Manṣūr’s decision and the expulsion, or between the advice and his decision, we are still left to wonder: why did al-Ṭabarī place the three accounts explaining the market expulsion in the entry for a year which preceded the actual event by a decade?

The common theme, linking the market expulsion accounts to other reports for the year 146, is foreign influence on the building of Baghdad. Over half of the space preceding the ambassador account (a little under two of three pages in the Leiden edition) is devoted to two relatively lengthy reports (the first of which narrates two separate events) about non-Arab influences on the construction of the new city.

At the beginning of the first report, we learn that the caliph’s influential Khurasanian advisor Ḥālīd b. Barmak was responsible for “marking out” (*ḥaṭṭa*) the city.¹⁹ In the narratives of al-Ṭabarī and other contemporary writers, “marking out” unclaimed land was an important prequel to building upon it.²⁰ Furthermore, not all accounts of this “marking out” of Baghdad give the role to a Persian; often al-Manṣūr or other Arabs are said to do the job, even in reports from other chapters of al-Ṭabarī’s book.²¹ Thus, with several accounts of the

17. ṬABARĪ, *Tārīḥ*, vol. 3, p. 379: “*ḥawwala al-Manṣūr al-aswāq min Madīnat al-Salām ilā Bāb al-Karḥ wa-ḡayri-hi min al-mawāḏī, wa-qad maḏā ḏikru-nā sabab ḏālik qablu.*” Thus, the ambassador’s visit came between 146 and 157.

18. ṬABARĪ, *Tārīḥ*, vol. 3, p. 323: “*wa-lammā inṣarafa al-bitrīq amara bi-ihṣāḡ al-sūq min al-madīna.*”

19. ṬABARĪ, *Tārīḥ*, vol. 3, p. 320: “*Ḥālīd b. Barmak ḥaṭṭa madīnat Abī Ḡā’far la-hu.*” Ḥālīd was from Balḥ (KENNEDY 1981, p. 44). Al-Ya’qūbī reports that Ḥālīd and his son (presumably Yaḥyā) had their own palace in Baḡdad (YA’QŪBĪ, *Tārīḥ*, vol. 2, p. 253).

20. For the nuanced usage of the term *ḥaṭṭa*, see AKBAR 1989, esp. p. 24.

21. Elsewhere, al-Ṭabarī reports that two men appointed by al-Manṣūr—al-Ḥaḡḡāḡ b. Artāt (not to be confused with al-Ḥaḡḡāḡ b. Yūsuf, the Umayyad governor of Iraq) and Abū Ḥanīfa al-Nu’mān b. Tābit—“marked out” (*ḥaṭṭa*) Baghdad; ṬABARĪ, *Tārīḥ*, vol. 3, p. 276. Similarly, he mentions under the year 145 that “*qad ḥaṭṭa al-Manṣūr madīnata-hu Baḡdād bi-l-qaṣab fa-sāra ilā al-Kūfa*”; ṬABARĪ, *Tārīḥ*, vol. 3, p. 204. It should be noted that under the year 146, al-Ṭabarī mentions that the same al-Ḥaḡḡāḡ “marked out” (*ḥaṭṭa*) the new city’s mosque; ṬABARĪ, *Tārīḥ*, vol. 3, p. 322. Al-Ya’qūbī reports that al-Manṣūr “marked out” (*ihṭaṭṭa*) Baghdad himself (YA’QŪBĪ, *Tārīḥ*, vol. 2, p. 373). Note that over a century later, al-Ḥaṭīb al-Baḡdādī also ascribed the “marking out” (*ihṭaṭṭa*) of Baghdad to al-Manṣūr (BAḠDĀDĪ, *Tārīḥ*, vol. 1, p. 67).

“marking out” of Baghdad at his disposal which did not involve a foreign element, al-Ṭabarī chose for inclusion here the one in which a Persian is distinguished as the caliph’s agent.

The rest of the same report narrates an event which emphasizes the importance of the nearby remains of Ctesiphon, the ancient Sassanian capital. When the caliph shows an interest in tearing down (*naqḍ*) the palace of the great king Ḥusrō I Anūḥirwān to obtain Sassanian *spolia* for use as building materials in his new city, Ḥālīd b. Barmak advises against it because the ruins of the palace are, in his words,

“one of the signs of Islam, from which the one who looks at it may judge that it was not vacated like its peers (*aṣḥāb*) by a worldly decree but rather that it was due to a divine decree. And besides, O Commander of the Faithful, within it is the place where ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib prayed, may God’s blessings be upon him.”²²

But al-Manṣūr sees through this justification to Ḥālīd’s ulterior motive, replying with derision, “How preposterous, Ḥālīd! You insist on sympathizing with your fellow men (*aṣḥāb*) the Persians (*‘aḡam*, lit. non-Arabs!)”²³ And he orders for the spoliation to commence. Then, when it becomes clear that the costs of spoliation will be more than the cost of quarrying the building material, the caliph once again turns to Ḥālīd, who reminds him of his previous advice, adding, “But now that you’ve done it (i.e., begun razing), I think you should raze it until you reach its foundations; otherwise it will be said that you were unable to raze it.”²⁴ Again the caliph rejects Ḥālīd’s advice, ordering that the spoliation cease. In this account, then, Ḥālīd presents the remains of Ctesiphon as a symbol of Islam’s dominance over ancient empires, even though al-Manṣūr, consistent with his common depiction as a “penny-pincher,” maintains a more pragmatic attitude towards the historical monuments in his backyard.²⁵ Nevertheless, his mocking rejection of Ḥālīd’s initial advice reveals that he too sees in the ruins a meaningful symbol – not of Islam’s triumph, but of the great civilization of the Persian *‘aḡam* – which, as successor to Sassanian kings, he feels free to dismantle, incorporating its pieces into the new symbol of his own glory, Baghdad. Whether a symbol of Persian glory or Persian defeat, the ruins of Ḥusrō’s palace are treated here as a vehicle for al-Manṣūr to relate to those who ruled before him.

Al-Ṭabarī follows this with another account (in a new report) concerned with Baghdad’s predecessors. This one narrates the origins of five of the eight gates of al-Manṣūr’s Round City: the biblical king Solomon, son of David, obtained five iron gates, “which no one today could imitate”, from “devils (*ṣayāṭīn*)”, for his city al-Zandaward. Then, much

22. ṬABARĪ, *Tārīḥ*, vol. 3, p. 320: “*li-anna-hu ‘alam min a’lām al-islām, yastadillu bi-hi al-nāzir ilay-hi ‘alā anna-hu lam yakun li-yuzāla miṭla aṣḥābi-hi ‘an-hu bi-amr dunyā, wa-innamā huwa ‘alā amr dīn. wa-ma’a hāḍā yā amīr al-mu’minīn, fa-inna fī-hi muṣallā ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib ṣalawāt Allāh ‘alay-hi.*”

23. ṬABARĪ, *Tārīḥ*, vol. 3, p. 320: “*hayhāt yā Ḥālīd! abayta illā al-mayl ilā aṣḥābi-ka al-‘aḡam!*”

24. ṬABARĪ, *Tārīḥ*, vol. 3, p. 320-321: “*fa-ammā id fa’alta fa-innī arā anna tahdim al-ān ḥattā talḥaq bi-qawā’idi-hi, li’allā yuqāl inna-ka qad ‘aḡazta ‘an hadmi-hi.*”

25. Al-Mas’ūdī writes of al-Manṣūr, “it is said he was the stingiest of people (*yuqāl huwa abḥal al-nās*)” (MAS’ŪDĪ, *Tanbīh*, vol. 4, p. 342). I have borrowed the epithet “penny-pinching” to describe al-Manṣūr from WENDELL 1971, p. 113.

later, al-Ḥaḡḡāḡ, governor of Iraq under ‘Abd al-Malik, took the gates to his new city of Wāsiṭ. Finally, when al-Manṣūr needed gates for Baghdad, he requisitioned the demonic portals for his own purposes.²⁶ The spoliation of gates was a common symbol of conquest in antiquity.²⁷ In the case of al-Manṣūr’s use of Solomon’s gates, it should be understood to signify inheritance more than conquest. Although recognizing the practical imperative of supplying gates for the city, a Muslim living in Abbasid Baghdad a century and a half later would surely have seen this story as emblematic of the caliphate’s succession to the pre-Islamic prophets, of which Solomon was one.

When the Byzantine ambassador is introduced, then, Baghdad’s foundations have already been laid by foreign hands and its construction out of foreign materials has begun. Rather than locating the tale of the Byzantine’s advice to suit his chronology, al-Ṭabarī places it where it is most thematically appropriate. Thus, the critical ambassador’s visit forms part of a narrative of foreign influence, from predecessors (the prophet Solomon and Ḥusrō, Sasanian king of kings) and contemporaries (Ḥālīd b. Barmak and the Byzantine ambassador), on the origins of the Abbasid capital of Baghdad.

This, then, allows us to suggest an answer to the first question: advice from an *ambassador* was seen as part of the foreign influence that was crucial to Baghdad’s origins. The ambassador, like other representatives and material symbols of foreign entities, directly affected the caliph’s construction. Writing from a different vantage point, al-Ḥaṭīb al-Baḡdādī described a distant, glorious beginning to a city which in his time looked very little like al-Manṣūr’s Baghdad; then, as in al-Ṭabarī’s time, the account of the critical ambassador continued to form part of the city’s lore.²⁸ Just as stones from Khusro’s palace came to form part of the Round City, the criticism from the mouth of an emperor’s representative was imprinted upon the city’s internal organization in the form of a market-free ‘downtown,’ a mark which, alongside the green dome which once stood out above the Abbasid capital, was to be remembered long after it had ceased to exist.²⁹

We can now pose the second question with which this paper is concerned: if the ambassador’s role signifies direct foreign influence on Baghdad, then why was it significant that he was a *Byzantine* ambassador? At least from al-Ḥaṭīb al-Baḡdādī’s text, we are left with the impression that there are a number of “delegations from kings” waiting at the caliph’s

26. ṬABARĪ, *Tārīḥ*, vol. 3, p. 321.

27. On the “carrying off of city gates in antiquity,” see WENDELL 1971, p. 114.

28. As evidence of Baghdad’s decay, al-Ḥaṭīb’s section on the topography of Baghdad is particularly lengthy; it was quite necessary to describe Baghdad as it once was. Bearing witness to decay, al-Ḥaṭīb described the ruined state of several original canals in his day (BAḠDĀDĪ, *Tārīḥ*, vol. 1, p. 79). See also LE STRANGE 1924, p. 43-45. In Baḡdādī, Solomon’s gates (vol.1, p. 75) and Khusro’s palace (vol.1, p. 130) also continued to form part of Baghdad’s lore.

29. Al-Ḥaṭīb notes that Baghdad’s famous green dome, whose importance he emphasizes as an emblem of the Abbasid dynasty, had fallen by his time (BAḠDĀDĪ, *Tārīḥ*, vol. 1, p. 73); when al-Ṭabarī died, this monument was still standing.

door. Why, in our tale of the critical ambassador, did it matter that the emissary admitted to the caliph's presence turned out to be "an envoy from the court of the Byzantine king?"³⁰

A look at al-Ṭabarī's account, plainest in tone, provides a clue as to the significance of Byzantine involvement in the market transfer. The chronographer details the exchange as follows: after the Byzantine visitor returned from a tour of the city, al-Manṣūr said to him,

" 'What did you think of my city?'—for (the Patrikios) had climbed to the wall of the city and the domes of the gates. (The Patrikios) replied, 'I thought it was lovely, except that I saw that your enemies are with you in your city.' (Al-Manṣūr) said, 'Who are they?' He replied, 'The market-rabble (*sūqa*).' Abū Ġa'far (al-Manṣūr) kept silent about it (*aḍabba 'alayhā*). Then, when the Patrikios departed, he ordered that the market be expelled from the city... [and eventually moved to al-Karḥ]."³¹

That is, despite his characteristically stern initial reaction as demonstrated by his discreet silence, the ambassador's advice is too compelling for him to reject it. Al-Manṣūr and later Abbasids were known for their autocratic and distant style of ruling; could it be that this account blames Byzantine influence for this signature of Abbasid rule?

Al-Ṭabarī's telling may merely hint at this, but in al-Ḥaṭīb al-Baġdādī's text, written at a time when the caliph's subjection to his Buyid emir allowed for the more open criticism of the Abbasids, the suggestion has become more apparent.³² The first version of the account in al-Ḥaṭīb's history, as mentioned above, closely resembles al-Ṭabarī's version, so much so that it is clearly based on al-Ṭabarī's text, or at least upon a version which was closely related to it: the opening is a paraphrase of al-Ṭabarī's opening, and the end expresses the same basic idea, that the markets were "ejected" from the city, with the overlap of a few key words.³³ It is in the middle section, the advice itself, that al-Ḥaṭīb's telling differs most significantly, for rather than issue a blanket condemnation of all the market-goers as the caliph's "enemies", the ambassador now provides a more nuanced assessment of the security situation:

"(The Patrikios) said, 'Your enemy passes through [the Round City] whenever he wants, without you knowing; and news about you is disseminated in remote regions such that you cannot conceal it.' (Al-Manṣūr) asked, 'How?' (The Patrikios) replied, 'The markets are in (the city), and no one is barred from the markets, so the enemy enters as if he wants to engage in

30. BAĠDĀDĪ, *Tārīḥ*, vol. 1, p. 78.

31. ṬABARĪ, *Tārīḥ*, vol. 3, p. 323. 'To keep/be silent' is one of the meanings of *aḍabba*; according to *Lisān al-'Arab*, "*Aḍabba al-qawmu idā sakatū wa-amsakū 'an al-ḥadīṭ*." (But see the following sentence: "*wa-aḍabbū idā takallamū wa-afādū fī al-ḥadīṭ*."") In Hugh Kennedy's translation, this sentence is rendered "Abū Ġa'far was silent about it" (KENNEDY 1990, p. 8).

32. The Buyids were generally indifferent to discussions concerning caliphal legitimacy, as long as these did not interfere with the authority of the Buyid sultanate; the Buyid court was tolerant of a variety of intellectual movements (MOTTAHEDEH 1980, p. 28-29).

33. Additionally, in al-Ṭabarī, before the account of the critical ambassador, but in the same *ḥabar*, there is a tale about the caliph's uncle not wishing to walk into the city on foot; al-Ḥaṭīb includes a similar account immediately before the ambassador account in his text as well, now as a separate *ḥabar*. LASSNER (1970, p. 246) notes this parallel. *Aḥbār* were often fragmented into smaller reports in transmission (ROBINSON 2003, p. 36).

trade (*yatasawwaq*). As for the merchants, they travel to remote regions and discuss news about you’.”³⁴

Thus, the Byzantine recommends that the Abbasid sovereign distance himself from his subjects to protect against breaches in both physical security and intelligence. Al-Manṣūr’s response in this version is modified to emphasize his eagerness to carry out the foreign visitor’s suggestion: “They say that on the instant al-Manṣūr commanded that the markets be expelled from the city to al-Karḥ.” The ambassador provides a learned justification of autocratic distance; convinced, the caliph complies.

Al-Ḥaṭīb’s other version of the account, a more comical and dramatic narrative, most openly insinuates that the ambassador’s visit implicates Byzantium in encouraging al-Manṣūr’s autocratic tendencies. In this version – which appears prior to the simpler one in al-Ḥaṭīb’s book – we are told that not long after the Byzantine ambassador is welcomed into al-Manṣūr’s presence,

“Al-Manṣūr heard a cry that almost uprooted the palace, so he said [to his chamberlain], ‘Rabī, send someone to see what that is.’ Then he heard a cry that was louder than the first, so he said, ‘Rabī, send someone to see what that is.’ Then he heard a cry that was louder than the first two, so he said, ‘Rabī, go out yourself.’ So Rabī went out then returned and said, ‘O Commander of the Faithful, a cow that was near to being slaughtered overcame the slaughterer and went out to go around in the markets’.”³⁵

This prelude follows a concise tripartite structure common to entertaining tales, with the caliph’s first two commands explicitly building, in parallel with the mounting volume of the cries (“louder than the first”; “louder than the first two”) towards his last command which at last yields a result. Furthermore, this passage is only loosely connected to the ambassador’s criticism by the following lines:

“The Byzantine was paying attention to Rabī, trying to understand what he said, and al-Manṣūr noticed the Byzantine’s attentiveness, so he said, ‘Rabī, explain it to him.’ (Rabī) explained it to (the Byzantine), who said, ‘O Commander of the Faithful, you have built a construction which no one has built before you, but it has three defects.’ (Al-Manṣūr) said, ‘What are they?’ He replied, ‘Its first defect is its distance from water; people need water for their lips. As for its second defect, the eye is green (*ḥaḍira*) and so longs for greenery (*ḥuḍra*),³⁶ and in this constriction of yours (*fī binā’i-ka hādā*), there is no garden. As for the third defect, your subjects are with you in your city, and if the subjects are with the king in his city then his secrets are disclosed’.”

The criticism which the Byzantine offers, although depicted here as a direct response to what he learns about the runaway cow, is not actually explicitly related to what he has just heard. The cow may be understood as a prompt for the ambassador to voice critiques that have been on his mind, possibly suggesting to him (as to the reader of the account) the

34. BAĞDĀDĪ, *Tārīḥ*, vol. 1, p. 80.

35. BAĞDĀDĪ, vol. 1, p. 78.

36. *Lisān al-‘Arab* gives many figurative meanings of *ḥaḍira* (lit. ‘green’); e.g., applied to people’s skin it can mean ‘brown.’ LASSNER (1970, p. 58) translates this clause as: “...indeed the eye is green and yearns for green foliage”.

security risk of the markets' proximity (if a cow can wander right up to the palace window, what might an enemy do?),³⁷ but the narrative does not make the connection clear. Instead, the cow prelude, while emphasizing the ambassador's foreignness by showing him to have difficulty understanding Arabic, serves primarily as a neat rhetorical parallel to the tripartite criticism which the ambassador now offers.

This rhetorical structure can guide us in reading the text, which is quite direct in its symbolism. The three critiques—the need for waterworks, gardens, and distance from subjects—can be seen to represent three (Byzantine) cultural exports which the ambassador seeks to thrust upon the caliph: urban planning, taste, and autocratic statecraft. Interpreting the three items this way is supported by the caliph's initial response and his subsequent actions:

“Al-Manṣūr grew cold towards him and said to him, ‘As for what you say about water, enough water for us (*ḥasbu-nā min al-mā*) is that which wets our lips.’³⁸ As for the second defect, we were not created for amusement (*lahw*) and play. As for what you say about my secrets, I keep no secret from my subjects.’ Afterwards he understood the correctness (of what he had been told) and turned to [two of his subjects] and said, ‘Lay out two canals for me from the Tigris; plant a garden for me on al-‘Abbāsiyya (an island in the Tigris); and move the people to al-Karḥ.’”

The caliph's first reply asserts ‘our’ (presumably Baghdad's residents') ability to cope with little water, apparently in a proud declaration of self-denial, while making clear that Baghdad's water infrastructure needs no improvement. His counter to the Byzantine's insistence on the need for gardens to please the eye highlights the lack of practicality in that insistence, implying that he has no need for this foreign taste for decorative vegetation. His last statement is the most telling, especially since it is the portion contained in the other tradition of this account (reported both by al-Ṭabarī and, in altered form, by al-Ḥaṭīb), almost certainly the earlier one: he has no secrets.

Secrets are what the standard autocrat is expected to have. The Prophet and his four “rightly-guided” successors were distinguished from “kings” by their justice and the importance of consensus in their decision-making.³⁹ Legends of the early conquests depict the Muslims and their leaders as just, frank, willing to consult others, and far from

37. LASSNER (1980, p. 200-201), for example, interprets the cow as an indication of security risk. This idea is supported by another of al-Ḥaṭīb's accounts in which al-Manṣūr locates the butcher shops especially far from himself “because,” as Lassner puts it, “they reportedly bore the frightening combination of dull wits and sharp knives” (p. 200).

38. Instead of *ḥasbu-nā*, LASSNER (1970, p. 58) reads *ḥasab-nā*, so that his translation is: “...we have calculated the amount of water necessary to moisten our lips”. Either way, the sense is in essence the same: we need only a small amount of drinking water, and so what we have is sufficient. Lassner's reading puts more emphasis on the “calculation” involved in providing water to the city and thus on the technical expertise required to develop urban infrastructure.

39. For example, the Kharijites referred to all the caliphs following the first four “rightly-guided” caliphs as “kings,” as opposed to a true caliph; the ideal ruler ruled by consensus and was answerable to the judgment of the community (CRONE 2004, p. 56-58). Some Mu'tazilites held that a unified Islamic caliphate had lost its value since caliphs had become kings. Kings, they said, were a universal commonplace, but the original pious rulers of Islam were not kings (*ibid.*, p. 66-67).

the tyranny to be found in their Byzantine enemies.⁴⁰ By contrast, the Umayyads – who themselves were culturally influenced by Byzantine emissaries,⁴¹ who were geographically, and for a time linguistically, in close proximity with the Byzantine empire, and whose interest in Byzantine culture continued through the end of their rule⁴² – were frequently denigrated with accusations that they were “kings,” a claim also supported by pointing to filial inheritance of the caliphate and the liberal use of the tools of autocracy, such as jails and bodyguards.⁴³ Abbasid revolutionary ideology promised to topple the tyranny of kingship and return to just rule, but by al-Ṭabarī’s day, it was abundantly clear that the Abbasids were as autocratic as the Umayyads, if not more so. Early consultative government was contrasted with arbitrary Abbasid rule.⁴⁴ In his own time, al-Manṣūr’s ruthlessness was noticed – he was said to have “governed like a king”⁴⁵ – and criticized, especially in view of Abbasid claims to restoring the righteous caliphate after the impious, illegitimate Umayyads.⁴⁶

In this light, al-Manṣūr’s claim to have no secrets from his people should be read as a plea that he is not, in fact, a distant, autocratic ruler, especially since the ambassador implies that he is a “king” (*malik*). The caliph’s subsequent action – ejecting the markets from his Round City – instantly condemn him. After promising reform, the Abbasids al-Manṣūr onwards were happy to betray the Muslim ideals of the revolution for autocratic kingship, as imported directly – so suggests the account – from the nearest contemporary

40. For example, in a narrative of the early conquests ascribed to al-Wāqidi (9th c.) but probably compiled in the 12th or 13th century (see ROBINSON 2003, p. 43), Abū Bakr consults the Muslims (not simply his immediate circle of advisors) at key moments – e.g., “*istašāra al-muslimīn*” (WĀQIDĪ, Futūh, vol. 1, p. 22) – and instructs a departing general, “Do not become angry with your army nor with your companions, and consult them before you command, and be just, and keep far from you tyranny and injustice (*lā taḡḏab ‘alā qawmi-ka wa-lā ‘alā aṣḥābi-ka wa-šāwir-hum fī l-amr wa-ista‘mil al-‘adl wa-bā‘id ‘an-ka al-ḡulm wa-l-ḡawr*)” (WĀQIDĪ, Futūh, vol. 1, p. 8). In contrast, Byzantine commanders are distant: when the Muslim armies surround Damascus and the townspeople wish to consult the commander of their garrison, Thomas, he is not immediately available to them: “the people went to Thomas and found armed men guarding him (*maḏā al-qawm ilā Tūmā wa-‘alay-hi riḡāl muwakkilūn bi-l-silāh*)”; Waq. i. 64. Thomas is the emperor’s agent, not easily accessible, under guard in his own city – an autocrat.

41. KENNEDY 1992, p. 133-136. For several “cultural” embassies to Umayyads and other Muslim potentates, see CANARD 1964, p. 36, n. 5. Visible evidence of reception of Byzantine culture under the Umayyads comes from the mosaics at the Great Mosque of Damascus and the Mosque of the Prophet in Madina, for whose assembly the Byzantine emperor is said to have sent mosaic tiles and craftsmen (GIBB 1958). Whether the masons were locals or sent by the “king of the Romans” himself, the mosaics themselves bespeak their patrons’ enthusiasm for art in the Byzantine style.

42. For example, the Umayyad palace Quṣayr ‘Amra was patronized between 715 and 750, most likely by Yazīd II (r. 720-724) or al-Walīd II (r. 743-744), suggesting continued Byzantine cultural influence late into this period of few embassies (GRABAR 1954; FOWDEN 2004, p. 142-174).

43. CRONE 2004, p. 44.

44. MOTTAHEDEH 1989, p. 83.

45. MAS‘ŪDĪ, Tanbīh, p. 342: “*yasūs siyāsāt al-mulūk*.” Al-Manṣūr’s panegyrists, on the other hand, insist on his willingness to “consult”; one of al-Manṣūr’s uncles (who had an interest in praising his nephew) reported, “al-Manṣūr would always consult us in all his affairs, as a result of which Ibrāhīm b. Harma praised him [in a poem] (*mā zālā al-Manṣūr yuṣāwirunā fī ḡamī umūri-hi ḥattā imtadaḥa-hu Ibrāhīm b. Harma*)” (MAS‘ŪDĪ, Murūḡ, vol. 4, p. 137-138 (#2387)). For centuries, formal consultation endured as a way to legitimize decisions and reinforce loyalty (MOTTAHEDEH 1989).

46. For the claim to restore the righteous caliphate, see, e.g., KENNEDY 1981, p. 58.

example of a powerful king, the *basileus* of Constantinople. Al-Manṣūr, contrary to his plea, had secrets from his people, and a Byzantine emissary helped him conceal them.

In a similar vein, al-Manṣūr's decision to provide his city with a better water supply and "greenery" in response to the Byzantine's first two pieces of advice shows him betraying the very ascetic ideals he hypocritically claimed to uphold earlier when he denied the need for more water and rejected "amusement and play." These ideals, like conceptions of good leadership, had their origins in the beginnings of Islam and the pre-Islamic Arab past.⁴⁷ Although not a historically plausible explanation for the decision to cultivate 'Abbāsiyya, nor for the decision to provide Baghdad with waterworks, nevertheless this story may well have seemed plausible to al-Ḥaṭīb's contemporaries. The cultivation of 'Abbāsiyya was probably a commercial enterprise,⁴⁸ and the infrastructure for transporting water into the city seems to have been in place before the ambassador's visit.⁴⁹ However, the placement of these critiques in a Byzantine's mouth correlates well with the widespread perception (often true) that technical expertise came from books found in Byzantine lands. To writers living during and after the Greek-Arabic translation movement of the 8th, 9th and 10th centuries⁵⁰ – in which Greek books on scientific and technical subjects were particularly favored with translation⁵¹ – it would have seemed plausible that Baghdad's water supply system and public landscaping were improved by a Greek. Moreover, the presence in Baghdad of a highly productive mill-complex with its own tale of Byzantine origins – it was known as "the Mill-Complex of the Patrikios" and was said to have been "designed by a Patrikios who came to (al-Manṣūr) from the Byzantine king" – gave further reason to believe that the Abbasid capital's infrastructure might have developed under direct Byzantine influence.⁵²

In short, these first two criticisms (scarcity of water and greenery) serve the narrative purpose by plausibly emphasizing al-Manṣūr's willingness to follow *all* of the ambassador's suggestions – demonstrating the foreigner's sway over him – and by accusing al-Manṣūr (or the Abbasids in general) of casting off the ideals associated with just leadership. Perhaps

47. For example, only reluctantly did the second caliph 'Umar, a companion of the Prophet who was known for his asceticism, accept the practice becoming prevalent in the garrison town of Basra of using materials more permanent than mud-brick in construction. For the development of Basra, see ALSAYYAD 1991, p. 48.

48. LASSNER 1980, p. 200: "the development of the island [Abbāsiyya] was an ambitious commercial venture that reflected opportunities for capital investment at a time of widespread expansion in the suburban districts."

49. Given that water conduits existed before the walls of the city were built, LASSNER (1970, p. 246) argues that this part of the narrative represents "a later invention concocted neatly to explain certain changes in architectural arrangement of the Round City..."; see also LASSNER 1980, p. 198-199.

50. The translation movement began in the days of al-Manṣūr (GUTAS 1998, p. 28ff.) and ended "around the turn of the millennium" (*ibid.*, p. 151).

51. ROSENTHAL 1975, p. 10.

52. YA'QUBĪ, *Buldān*, p. 243 (9th c.): "al-raḥā al-'uzmā yuqāl la-hā Raḥā al-Biṭrīq wa-kānat mā'at ḥaḡar taḡull fī kull sana mī'at alf dirham handasahā biṭrīq qadima 'alay-hi min malik al-Rūm." In al-Ḥaṭīb's passage on the same complex, this Byzantine is called "a Byzantine ambassador" and identified by name; BAĞDĀDĪ, *Tārīḫ*, vol. 1, p. 91-92: "wāfīd li-malik al-Rūm wa-ismu-hu..." (91); "kāna abū-hu malikan min mulūk al-Rūm fī ayyām Mu'āwiya b. Abī Sufyān" (92).

it was understandable that the Umayyads, perched as they were in an old Roman city in an old Roman province, had chosen to adorn their bathhouses with images of voluptuous human forms,⁵³ but after the Abbasid revolution, one might have expected new vigor in enforcing Islamic moral ideals. Instead, implies our tale, Byzantine taste was imported anew, directly from the emperor's court.

We can therefore suggest an answer to the second question as well: it was significant that the ambassador criticizing al-Manṣūr was Byzantine because this political and cultural affiliation made it reasonable, in the eyes of such a story's Muslim audience, to hold him—an agent of direct Byzantine influence—partially to blame for the new dynasty's failure to live up to its own pious propaganda.

In this paper, I have examined a single episode in Baghdad's early history, in which a Byzantine ambassador visited the caliph al-Manṣūr. From the contextual placement of the account in al-Ṭabarī's chronicle, I have argued that the ambassador's visit was understood as part of the foreign influence which helped shape the new city and the dynasty which ruled from it. Furthermore, by reading the individual accounts closer, I have concluded that in the case of the Byzantine ambassador, this influence entailed encouraging al-Manṣūr's tyrannical tendencies and, in al-Ḥaṭīb's later version, leading the caliph to indulge in horticultural "amusement and play."

The origins of the Abbasid dynasty and Baghdad remained highly relevant as long as Abbasid caliphs ruled from "the mother of the world, mistress over the nations."⁵⁴ This maternal city was in its first centuries a marvelous, prosperous capital, its origins tightly linked to al-Manṣūr, its destiny tied to the Abbasid caliphate. Origin myths for Baghdad abound, and al-Manṣūr is personally involved in choosing the site of the new glorious city, in at least one account setting out alone to find the site. While some accounts ascribe the choice of the site to practical considerations, like its optimal location for trade and its fine climate, in more marvelous accounts, the site is chosen for the caliph by divine decree in the form of a prophecy.⁵⁵ Then, having found the site, the caliph was said to have thanked God for saving the site for him and keeping all who came before him ignorant of it, declaring in his excitement, "It will be the most prosperous city on earth!"⁵⁶ The founding of Baghdad

53. FOWDEN 2004, p. 57-79.

54. So Yāqūt, writing only half a century before the ignominious end of the Abbasid caliphate, begins his entry on Baghdad in his *Muḡam al-Buldān*: "*Baḡdād: umm al-dunyā wa-sayyidat al-bilād.*"

55. E.g., ṬABARĪ, *Tārīḥ*, vol. 3, p. 272-277; YA'QŪBĪ, *Tārīḥ*, p. 373 (practical only); later, YĀQŪT, *Muḡam*, vol. 1, p. 457-459. Tales associating a monk or a monastery with the founding of Baghdad are common; the patriarch of Alexandria Sa'īd b. al-Biṭrīq (alias Eutychius; d. 328/940) wrote in his universal history that al-Manṣūr "built the city of Baghdad and called it the City of Peace; however, it was called the city of Baghdad because there was a monk who lived there in his hermitage, and the monk's name was Baghdad (*banā madīnat Baḡdād wa-sammā-hā Madīnat al-Salām wa-innamā summiyat madīnat Baḡdād li-annahu kāna bi-hā rāhib fi ṣawma'a wa-kāna ism al-rāhib Baḡdād*)" (SA'ĪD B. AL-BIṬRĪQ, *Tārīḥ*, p. 49. Al-Ya'qūbī (d. after 292/905) confirms that Baghdad was built near a monastery (YA'QŪBĪ, *Buldān*, p. 235). This phenomenon was not unique to Baghdad: similar accounts link monks to the founding of other cities, such as Wāsiṭ (scouted out in 83/702 by al-Ḥaḡḡāḡ, Umayyad governor of Iraq) (WENDELL 1971, p. 111-113).

56. Tārīḥ 238: "*fa-l-ḥamdu li-llāh allādī dahāra-hā lī wa-aḡfala 'an-hā kulla man taqaddamanī... la-takūnanna a'mar madīna fī al-arḍ.*"

was a legendary event, and its existence was to be an everlasting boon to the caliphate, for according to the city's horoscope, no caliph would ever die within its walls.⁵⁷ Its official name, "City of Peace," referred to a Qur'anic name for paradise.⁵⁸ Baghdad was the city of the great Abbasid caliphs, of whom al-Manṣūr was, if not the very first, then the first to consolidate the dynasty's power and anchor it firmly on the throne. Any story related under the Abbasids concerning the origins of Baghdad would have carried considerable political and cultural significance.

Thus we should understand the meddlesome ambassador's appearance in al-Ṭabarī's influential chronicle, and again in later works, as a reflection of how later generations, who were familiar with Greek cultural influence on their society, viewed Byzantine influence on Abbasid origins. This account, though not indispensable to a narrative of Baghdad's early days, nevertheless continued to be repeated even in the 13th century.⁵⁹ Both al-Ṭabarī's version and al-Ḥaṭīb al-Baġdādī's three-pronged alternative provide insight into Arab perception of Byzantine influence in the beginnings of Abbasid customs, most importantly their king-like behavior. If one asked, in the centuries that followed Baghdad's legendary beginnings, why al-Manṣūr and his successors elevated themselves so far above their subjects, surrounding themselves by wall upon wall, no better in this regard than the Umayyad usurpers before them, this account provided a plausible answer: it all began when al-Manṣūr welcomed into his presence "an envoy from the court of the Byzantine king."

APPENDIX: Accounts of the Critical Ambassador

1. al-Ṭabarī's account (ṬABARĪ, Tārīḥ, vol. 3, p. 322-3)

وذكر عن يحيى بن الحسن بن عبد الخالق خال الفضل بن الربيع:
 أن عيسى بن علي شكّا إلى أبي جعفر، فقال: ...
 فلم تزل على ذلك مدة حتى قدم عليه بطريق من بطارقة الروم وافداً، فأمر الربيع أن يطوف به في المدينة وما
 حولها ليرى العمران والبناء، فطاف به الربيع، فلما انصرف قال: «كيف رأيت مدينتي؟» وقد كان أصدع إلى سور
 المدينة وقباب الأبواب. قال: «رأيتُ بناءً حسناً إلا أنني قد رأيتُ أعداءك معك في مدينتك». قال: «ومن هم؟»
 قال: «السوقة». قال: فأضبّ عليها أبو جعفر، فلما انصرف البطريق أمر بإخراج السوق من المدينة، وتقدّم إلى
 إبراهيم بن حبيش الكوفي، وضمّ إليه جواس بن المسيّب اليماني مولا، وأمرهما أن يبنيّا الأسواق ناحية الكرخ ...

57. For examination of some of the folklore surrounding Baghdad's origins, WENDELL 1971. Horoscope: BAĠDĀDĪ, Tārīḥ, vol. 1, 67f.; cited in WENDELL 1971, p. 122. For a counter to Wendell's conjecture of "cosmological origins" of Baghdad's shape, LASSNER 1980, p. 175ff.

58. *Dār al-salām; Qur'ān* 6.127, 10.25; cited in DURĪ 1960.

59. Found in Bar Hebraeus (d. 1286) but not found in Yāqūt (d. 1229), as mentioned above.

2. Bar Hebraeus's account (IBN AL-IBRI, Tārīḥ, vol. 3, p. 212)

فجاءه رسول لملك الروم . فأمر الربيع فطاف به في المدينة . فقال : « كيف رأيت ؟ » . قال : « رأيت بناء حسناً إلا أنني رأيت أعداءك معك وهم السوقة . فلما عاد الرسول عنه أمر بإخراجهم إلى ناحية الكرخ . . . »

3. al-Ḥaṭīb al-Baġdādī's plain account (BAĠDĀDĪ, Tārīḥ, vol. 1, p. 80)

قال محمد بن خلف : وأخبرني الحارث بن أبي أسامة . قال :
لما فرغ أبو جعفر المنصور من مدينة السلام وصير الأسواق في طاقات مدينته من كل جانب ؛ قدم عليه وفد ملك الروم ، فأمر أن يُطاف بهم في المدينة ثم دعاهم . فقال للبطريق : « كيف رأيت هذه المدينة ؟ » . قال : « رأيتُ أمرها كاملاً إلا في خلة واحدة » . قال : « ما هي ؟ » . قال : « عدوك يخترقها متى يشاء وأنت لا تعلم ؛ وأخبارك مبثوثة في الآفاق لا يمكن سترها » . قال : « كيف ؟ » . قال : « الأسواق فيها والأسواق غير ممنوع منها أحد فيدخل العدو كأنه يريد أن يتسوّق ؛ وأما التجار فإنها ترد الآفاق فيتحدثون بأخبارك » . قال : فرعموا أنه أمر المنصور حينئذ بإخراج الأسواق من المدينة إلى الكرخ ، وأن يُبنى ما بين الصراة إلى نهر عيسى ، وولى ذلك محمد بن حبيش الكاتب . . . »

4. al-Ḥaṭīb al-Baġdādī's embellished account (BAĠDĀDĪ, Tārīḥ, vol. 1, p. 78-79)

أخبرنا الحسين بن محمد بن الحسن المؤدّب قال : أخبرني إبراهيم بن عبد الله ابن إبراهيم الشطّبي بجرجان قال : نبأنا أبو إسحق الهجيمي قال : قال أبو العيّناء : بلغني أن المنصور جلس يوماً فقال للربيع : « انظر من الباب من وفود الملوك فأدخله » . قال : قلت : « وافد من قبل ملك الروم » . قال : « أدخله » . فدخل فبينما هو جالس عند أمير المؤمنين ، إذ سمع المنصور صرخة كادت تقلع القصر . فقال : « يا ربيع ينظر ما هذا » . قال : ثم سمع صرخة هي أشد من الأولى . فقال : « يا ربيع ينظر ما هذا » . قال : ثم سمع صرخة هي أشد من الأولى . فقال : « يا ربيع اخرج بنفسك » . فخرج الربيع ثم دخل فقال : « يا أمير المؤمنين بقرة قُرّبت لتُدبَح فغلبت الجازر وخرجت تدور في الأسواق » .

وأصغى الرومي إلى الربيع يتفهّم ما قال ، ففطن المنصور لإصغاء الرومي ، فقال : « يا ربيع أفهمه » قال فأفهمه . فقال الرومي : « يا أمير المؤمنين إنك بنيت بناءً لم بينه أحدٌ كان قبلك ، وفيه ثلاثة عيوب » . قال : « وما هي ؟ » . قال : « أما أول عيب فيه فبعده عن الماء ولا بد للناس من الماء لشفاهم ، وأما العيب الثاني فإن العين خضرة وتشتاقي إلى الخضرة وليس في بنائك هذا يستان ، وأما العيب الثالث فإن رعيتك معك في بنائك وإذا كانت الرعية مع الملك في بنائه فشا سرّه » . قال : فتجلد عليه المنصور ، فقال له : « أما قولك في الماء فحسبنا من الماء ما بل شفاهنا ، وأما العيب الثاني فإننا لم نُخلَق للهو واللعب ، وأما قولك في سرّي فما لي سرّ دون رعيتي » . قال : ثم عرف الصواب فوجه بشميس وخلاد – وخلاد هو جد أبي العيّناء – فقال : « مُدّا لي قناتين من دجلة ، واغرسوا لي العباسية ، وانقلوا الناس إلى الكرخ » .

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