

The Imperial Elite in the Umayyad and ‘Abbasid Caliphates

Andrew Peacock

This paper investigates the shifting nature of the elites in the early Islamic empire, between the seventh and eleventh centuries. As early as the ninth century, the prominent Arabic litterateur al-Jahiz had noted the contrast between the first two caliphates, the Umayyad (r. 660-750) and the Abbasid (750-1258). The latter was, he said, “a Persian, Khurasani state (*dawla*)” in contrast to the Umayyads who were “an Arab state” backed by Syrian troops. Al-Jahiz’s description has strongly influenced modern scholarship, which has tended to distinguish between “the Arab kingdom” of the first Islamic empire, reliant on an Arab, Muslim elite that as far as possible segregated itself from the subject populace, and the Abbasids, who had come to power through the support of Khurasani converts to Islam and who envisioned themselves as successors to the Sasanian empire. Although in some respects this outline has much to commend it, the reality was more complicated. Alongside the Arab military elite, the Umayyads had relied on their subject populations to administer their empires, continuing initially the use of Greek and Pahlavi as administrative languages; even when these were replaced by Arabic in the later seventh century, the recently converted, or indeed unconverted bureaucratic elite continued to play an important role. Perhaps the shift between Umayyad and Abbasid practices is most notable in the military. Indeed, it is here that developments lay the basis for an even more profound transformation of the Islamic polity, as the Abbasids’ desire to mitigate their reliance on their Khurasani supporters led to their recruitment of mercenaries and slave soldiers predominantly from the Turkish fringes of the Islamic world. This Turkish military contingent formed a new elite of its own that came to take control of key provinces such as Egypt, and ultimately even depose Caliphs. The Abbasids’ relationship with these elites thus laid the basis for the collapse of Abbasid political authority and the domination of the Middle East and Central Asia by new Turkish dynasties from the eleventh century.