

The Causes of Anarchy in Samarra and its Consequences for the Abbasid Caliphate

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Abstract

Anarchy in Samarra (861-870) - a period of acute political instability in the Abbasid Caliphate, caused by the conflict between factions of the Turkic guard and the weakening of central authority. The article systematically analyzes the causes of the Samarra crisis - from the institutional changes associated with al-Mu'tasim's establishment of the new capital of Samarra and the formation of a professional army of ghulams, to the political intrigues at al-Mutawakkil's court. It demonstrates how the concentration of power in the hands of Turkic military commanders led to a series of palace coups from 861 to 870 and reduced the caliphs to puppets under their control. Military, political, and social factors, including the role of the conflict between the new Turkic elite and the old Arab nobility, are examined separately. The consequences of the anarchy in Samarra for the Abbasid Caliphate were revealed: the actual disintegration of a unified empire, the loss of control by the central government over provinces, and the transition to a decentralized system of local dynasties. In conclusion, the impact of the Samarra events on the subsequent decline of the Caliphate is summarized, and the author's conclusions regarding the patterns of this crisis situation are presented.

Keywords: Samarra, Abbasid Caliphate, Turkish Guard, al-Mutawakkil, anarchy, ghulams, palace coups, decentralization.

Introduction

“Anarchy in Samarra” is the accepted name in historiography for the crisis nine-year period (861-870) in the history of the Abbasid Caliphate, when several caliphs changed in a short period, and actual power passed into the hands of military commanders of Turkic origin[1]. The assassination of Caliph al-Mutawakkil in December 861 marked the beginning of a series of palace coups and internecine struggles in the new capital of the caliphate - the city of Samarra[2]. Many researchers emphasize that it was “the anarchy in Samarra” that became a turning point that ultimately led to

the decline and disintegration of the Abbasid Empire[3]. Indeed, the Samarra crisis period marks the loss of central authority control over provinces and the transformation of caliphs into puppets in powerful emirate palaces. However, the reasons for the emergence of this anarchy and the mechanism for its development were complex and multifactorial. A systematic analysis of the political, military, and institutional preconditions that led to the events in Samarra is required, as well as an assessment of the consequences of the crisis for the subsequent history of the Caliphate. The aim of this study is to identify and analyze the main causes of the Anarchy in Samarra and to demonstrate its consequences for the Abbasid Caliphate, taking into account the influence of political intrigues, military factors (particularly the role of the Turkic guard), and institutional changes (the transfer of the capital and the transformation of the system of power).

To achieve this aim, the article addresses the following objectives:

1. To examine the historical situation by the mid-ninth century on the eve of the Samarran events (the foundation of Samarra, the rise of the Turkic guard, etc.).
2. To analyze the specific causes and immediate triggers of the crisis of 861 (the assassination of al-Mutawakkil), including court conflicts and the dissatisfaction of various social groups.
3. To trace the course of the Anarchy in Samarra (861–870), characterizing the reigns and depositions of the caliphs al-Muntasir, al-Musta'in, al-Mu'tazz, and al-Muhtadi.
4. To assess the political and socio-economic consequences of the Samarran period for the Abbasid state (the weakening of central authority, the fragmentation of the provinces, and changes in the balance of power between the caliphate and regional dynasties).

The relevance of the study lies in the fact that the Samarran period constituted a turning point that significantly influenced the subsequent history of the Caliphate and Central Asia. An analysis of the causes of the Anarchy in Samarra allows for a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of political decentralization in the early medieval Muslim state and the role of various ethnic groups (Arabs, Persians, Turks) in these processes [8, 9].

The novelty of the study lies in its comprehensive approach to the problem: it draws on both the accounts of medieval chroniclers (al-Tabari, al-Ya'qubi, and others) and modern scholarship by Orientalists (Russian—V. V. Bartold, I. M. Fil'shtinskii, O. G. Bol'shakov; and Western—H. Kennedy, S. Starr, and others) to develop a holistic understanding of the nature of the Samarran Anarchy.

Historiography and Sources

Medieval Sources

The principal primary source for the period under study is the chronicle of al-Tabari. The great early Islamic historian Abu Ja'far al-Tabari (d. 923), in his *History of Prophets and Kings*, provided a detailed account of the reigns of the mid-ninth-century caliphs [6, 7]. In particular, al-Tabari describes the circumstances surrounding the assassination of al-Mutawakkil in 861 and the subsequent struggle for power almost year by year. His work is especially valuable for its detailed depiction of palace intrigues and for naming the key figures involved in the crisis (the Turkic emirs Wasif, Bugha, Itakh, the vizier Fath ibn Khaqan, and others) [7].

Another near-contemporary chronicler, Ahmad al-Ya'qubi (d. ca. 897), also addresses the Samarran period in his *Ta'rikh al-Ya'qubi*. Al-Ya'qubi provides valuable details about the composition of the Samarran army, noting that it was not composed solely of Turks but

represented a complex ethnic mixture of troops [1]. As a contemporary observer, he also records the relations between the Turkic guard and the population of Baghdad: according to him, the foreign Turks behaved arrogantly, riding through the streets at full gallop and knocking down passersby [1], which provoked public outrage and intensified tensions.

In addition to al-Tabari and al-Ya‘qubi, information about this period can be found in later Arabic historians. Al-Mas‘udi, in *Muruj al-Dhahab* (tenth century), describes the negative perception of the Turkic soldiers among the Baghdadis, who openly characterized the conduct of the caliph’s guard as “unworthy.” The works of the geographer Ibn Khordadbeh and others are also relevant, though fragmentary.

Russian Historiography

In pre-revolutionary and Soviet historiography, many Orientalists addressed the problem of the Turkic guard and the Samarran period. V. V. Bartold emphasized that the transfer of the capital to Samarra and the caliphs’ reliance on Turkic soldiers marked a fundamental turning point in the governance of the caliphate [2]. Bartold stressed that from the mid-ninth century onward, the traditional Arab aristocracy was gradually pushed aside, giving way to figures from Khurasan and Turkic military commanders.

E. A. Belyaev, in his seminal work *The Arabs, Islam, and the Arab Caliphate in the Early Middle Ages* (1966), likewise analyzed the conflict between the old Arab elite and the new military aristocracy, highlighting the social preconditions of the Samarran crisis. Contemporary Russian historians such as O. G. Bol’shakov and I. M. Fil’shtinskii examine the Anarchy in Samarra within the broader context of the decline of centralized Abbasid power. Fil’shtinskii notes that the 860s were marked by extreme internal instability that led to the effective fragmentation of the empire into a number of independent states [3]. Bol’shakov, in volume four of *The History of the Caliphate* (2010), traced the Samarran events in detail and demonstrated how each caliph during this period depended on military factions.

In my own works (2022–2024), I have also analyzed the role of the Turkic–Central Asian element in the political life of the mid-ninth-century caliphate. In particular, I examined the significance of the foundation of Samarra as a new capital and noted that al-Mu‘tasim’s decision to move the capital from Baghdad was a response to the conflict between the Baghdadis and the Turkic guard, as well as an attempt to rely on a new military force [8, 9]. I traced in detail the evolution of relations between the caliphs and the guard and concluded that the Samarran period laid the foundations of the caliphate’s military power while simultaneously sowing the seeds of its future political weakness [1]. A wide range of sources was employed, with particular emphasis on the role of figures from Central Asia (Ferghanans, Ustrushanis, and others) in the Abbasid army [1].

Western Scholarship

Among English-language studies, the problem of the “Anarchy in Samarra” has been addressed most fully in the works of Hugh Kennedy. In *The Court of the Caliphs* (2004), Kennedy vividly describes the Samarran events and emphasizes their destructive consequences for the caliphate [5]. He argues that the death of al-Mutawakkil was a catastrophe for the future of Abbasid authority and effectively predetermined the transfer of real power to military commanders [5]. His other major work, *The Armies of the Caliphs* (2001), analyzes the military and social system of

the early Abbasids; it examines in detail the institution of the ghulams (slave soldiers) and notes that the isolation of the Turkic guard in Samarra only strengthened its cohesion and influence [7]. In addition to Kennedy, the work of S. Frederick Starr, *Lost Enlightenment* (2013), is noteworthy. In the context of the “lost enlightenment” of Central Asia, Starr also addresses the Abbasid era of the ninth century. He draws attention to the fact that many figures of science and culture of this “golden age” originated from Khurasan and Transoxiana and rose at the Abbasid court precisely during the Samarran period—paradoxically coinciding with political anarchy. Thus, Western scholars emphasize, on the one hand, the military-political dimension of the Samarran crisis (Kennedy) and, on the other, its role in reshaping the ethno-social structure of the caliphate and its regional connections (Starr).

Methodology

The present study is based on the principles of historicism and interdisciplinary analysis. It employs the comparative-historical method to juxtapose the accounts of different chroniclers and identify common trends; a structural-systemic approach to reveal the interaction of political, military, and institutional factors in the crisis; and the problem-chronological method to examine the course of the anarchy year by year. Source analysis relies on close textual examination of the chronicles (al-Tabari, al-Ya‘qubi, and others), critically evaluated in light of modern scholarship. The author adopts an objective approach, seeking to synthesize the conclusions of Orientalists from different scholarly traditions.

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