

الأبھاث

Al-Abhath

مجلة تصدرها كلية الآداب والعلوم

JOURNAL OF THE FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

VOL. 71 | ISSUE 1-2 | 2023

الجامعة الأميركية في بيروت

American University of Beirut

بيروت – لبنان

Beirut – Lebanon

BRILL

Al-Abhath

Al-Abhath

Editors

Ramzi Baalbaki, *Margaret Weyerhaeuser Jewett Chair of Arabic, AUB*, Beirut, Lebanon
Bilal Orfali, *Sheikh Zayed Chair for Arabic and Islamic Studies, AUB*, Beirut, Lebanon

Associate Editor

Sonja Mejcher-Atassi, *AUB*, Beirut, Lebanon
Maher Jarrar, *AUB*, Beirut, Lebanon

Book Review Editor

Lyall Armstrong, *AUB*, Beirut, Lebanon
Kirill Dmitriev, *University of St Andrews*, St Andrews, UK

Editorial Board

Tarif Khalidi, *AUB*, Beirut, Lebanon
Ferial J. Ghazoul, *AUC*, Cairo, Egypt
Wadad Kadi, *University of Chicago*, Chicago, Illinois, USA
Alexander Knysh, *University of Michigan*, Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA
Chase Robinson, *Smithsonian Institution*, Washington, DC, USA
Monique Bernards, *Institute for Advanced Arabic and Islamic Studies*, Antwerp, Belgium
Julia Bray, *University of Oxford*, Oxford, UK
Beatrice Gruendler, *Freie Universität Berlin*, Berlin, Germany
Abdessalem Mseddi, *Tunisian University*, Tunis, Tunisia

الأبحاث Al-Abhath

Journal of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences
American University of Beirut, Beirut, Lebanon

VOLUME 71 (2023)

How to End Things in Arabic Literature

Edited by
Lale Behzadi and Bilal Orfali



BRILL

LEIDEN | BOSTON

INFORMATION FOR AUTHORS AND PUBLISHERS

Manuscripts: *Al-Abhath* encourages the submission of articles written in English or Arabic dealing with Arab and Middle Eastern studies. Manuscripts submitted to the journal may not be or have been published or submitted elsewhere. Submissions are subject to peer review that maintains the anonymity of authors and reviewers. A decision will be reached as quickly as possible, but *Al-Abhath* is not responsible for delays in the decision process. *Al-Abhath* is not responsible for the return of manuscripts to authors. Upon publication, authors will receive one copy of the issue in which it appears and a PDF version of their article.

Articles to be considered for publication must be submitted on a CD for PC or by e-mail attachment to alabhath@aub.edu.lb. The text must be in Microsoft Word for English or Arabic, double-spaced. Manuscripts must include a cover page containing the title, author's name, and an abstract of no more than 150 words. **Articles not conforming to these specifications will be rejected without review.**

Style: Text and reference note style must conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*. Transliteration follows the style of the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*. Authors who wish correct modern Turkish orthography to appear in their texts are responsible for providing it.

Send manuscripts to:

Al-Abhath
American University of Beirut
College Hall, 4th Floor
P.O. Box 11-0236
Riad El-Solh, Beirut 1107-2020, LEBANON

Books for review: Publishers who wish to have their titles considered for review should send review copies to The Editor, Al-Abhath, American University of Beirut, P.O. Box 11-0236, Riad El-Solh, Beirut 1107-2020, Lebanon.

For more information: Contact us via email at alabhath@aub.edu.lb

Copyright 2023 by Koninklijke Brill nv Leiden, The Netherlands.

Koninklijke Brill nv incorporates the imprints Brill, Brill Nijhoff, Brill Hotel, Brill Schöningh, Brill Fink, Brill mentis, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Böhlau, V&R unipress and Wageningen Academic. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, translated, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior written permission from the publisher. Requests for re-use and/or translations must be addressed to Koninklijke Brill nv via brill.com or copyright.com. Brill has made all reasonable efforts to trace all rights holders to any copyrighted material used in this work. In cases where these efforts have not been successful the publisher welcomes communications from copyright holders, so that the appropriate acknowledgements can be made in future editions, and to settle other permission matters.

This journal is printed on acid-free paper and produced in a sustainable manner.



BRILL

Inevitable End? Al-Amīn's Death Narrated by al-Ṭabarī

Lale Behzadi

Professor of Arabic Studies at University of Bamberg, Bamberg, Germany

lale.behzadi@uni-bamberg.de

Abstract

The violent end of a human life, especially when it is an end brought about by other human beings, can have an enormous effect on the remembering of events leading up to it as well as on the perception of the aftermath. The so-called War between Brothers is a well-known passage in al-Ṭabarī's (d. 310/923) *Annales* that relates the conflict between the half-brothers al-Amīn (d. 198/813) and al-Ma'mūn (d. 218/833) over who would succeed their father, the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (d. 193/809), resulting in the assassination of then-caliph al-Amīn in Baghdad in the year 198/813 by al-Ma'mūn's troops. While the reader of this account already knows the outcome, it will be of interest to look closely at the various narrative elements, strategies, and dynamics employed to describe and analyze the last moments of al-Amīn's life. The focus of this paper is to show how the unfolding of decision-making shapes the composition of this passage and how the end of the story, as well as of al-Amīn's life, is presented as the result of earlier decisions.

Keywords

War between brothers – finality – end – decisions – decision-making – emotions – al-Amīn

هل الخاتمة محتومة؟ مصرع الأمين في رواية الطبري

لاله بهزادي
أستاذة الدراسات العربية في جامعة بامبرغ، بامبرغ، ألمانيا
lale.bhezadi@uni-bamberg.de

المستخلص

قد تؤثر النهاية العنيفة لحياة إنسان تأثيراً جماً على القدرة في تذكر الأحداث التي يُفترض أنها أدت إليها وعلى تصوّر عواقبها، لا سيما إن كانت نهايته على يد إنسان آخر. يسرد الطبري (ت. 923/310) في تاريخه القصّة المشهورة للخلاف الذي وقع بين الأمين (ت. 813/198) والمأمون (ت. 833/218)، وهو نزاع نشب بين الأخوين غير الشقيقين على خلافة أبيهما هارون الرشيد (ت. 809/193)، وأسفر عن اغتيال قوّاد المأمون الأمين، الخليفة آنذاك، في بغداد عام 813/198. وعلى الرغم من علم القارئ النهاية، رأينا أنّ البحث عن كُتب في عناصر السرد واستراتيجيّاته وديناميّاته لوصف اللحظات الأخيرة في حياة الأمين وتحليلها جدير بالاهتمام. يركّز هذا البحث على تبيان الأثر الذي يُحدثه في تركيبة القصّة الكشف عن اتّخاذ القرار؛ كما يبيّن كيف أن طريقة عرضها توحى بأنّ نهايتها، فضلاً من حياة الأمين نفسه، هي نتيجة قرارات اتّخذت من قبل.

الكلمات المفتاحيّة

الخلاف بين الأمين والمأمون - النهاية - الخاتمة - القرارات - اتّخاذ القرارات - المشاعر - الأمين

Introduction

In an earlier attempt to address endings and finality, I have looked at textual endings, compositions of closure, and authorial guidance.¹ What interests me now is the end as a subject of narration.² The death of a human being is definitely an end or, as Deborah H. Roberts had put it: “the only real ending is death.”³ Or is it? While we can quibble over textual endings and the arrangement of literary texts, the end of a human life seems definite, irreversible, and unquestionable. Looking at narratives of an unnatural death in historical writing, however, many questions arise, for example about the reason why the person had to die, why their life had to end this way, and how this abrupt end shapes our perception of history. The historiographic narrative presents certain perspectives as to how the events around this end of life had been perceived, classified, and evaluated; it works along dynamics and mechanisms similar to literary narrative genres. The account, or reappraisal, of this kind of historical event, too, needs beginnings, ends, and sections, and provides “a reduction of the world”⁴ as a means of processing drastic experiences.

With regard to the representation of ends, endings, and finality in historical texts, a salient example is the so-called war between brothers: it was triggered by a death, claimed many lives, and ended with another death. The end of the life of the sixth Abbasid caliph, Muḥammad al-Amīn, son of Hārūn al-Rashīd, became a famous tragedy in the history of the Abbasid caliphate. The focus of this paper is the murder of al-Amīn in Baghdad in September 198/813 by the troops of his half-brother, ‘Abdallāh al-Ma’mūn, as narrated by the historian al-Ṭabarī in his *Annales* (*Kitāb al-Rusul wa-l-mulūk*). The story is overshadowed by an ending that, at a first glance, seems less the result of individual actors themselves than of the forces that compel them to act. As such, the text deals with the social conditions that have a great impact on an individual human life, but at the same time indicate something beyond individual fate and a personal confrontation. However, the reader witnesses a succession of decisions that lead to the known outcome. My research interest here is not to reconstruct

1 Behzadi, “Authorial Guidance.”

2 I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Ca’ Foscari University of Venice and to my host and dear colleague, Prof. Antonella Ghersetti, who granted me two fellowships in 2019 and 2021 to work on this subject.

3 Roberts, “Afterword,” 255.

4 Frank Kermode ponders about the end of the novel, stating that ‘truth’ can only be found in a silent poem or novel, a notion that to a certain extent also applies to historiography: “As soon as it speaks, begins to be a novel, it imposes causality and concordance, development, character, a past which matters and a future with certain broad limits determined by the project of the author rather than that of the characters. They have their choices, but the novel has its end.” Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, 140.

the historical situation, as this has been done elsewhere, but to look at how the dynamics of finality and decision-making play out. More specifically, I will look at the last days and moments in al-Amīn's life and how the narrative relates his death to the decisions he made earlier. The joint examination of representations of decision-making as well as the narrative strategies leading to the well-known end is intended to shed light on the ways in which notions of finality and decision-making are interconnected.

As a brief overview of the events, I quote Michael Fishbein's summary as follows: "Before his death, al-Rashīd had arranged for the succession in a series of documents signed at Mecca and deposited for safekeeping in the Ka'bah. Al-Amīn was to become caliph; al-Ma'mūn was to govern Khurāsān with virtual autonomy from Baghdad. Al-Amīn could neither remove his brother from office nor interfere with his revenues or military support. Furthermore, al-Ma'mūn was named as al-Amīn's successor, and al-Amīn was forbidden to alter the succession. If either brother violated these conditions, he was to forfeit his rights. It soon became apparent that the good will to carry out these arrangements did not exist. Disagreement broke out when al-Amīn insisted that many of the forces that had accompanied al-Rashīd and al-Ma'mūn to Khorasan return to Baghdad. When the majority of the army commanders obeyed the new caliph's orders, al-Ma'mūn was enraged and countered with measures to secure his position. Angry letters were exchanged, with al-Amīn pressing his brother to make concessions that al-Ma'mūn regarded as contrary to the succession agreement. By March 811, military conflict was imminent. Al-Amīn demanded that certain border districts be returned to the control of Baghdad. When al-Ma'mūn refused, al-Amīn dispatched an expedition to seize the districts. Al-Amīn's resort to force ended in disaster. Al-Ma'mūn's forces, led by Ṭāhir b. al-Ḥusayn and Harthama b. A'yan, quickly closed in on Baghdad. In a siege lasting over a year, Baghdad suffered extensive damage from the fighting and from bombardment by siege engines. Gangs of vagrants and paupers, organized by al-Amīn into irregular units, fought a kind of urban guerilla war. But, with Ṭāhir and Harthama enforcing the siege and with most of al-Amīn's associates having switched their loyalties to the winning side, the caliph was forced to sue for terms. These were worked out among representatives of al-Amīn, Ṭāhir, and Harthama. However, when the caliph boarded the boat that was to take him into Harthama's custody, troops loyal to Ṭāhir assaulted and capsized the boat. Al-Amīn fell into the Tigris, was apprehended, and was executed that night on orders from Ṭāhir. Thus ended this phase of the civil war. Al-Ma'mūn was now caliph."⁵

Unlike an unsolved criminal case or a literary text, the outcome of the

5 Fishbein, *The War between Brothers*, back cover, blurb.

story is fixed from the outset. Outside the textual realm, the author and the reader in this case already know what has happened: two sons of the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd, Muḥammad in Baghdad and ‘Abdallāh in Khorasan, fought against each other for the succession of the caliphate after the death of their father—or their respective armies have fought—until the troops of ‘Abdallāh defeated the troops of Muḥammad, then besieged Muḥammad in his palace in Baghdad and finally killed him. The result of this struggle and fratricide was the accession of ‘Abdallāh to the caliphate as al-Ma’mūn from September 198/813. Interestingly, a death had triggered the story of the war between brothers: that of their father. Hārūn al-Rashīd had anticipated what forces his death would unleash and tried to tame them beforehand through an elaborate system of succession that divided power between three of his sons.⁶ Unsurprisingly, this arrangement was called into question not long after Hārūn’s death by Muḥammad, or by his counselors.

These events have left their mark on contemporaries as well as on researchers. To quote Hugh Kennedy: “The account of what happened on the night of 25 September 813, when he [al-Amīn] made his decision, is one of the most dramatic and moving narratives in the whole of early Arabic historical writing.”⁷ The dominant variation of the story gives the impression that with al-Ma’mūn the worthier of the two has climbed the throne, and that al-Amīn from the start had been a bad choice. It sometimes even reads as if al-Amīn had brought this upon himself through his behavior. Several research approaches have asked to what extent this reading was led by pro-Ma’munid propaganda—history written by the winner, so to speak. Tayeb El-Hibri has analyzed in detail the different historical accounts on the “regicide” of al-Amīn (for example by al-Ṭabarī, al-Mas’ūdī, and al-Dīnawarī), pointing to the fact that the planned murder of a sitting caliph had been an outrageous and unheard-of incident and “a moral challenge” that needed explanation and justification.⁸ He also offers a reading of al-Ṭabarī’s “symmetry” as a way to divert from the more official, negative portrayal of the fallen caliph and engage the reader in a critical reception of historical writing. The narrative structure, El-Hibri suggests, should enhance anxiety in the reader by also providing counter narratives to the dominant version and thus acknowledging that the brothers were “pushed down the path of tragedy by ambitious politicians on both sides.”⁹ Shoshan, starting from El-Hibri’s reading, interprets the arrangement of the material slightly differently. For him, emphatic narrative (al-Madā’ini’s account)

6 See in detail El-Hibri, “Harun al-Rashid and the Mecca Protocol of 802: A Plan for Division or Succession?” 461–80.

7 Kennedy, *The Caliphate*, 112.

8 El-Hibri, “Regicide,” 335.

9 El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting*, 152.

and religious rhetoric (Ṭāhir's letter), put side by side, have the effect of an open-ended outcome, i.e. that it is not quite clear which side the text takes.¹⁰ Thompson, in his dissertation on the narrative factor in al-Ṭabarī's writing, has collected and analyzed readings of al-Ṭabarī by Shoshan, Hodgson, Hinds, and El-Hibri, especially with regard to the question of whether the organization of information al-Ṭabarī takes from other historians and sources displays his intent or not.¹¹ All in all, the account shows an overwhelming need for explanation of this incident, probably the main reason why the last moments in al-Amīn's life are narrated in "vivid tragic detail."¹² The fact that the narrative focuses on the various decision-making situations raises the possibility that things could have turned out differently. Since the purpose of this essay is to shed more light on how endings and preceding decisions are related, some remarks on research on decision-making may be useful.

Decision-Making

Research on the history of decision-making was initially based primarily on economic, neuroscientific and psychological issues.¹³ In a further step, aspects of cultural studies were added to shed light on the historical, cultural and linguistic factors of individual and collective decision-making processes.¹⁴ Questions about the way people make decisions always touch on values and norms as well as political, economic, and social hierarchies. Like emotions, decisions can be analyzed on an individual level as well as referring to certain social constellations and expectations. Also comparable to emotion research, in decision research we encounter the deconstruction of an assumed duality of an inner and an outer sphere, of rationality and emotionality, and of cognition and emotion respectively. For a long time, the idea prevailed that correct decisions were made exclusively on a rational level. Emotions in the decision-making process were treated as "disturbing factors" that had to be eliminated or at least contained because they could have an unfavorable influence on a decision. More recent research approaches emphasize the interconnectedness of cognition and emotion in decision-making processes: "The picture of the isolated rational decision maker is being replaced by viewing decision makers

10 Shoshan, *Poetics of Islamic Historiography*, 136.

11 Thompson, *Re-Reading al-Ṭabarī*, 80 et passim.

12 El-Hibri, "Regicide," 350.

13 For an overview, see Keren and Wu, *The Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Judgement and Decision Making*.

14 For example, in 2017 the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg established a Master's program "Standards of Decision-Making Across Cultures."

as social beings who communicate with others and experience a wealth of diverse emotions when planning and coordinating their actions.”¹⁵ Instead of viewing a decision as the result of cool deliberation that could possibly be influenced “from the outside,” the decision-making process is seen as a phenomenon in which many aspects of human thinking, feeling and acting are intertwined and interdependent. Oum and Lieberman view emotions not as a separate domain from cognition, “but rather as a subset of cognitive processes [...]”.¹⁶ Accordingly, emotions are not only involved in decision-making but “evolved to direct decision making.”¹⁷ The neuroscientist Edward T. Roll in his study, for example, considers the brain mechanisms of emotion and motivation together with decision-making because “for both emotion and motivation, rewards and punishers are assessed in order to provide the goals for behaviour.”¹⁸ While the notion of “emotion-mediated decision-making” seems to be generally accepted, Christopher J. Anderson goes a step further and suggests “a more encompassing view of the role of emotions in decisions” which he calls “emotion-constructed decision-making.”¹⁹

What is of interest here is the question of how the reader is guided through the decision-making process. On what basis are the decisions made? Who exerts influence? Do we detect a duality between reason and emotion and if so, what is the relationship between arguments and feelings? Are doubts expressed or decisions withdrawn? How is the end of this chain of events already integrated into the narrative process? All these questions arise when we look back at the story from the end, as the narrator, al-Ṭabarī, did. The story can unfold yet again when we consider ideas about ends, endings, closure, and the motive for coming to terms with the regicide. The end of al-Amīn shall be our starting point to re-read the narrative while looking at what decisions supposedly led to his death. I have chosen three scenes in which al-Amīn makes important decisions, according to al-Ṭabarī. Each seems to be a fork in the road that leads to his death in the end. However, my choice of scenes could have been different.²⁰ We could look at al-Amīn’s demise and the decisions leading up to it from the starting point of his father’s decision about the succession. This paper follows al-Ṭabarī, who mentions the murder at the beginning of

15 Böhm and Brun, “Intuition and affect,” 4.

16 Oum and Lieberman, “Emotion is cognition,” 133.

17 Ibid., 148.

18 Rolls, *Emotion and Decision-making Explained*, 13.

19 Anderson, “The Functions of Emotion in Decision Making,” 184.

20 It is a topic for itself to decide where to assume a final passage of a text begins, or to quote Don Fowler: “[...] it is frequently easier to say where the beginnings end than where the end begins.” Fowler, “Second Thoughts,” 21. See also Behzadi, “Authorial Guidance,” 215 and 220.

the respective sub-division (*dhikr al-khabar fī maqtalihi*).²¹ I will introduce the respective scene and then discuss the text with a view to the process of decision-making.

Decision 1: advisors and external influences

The relevant passage in al-Ṭabarī starts with al-Amīn deciding which escape plan to follow to save his life.²² Two options lie before him. His commanders come to him and say: "We have formed a plan, which we submit to you. Consider it, and make up your mind to do it; for we hope that it will be right." (*wa-qad ra'aynā ra'yan na'riḍuhu 'alayka fa-nṣur fīhi wa-'tazim 'alayhi fa-innā narjū an yakūna ṣawāban*)²³ They suggest fleeing the city with seven hundred men, giving the reason as: "Your enemies have surrounded you from every side" (*aḥāṭa bika 'aduwwuka min kulli jānibin*).²⁴ They fear (*khāfū*)²⁵ that they will be defeated. So how does al-Amīn decide? He decides to go with the plan to leave the city: "How excellent your plan is," he says (*ni'ma mā ra'aytum*).²⁶ Another group of men warns al-Amīn that the plan of the commanders is a trick and that they will betray him and trade him for their own safety. A further argument is that al-Ma'mūn will do him no harm and let him go. Why does this other group make this argument? We are told that Ṭāhir had learned about the commanders' plan and threatened the men in the second group, telling them to ensure that al-Amīn stayed in town. It is very likely that they were afraid to oppose Ṭāhir. After listening to these other men, al-Amīn changes his mind. He overturns his first decision (*aḍraba 'ammā kāna 'azama 'alayhi*)²⁷ and decides not to leave the city on his own but to surrender and to go out to Harthama, clearing the way for al-Ma'mūn. The reason for this is that the words and arguments of the second group had touched his heart and made an impression on his soul (*nakata dhālika fī qalbi Muḥammad wa-waqa'a fī nafsīhi*).²⁸

As we have seen, the first request to make a decision is brought to al-Amīn by his counselors and companions, who inform him that he is surrounded on all sides by attackers. This spatial notion of a circle leaves virtually no way out. Nevertheless, they present a plan to leave the city accompanied by

21 al-Ṭabarī, *Annales*, 911.

22 The passage relevant to this article runs from al-Ṭabarī, *Annales*, 911–33; Fishbein, *The War between Brothers*, 182–206. For Arabic quotes, page number and line number will be given.

23 al-Ṭabarī, *Annales*, 911:14–15; Fishbein, *The War between Brothers*, 182.

24 al-Ṭabarī, *Annales*, 911:16–17; Fishbein, *The War between Brothers*, 182.

25 al-Ṭabarī, *Annales*, 911:12; Fishbein, *The War between Brothers*, 182.

26 al-Ṭabarī, *Annales*, 912:4; Fishbein, *The War between Brothers*, 182.

27 al-Ṭabarī, *Annales*, 913:1; Fishbein, *The War between Brothers*, 183.

28 al-Ṭabarī, *Annales*, 912:20–913:1; Fishbein, *The War between Brothers*, 183.

soldiers, fearing to be overpowered by Ṭāhir's troops. The fear in this case is not unfounded, but the result of weighing the consequences of one course of action, namely staying in the palace in the face of overwhelming military superiority. Not acting would mean certain death, so they advise flight. The other group of advisers present an alternative plan: al-Amīn should surrender. This, we can assume, is not the result of an analysis of being surrounded by the enemy's forces, but is rooted in the fear this triggers. Al-Amīn now has two options, even though he is besieged in his palace. The hopelessness seems to be postponed for the time being; al-Amīn is pleased that his advisors present him with plans that open up possibilities for action. Even if fear plays a major role in the thinking of both advisory groups, the two options appear to be justified responses based on rational consideration. Al-Amīn's decision to go with the second group's plan, on the other hand, is based on the fact that it "had touched his heart and made an impression on his soul." He also seems struck by the fact that some counselors were accusing others of bad intentions. Accordingly, the most important tool for decision-making was to leave the greatest possible impression on the heart (*qalb*) and soul (*nafs*) of the decision-maker: al-Amīn.

Decision 2: Competing anxieties

Now that the decision has been made to stay in the palace, some of al-Amīn's associates who had been in favor of option no. 1 turn to al-Amīn. The next decision is already in process. First, they tell him that their plan to leave the town was the right thing to do (*ṣawāb*).²⁹ In a way, they are criticizing al-Amīn, telling him that he made the wrong decision listening to those who flattered him (*mudāhinūn*),³⁰ and now proposing another plan against their better judgment. Then they try to persuade him to surrender to Ṭāhir instead of Harthama, saying it would be better for him. We learn that their true reason is that they had been Harthama's companions and no longer trust him. They fear he would treat them roughly (*khāfū an yajfiwuhum*).³¹ Al-Amīn refuses. He cannot stand Ṭāhir (*akrahu Ṭāhiran*).³² He also recalls a dream in which Ṭāhir killed him. He therefore has an ominous feeling about him and feels uneasy (*anā ataṭayyaru min Ṭāhir wa-astawḥishu minhu wa-akrahu l-khurūj ilayhi li-dhālika*).³³ Al-Amīn himself comes forward with arguments in favor of Harthama. He considers him his *mawlā* and like a father. He is more comfortable around him and trusts him more (*wa-anā bihi ashaddu unsan*

29 al-Ṭabarī, *Annales*, 913:10; Fishbein, *The War between Brothers*, 183.

30 al-Ṭabarī, *Annales*, 913:11; Fishbein, *The War between Brothers*, 183.

31 al-Ṭabarī, *Annales*, 913:8–9; Fishbein, *The War between Brothers*, 183.

32 al-Ṭabarī, *Annales*, 913:12; Fishbein, *The War between Brothers*, 184.

33 al-Ṭabarī, *Annales*, 913:17–18; Fishbein, *The War between Brothers*, 184.

wa-ashaddu thiqatan).³⁴ According to another source, this second decision comes up after most of those who had persuaded al-Amīn to stay in the city have already left the palace to negotiate with Ṭāhir. Al-Amīn discusses with his remaining associates (*nāẓara Muḥammad aṣḥābahu*) whether to ask for safe conduct (*amān*).³⁵ Then he asks them what to do to escape Ṭāhir (*al-najāt min Ṭāhir*).³⁶ Again, the two options are put on the table. Some of those present advise surrendering to Harthama, to prevent them falling into the hands of al-Ma'mūn; others advise going to Ṭāhir and saying: "If you swore him oaths by which he became certain that you were committing your kingdom to him, perhaps he would trust you." (*law ḥalafta lahu bi-mā yatawaththaqu bihi minka innaka mufawwiḍun ilayhi mulkaka fa-la'allahu kāna sayarkunu ilayka*)³⁷ Al-Amīn dismisses this option. He has thought more about Ṭāhir and found him too strong and too much committed to his, al-Amīn's, brother. Therefore, he considers him to pose a greater threat. As a result, al-Amīn decides to go out to Harthama, who has allegedly given a guarantee that he will save his life and help him escape; in exchange, al-Amīn would have to send the caliphal insignia to Ṭāhir.

This second scenario presents a variety of anxieties and fears. After deciding to stay, al-Amīn has to make up his mind whether to surrender to Ṭāhir or to Harthama. Again, he receives conflicting advice, and has doubts regarding both options. While his companions express their fear of Harthama because they believe that he would not treat them well, al-Amīn's main reason for deciding to go out to Harthama is his uneasiness about Ṭāhir—an ominous feeling, stemming from a bad dream. However, in addition to his strong general dislike of Ṭāhir, we also get to hear the arguments underlying his fear. This is the only time that we hear al-Amīn commenting on his own decision-making. He tells those who recommend Ṭāhir: "You are wrong, it has been a mistake to even consider your suggestion." (*akhṭa'tum wajha l-ra'y wa-akhṭa'tu fī mushāwaratikum*)³⁸ However, al-Amīn, according to this version, is far from being sure about Harthama: "How by Harthama, when death has surrounded me on every side?" (*Kayfa bi-Harthama wa-aḥāṭa l-mawtu bī min kulli jānibin?*)³⁹ The end here, again, is not a final point on a line but a tight circle, which equals hopelessness. Death could perhaps have been averted at an earlier stage; a way out is no longer in sight. Nevertheless, Harthama seems

34 al-Ṭabarī, *Annales*, 913:19; Fishbein, *The War between Brothers*, 184.

35 al-Ṭabarī, *Annales*, 914:19; Fishbein, *The War between Brothers*, 185.

36 al-Ṭabarī, *Annales*, 914:20; Fishbein, *The War between Brothers*, 185.

37 al-Ṭabarī, *Annales*, 915:3–5; Fishbein, *The War between Brothers*, 185.

38 al-Ṭabarī, *Annales*, 915:5; Fishbein, *The War between Brothers*, 185.

39 al-Ṭabarī, *Annales*, 915:2–3; Fishbein, *The War between Brothers*, 185.

to be considered the lesser of two evils. The fact that al-Amīn makes a decision about whom to surrender to delays the end once again.

Decision 3: For self-determination, and against standstill

According to another source, there is yet another decision to be made by al-Amīn. A servant, the eunuch Kutla, delivers a message from Harthama to al-Amīn, who is about to leave the palace. He suggests that al-Amīn waits until the next day before leaving the palace. The reason he gives is that apparently they have seen something suspicious at the riverbank (*raʿaytu fī Dijlati ʿalā l-shaṭṭi amran qad rābanī*).⁴⁰ The messenger fears that he cannot guarantee safe passage and that al-Amīn could be taken from his hands and possibly lose his life. Al-Amīn is worried and apprehensive (*qaliqa*),⁴¹ because all his guards have scattered; he is afraid that if this news reached Ṭāhir, he would then come and overpower him. Al-Amīn decides to go anyway and not to wait another night: “I am not staying until tomorrow.” (*lastu uqīmu ilā ghad*)⁴²

In this last example, al-Amīn is faced with the decision of either waiting longer or leaving the palace at a time of his own choosing. He goes with the latter option, at the risk of being attacked before he finds shelter with Harthama. What follows is the familiar farewell scene with his sons: “Then he called for his two sons. He embraced them, smelled them, and kissed them. He said, ‘I commend you to God.’ His eyes filled with tears, and he began to wipe them with his sleeve. Then he stood up and jumped onto his horse.” (*thumma daʿā bi-ibnayhi fa-ḍammahumā ilayhi wa-shammahumā wa-qabbalahumā wa-qāla astawdiʿukumā llāha wa-damaʿat ʿaynāhu wa-jaʿala yamsaḥu dumūʾahu bi-kummihi thumma qāma fa-wathaba ʿalā l-farasi*)⁴³ In this interaction, the impression is given that al-Amīn does not think he will see his sons again. Nevertheless, there seems to have been one last glimmer of hope that if he cannot escape, he can at least save his own life. He is filled with grief and weeps. To get back into action mode, he puts an end to the emotional outburst by wiping away his tears and mounting his horse.

40 al-Ṭabarī, *Annales*, 918:11; Fishbein, *The War between Brothers*, 188.

41 al-Ṭabarī, *Annales*, 918:15; Fishbein, *The War between Brothers*, 189.

42 al-Ṭabarī, *Annales*, 918:19–919:2; Fishbein, *The War between Brothers*, 189.

43 al-Ṭabarī, *Annales*, 918:19–919:2; Fishbein, *The War between Brothers*, 189.

Conclusion

Going back to the initial questions, we see that the reader is brought very close to the decision-making process. Through supposed eyewitness accounts, we are in the room when al-Amīn is presented with various proposals and plans. We not only learn about the motives of the advisors, but can also follow al-Amīn's struggle to make the right decision from his point of view. The doubts and hesitations are told in a quasi-internal focalization, creating a great closeness, almost an identification, with al-Amīn.

Was al-Amīn's end, then, inevitable? The narratives give quite a few hints that this murder need not have happened and that there could have been a number of ways to avoid it. The reader is being invited to ponder some alternative scenarios. On the other hand, we get the impression that there was little room for other paths. Each decision concludes a narrative section, closes a scene, and opens up to the next, thus delaying the very end. Don Fowler pointed to these temporary ends, or "units of thought," as "cultural poetics of segmentation."⁴⁴ We can even detect the dynamics of a framing narrative, where the closure of each section cannot be complete or constitute the end because the framing narrative has to continue, in our case until al-Amīn is dead. The linearity of the historical text is juxtaposed with the image of circular enclosure.

Al-Amīn's decisions are based on evaluation, on weighing arguments, on emotions, on dreams and bad omens. The situation of the protagonist seems utterly hopeless; time and space are diminished to one day and to one place. One can literally feel the air getting tight. Everything seems to stand still. At the same time, however, a lot is going on. Thinking, evaluating, debating, choosing one option, ruling out another one, accepting a piece of advice, rejecting another. The reader, in addition to this reasoning, witnesses emotions, too—mostly fear and concern, but also dislike, hatred and uneasiness. Decisions seem to be made in some inner sphere, the soul or the heart. Nevertheless, the fear appears to be mostly well-founded; al-Amīn does not act mindlessly. Both he and his advisors are concerned and distressed as a result of experiences and by assessing the situation. The fear of death and imprisonment is the motor of rationally deliberative behavior and can hardly be separated from it.⁴⁵ Al-Amīn keeps moving, even if only mentally, and finally moves on to action. Instead of waiting for the enemy to catch him, al-Amīn has a plan; he decides to leave the palace, mounts his horse, and then boards the waiting

44 Fowler, "First Thoughts," 88, and "Second Thoughts," 14–15.

45 This observation is in line with Anderson's conclusion that "without emotions at some point in the chain, there would be no decision of which to speak." Anderson, "The Functions of Emotion in Decision Making," 198.

boat. The decision to surrender means the end of his caliphate; however, these various stages of decision-making are about al-Amīn maintaining control and self-determination. Engaging in decision-making means doing something; and although a decision is somehow a kind of end, doing something means it is not over yet. Gradually, one door after another closes, or, to use another metaphor, there are no more windows of opportunity to save himself. The end here is depicted as a state when you run out of options; you are encircled and deprived of action. The end, then, seems to be the time and the place when you can do nothing more than wait. Of course, the story does not end with al-Amīn's death. After the account of the caliph's murder, many pages of the *Annales* are devoted to the aftermath. Attempts at explanation and justification, retrospect assessments of the caliph, and numerous mourning verses illustrate the need for contemporaries and those born later to come to terms with this cruel end. But that is another story.

References

- Anderson, Christopher J. "The Functions of Emotion in Decision Making and Decision Avoidance," in *Do Emotions Help or Hurt Decision Making?: A Hedgefoxian Perspective*. Eds. Kathleen D. Vohs et al. New York: Russell Sage, 2007, 183–201.
- Behzadi, Lale. "Authorial Guidance: Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī's Closing Remarks," in *Concepts of Authorship in Pre-Modern Arabic Texts*. Eds. Lale Behzadi and Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila. Bamberg: University of Bamberg Press, 2015, 215–34.
- Böhm, Gisela and Wibecke Brun. "Intuition and affect in risk perception and decision making." *Judgement and Decision Making* 3.1 (Jan. 2008), 1–4.
- El-Hibri, Tayeb. "The Regicide of the Caliph al-Amīn and the Challenge of Representation in Medieval Islamic Historiography." *Arabica*, 42.3 (Nov. 1995), 334–64.
- El-Hibri, Tayeb. *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography: Hārūn al-Rashīd and the Narrative of the Abbasid Caliphate*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- El-Hibri, Tayib. "Harun al-Rashid and the Mecca Protocol of 802: A Plan for Division or Succession?" *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 24.3 (1992), 461–80.
- Fishbein, Michael, trans. *The History of al-Ṭabarī, Vol. XXXI: The War between Brothers*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992.
- Fowler, Don. "Second Thoughts on Closure," in *Classical Closure: Reading the End in Greek and Latin Literature*. Eds. Deborah H. Roberts et al. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997, 3–22.
- Hoffmann, Gerhard. "Al-Amīn, al-Ma'mūn und der "Pöbel" von Bagdad in den Jahren 812/13." *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 143. 1 (1993), 27–44.
- Kennedy, Hugh. *The Caliphate*. Westminster: Pelican Random House, 2016.
- Keren, Gideon and George Wu, eds. *The Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Judgement and Decision Making*. Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2015.
- Kermode, Frank. *The Sense of an Ending. Studies in the Theory of Fiction with a New Epilogue*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

- Khamīs, 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Ṣāliḥ al-. *Khātimat al-qaṣīda fī l-qarn al-rābi' al-hijrī – fī l-'Irāq wa-l-Shām*. Bayrūt: al-Dār al-Bayḍā', 2014.
- Oum, Robert and Debra Lieberman. "Emotion is Cognition: An Information-Processing View of the Mind," in *Do Emotions Help or Hurt Decision Making?: A Hedgefoxian Perspective*. Eds. Kathleen D. Vohs et al. New York: Russell Sage, 2007, 133–54.
- Pfister, Hans-Rüdiger and Gisela Böhm. "The Multiplicity of Emotions: A Framework of Emotional Functions in Decision Making." *Judgement and Decision Making* 3.1 (Jan. 2008), 5–17.
- Roberts, Deborah H. "Afterword: Ending and Aftermath, Ancient and Modern," in *Classical Closure: Reading the End in Greek and Latin Literature*. Eds. Deborah H. Roberts et al. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997, 251–73.
- Rolls, Edward T. *Emotion and Decision-making Explained*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Shoshan, Boaz. *Poetics of Islamic Historiography: Deconstructing Ṭabarī's History*. Leiden: Brill, 2004.
- al-Ṭabarī, Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. Jarīr. *Annales. Tārīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*. Ed. M.J. De Goeje, Tertia. Leiden: Brill, 1964.
- Thompson, Alexs. "Re-Reading al-Ṭabarī: Towards a Narratological Interpretation of the History." PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2014.



BRILL

AL-ABHATH 71 (2023) 254–255

الأبْهَاطِ
Al-Abhath

Contents

VOLUME 71

How to End Things in Arabic Literature

Introduction 1

Maurice Pomerantz

As Barren as Mother Eve: Why Some Poems End Badly, According to Pre-modern Arabic Critics 9

Kevin Blankinship

Deconstructive Narratives, Decreasing Doublets, Deceptive Cadences, and the Design of Circles: Strategies for Building a Closure in the *Arabian Nights* 38

Johannes Thomann

A Sense of No Ending: *Kalila and Dimna* between Fluidity and Completeness 53

Johannes Stephan

Inevitable End? Al-Amīn's Death Narrated by al-Ṭabarī 82

Lale Behzadi

Textual Endings as Persuasive Educational Beginnings: An Inquiry into the *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity* 96

Sebastian Günther

«رَبِّ مَتَرْدَمٍ غَادَرْتَهُ الشُّعْرَاءُ»: بَحْثٌ فِي ذَاتِيَةِ الْإِخْتِيَارِ ضَمْنَ ثَلَاثَةِ أَعْمَالٍ
أَنْدَلُسِيَّةٍ 122

إِبْنُ نَاسٍ خَنْسَه

Christian Arabic Theological Works: Copyists and Author's Endings and Self-abasement 144

Rocio Daga Portillo

طَيِّ بساط الحديث: الخاتمة في موسوعة القلقشنديّ الأدبيّة والبُسط
المملوكيّة 172
لينا الجمال

جدليّة البداية والنهاية في رواية عودة الطائر إلى البحر لحليم بركات 192
عماد بسام غنوم

Resisting Closure, Defying the System: Two Dystopian Novels
from Egypt 208

Katarína Bešková

Book Reviews

Tobias Andersson, *Early Sunnī Historiography: A Study of the Ta'rikh of Khalīfa b Khayyāt*. 230

Scott C. Lucas

Bilal W. Orfali & Maurice A. Pomerantz, *The Maqāmāt of Badī al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī. Authorship, Texts, and Contexts*. 233

Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila

CONTENT

How to End Things in Arabic Literature

Introduction 1

Maurice Pomerantz

As Barren as Mother Eve: Why Some Poems End Badly, According to Pre-modern Arabic Critics 9

Kevin Blankinship

Deconstructive Narratives, Decreasing Doublets, Deceptive Cadences, and the Design of Circles: Strategies for Building a Closure in the *Arabian Nights* 38

Johannes Thomann

A Sense of No Ending: *Kalila and Dimna* between Fluidity and Completeness 53

Johannes Stephan

Inevitable End? Al-Amīn's Death Narrated by al-Ṭabarī 82

Lale Behzadi

Textual Endings as Persuasive Educational Beginnings: An Inquiry into the *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity* 96

Sebastian Günther

”رَبِّ مَتَرَدِّمٍ غَادَرْتَهُ الشَّعْرَاءُ“: بحث في ذاتية الاختيار ضمن
ثلاثة أعمال أندلسية 122
إيناس خنسه

Christian Arabic Theological Works: Copyists and Author's Endings and Self-abasement 144

Rocio Daga Portillo

طَيِّ بساط الحديث: الخاتمة في موسوعة القلقشندي الأدبية
والبسُّط المملوكية 172
لينا الجمال

جديّة البداية والنهاية في رواية عودة الطائر إلى البحر لحليم بركات 192
عماد بسام غنوم

Resisting Closure, Defying the System: Two Dystopian Novels from Egypt 208

Katarína Bešková

Book Reviews (230–236)