

SINGING SAMARRA (861–956)
POETRY AND THE BURGEONING OF
HISTORIOGRAPHY UPON THE MURDER
OF AL-MUTAWAKKIL

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Historiography on the patricide/regicide of the Caliph al-Mutawakkil (d. 861) developed from a stage of simple description to a burgeoning of mytho-historical narrative. It would appear that what began as a palace scandal—profaning to a putatively sacral community already torn by civil war—developed into a redemptive tragedy with perennial appeal. In a patronage society governed by loyalty to one's patron or father, this transformation should count as nothing less than conspicuous. This article examines the role of a major Abbasid poet, al-Buḥturī (d. 897), in shaping public perception by cultivating genuine sympathy for the Abbasids and planting the seeds of questions that would be addressed in historical narratives. In particular, I discuss the importance of literary salons or gatherings as a social institution where poetry and historical narratives were recited orally as a means of transmitting knowledge to future generations. These gatherings provide a likely forum where mythic questions of poetry could inspire narrative.*

In the century after the patricide of the Caliph al-Mutawakkil °alā Allāh (d. 861), historiography of the event evolved in written form from an early stage of simple description to a more influential one of mytho-historical narrative. El-Hibri's important analysis of al-Ṭabarī's (d. 923) narrative demonstrates the latter stage well. He argues that, despite the

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implication of the heir al-Muntaṣir (d. 862) in the murder, literary devices were used to illustrate the fatal flaws of father, then son, as well as the key virtues that ultimately redeem them both.¹ In a figurative idiom drawing on the Arabic poetic tradition, al-Ṭabarī addressed several questions about the injustice of fate, the assigning of blame and the impermanence of power.² This artful ledger of sins and graces betrayed a preoccupation with the patricide as an event of mythic importance for Abbasid society. This, however, was not the case in the beginning.

Ibn Qutayba (d. 889) was the closest historian to the murder, yet his narrative conveys the least information. He does not even mention the involvement of a son or the guards: “He was killed in the year 247 [861 AD], three days after the Fiṭr holiday.”³ Ibn Qutayba makes no mention of the setting, the possible perpetrators or al-Faṭḥ b. Khāqān’s simultaneous murder, which are all amplified in later historiographies. It seems conspicuous that a public event of the Abbasid era, not to mention the first regicide of the Abbasid epoch, would receive such short shrift from a leading historian and littérateur of that era. His sentence to posterity should, however, be counted as revealing compared to that of his contemporary Abū Ḥanīfa al-Dīnawarī (d. 895), who remains absolutely silent. In short, the situation poses a conundrum: Could it be that in the earliest phases there was no public knowledge of the event? It is difficult to imagine, with scores of courtiers employed in the palace, indeed a number who may have even witnessed the regicide first hand, that there was a dearth of informants or “leaked” information. To the contrary, there was probably ample incentive for informants to take their place in history by talking.

Al-Yaʿqūbī’s (d. 897) text, with more gumption than al-Dīnawarī’s and Ibn Qutayba’s, gives a bit more detail, bordering on a “plot,”⁴ but still in the realm of “story” because it omits any meaningful sense of causality. Nevertheless, he does not reveal informants, though—given the conventions of transmission—it would diminish his credibility

¹ Tayeb El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography: Harun al-Rashid and the Narratives of the Abbasid Caliphate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 188, 192, 198.

² *Ibid.*, 198.

³ Abū Muḥammad ʿAbd Allāh b. Muslim b. Qutaybah, *al-Maʿārif*, ed. Tharwat ʿUkāshah (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1992), 393.

⁴ The terms “plot” and “story” are used in the most literary technical sense: The former is “a sequence of events conveying a sense of causality,” and the latter is simply “a sequence of events.”

somewhat. Perhaps for this reason, he holds himself to the details most believable to his audience:

Al-Mutawakkil had mistreated his son, Muḥammad al-Muntaṣir, so they [the Turks] incited him [the son], and plotted to attack him [the father]. When it was Tuesday, the 3rd of Shawwāl of the year 247 [Dec. 861 AD], a band of Turks entered . . . while he was in a private gathering and attacked him. They killed him with their swords. And they killed al-Faṭḥ b. Khāqān along with him.⁵

Al-Ya^cqūbī's single report is a quantum leap from Ibn Qutayba's sentence, but the account does not spell out causes or the motives of the caliphal guard, who are solemnly sworn to die for their master. Rather, one receives a cryptic reference to the son's "mistreatment," but nothing to justify blood vengeance. The relationship between events has yet to crystallize into a full-blown plot. More importantly, no literary devices are used to comment on moral, existential and communal issues. What begins with Ibn Qutayba and al-Ya^cqūbī in the late ninth century as a cryptic palace scandal develops a few decades later, in the early tenth century, into a mythic narrative about glory, tragedy and redemption. In this paper, I will draw on El-Hibri's theory that historical narratives answer deep-seated societal questions and will propose a determinant role for poets in defining the existential questions that historical reports need to address.⁶

This article will examine al-Buḥturī's poetic role, in particular, as a catalyst for cultivating sympathy for the Samarran tragedy. His poems after the patricide, broadcast from within the palace, spread news of the incident and helped mythologize events that might otherwise have remained the painful facts of a palace scandal, which profane an ostensibly sacral community already torn by two civil wars. I will argue that al-

⁵ Aḥmad b. Abī Ya^cqūb al-Ya^cqūbī, *Tārīkh al-Ya^cqūbī*, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1960), 2:492.

⁶ See also Ruth Morse, *Truth and Convention: Rhetoric, Representation, and Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Morse's study of medieval monastic historiography corroborates El-Hibri's findings for Abbasid historiography. She argues that the Christian historiographers were guided not by positivistic sensibilities of what really happened, but by conventions of rhetoric, or shared habits of persuasion between orators (writers) and listeners (readers). Thus she sees medieval historiography, much like hagiography, serving as a model or example of what should be or might be (*ibid.*, 87). Morse, most importantly, attempts to redress presentist biases in reading medieval historiography which project positivism anachronistically onto medieval narratives (*ibid.*, 128).

Buḥturī's intense activity sowed seeds in the form of archetypal questions that later elicited a response in the form of rhetorically-rich narratives that burgeoned and diversified to address these questions. In addition, I will suggest a likely forum where the performance of poetry could influence the literary invention of narrative; this forum was as a social institution in Abbasid culture, the literary gathering or salon (referred to usually in the plural as *mujālasāt*, *muḥāḍarāt*, *mudhākarāt*, or *musāmarāt*). Since the written tradition is largely dependent on oral informants, this formulation contributes to an understanding of how written narratives burgeoned from 861 to the first half of the tenth century, when al-Ṭabarī passed away.

The Poet's Business

Al-Buḥturī played a special role for the Abbasid dynasty. More than any other contemporary, he used his personal stature as a poet-hero, while giving vent to discontents, to build and maintain the public image of the Abbasids as sacred and generous rulers in response to the political claims of the Alids, who were of the Prophet's blood. Throughout the tumultuous era at Samarra, he persisted as caliphs were made and unmade. He thus served a total of six rulers: al-Mutawakkil (r. 847–61), al-Muntaṣir (r. 861–62), al-Mustaʿīn (r. 862–66), al-Muʿtazz (r. 866–69), al-Muhtadī (r. 869–70) and al-Muʿtamid (r. 870–92), in addition to their subordinates. Even the pious al-Muhtadī, known for his dislike of poets, conceded al-Buḥturī's distinctive role in promoting the Abbasid line, calling him “the orator of our family and the poet of our dynasty.”⁷

The post-patricide era, though, was an ordeal for the Abbasids and their entourage. The murder was merely the inauguration of an era of decline. Al-Muntaṣir himself reigned for only six months, but the tumult at the court continued long after. Later historiography judged the Turkic guards as traitors who began their mischief as early as the ascension of al-Mutawakkil, when they appointed the Caliph virtually irrespective of the Abbasid royal family,⁸ and indeed intimidated their master, forcing him to flee, abortively, to Damascus.⁹ When they succeeded in co-opting

⁷ Muḥammad b. al-ʿImrānī, *al-Inbāʾ fī tārikh al-khulafāʾ* (Leiden: Netherlands Institute [Cairo: ʿĪsā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī], 1973), 136.

⁸ Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭabarī, *Tārikh al-Ṭabarī: Tārikh al-rusul wal-mulūk*, 11 vols., Dhakhāʾir al-ʿArab, 30 (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1960–69), 9:154.

⁹ al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985–), vol. 34, *Incipient Decline*, trans. and annot. Joel L. Kraemer, xii–xiii; al-Ṭabarī, *Tārikh*, 9:210. On al-Mutawakkil's trip to Damascus, see Cobb's important reinterpretation: Paul Cobb, “al-Muwakkil's Damascus: A New

al-Muntaṣir against his father, the crisis was more than a single crime. The event propelled the palatine guards to a new level of temerity. The death of al-Mutawakkil ended a golden era and initiated one of intense horror and insecurity.

In the nine years following al-Mutawakkil's regicide, four caliphs suffered overthrows or violent deaths: al-Muntaṣir (r. 861-862), al-Mustaʿīn (r. 862-866), al-Muʿtazz (r. 866-869), and al-Muhtadī (r. 869-870).¹⁰ A new beginning was thought to have arrived with the next caliph, al-Muʿtamid (r. 870-892). He was named "al-Saffāḥ II," after the founder of the Abbasid dynasty.¹¹ He reigned for twenty-two years, despite Turkic threats at home and the fierce Zanj revolt in the southern marshland.¹² His success was bolstered by his Herculean brother al-Muwaffaq, dubbed "al-Manṣūr II" for his legendary courage, strength and acumen.¹³

Modern historians, however, note that the "recovery" of the caliphate still suffered from a basic weakness that was never overcome.¹⁴ As Kennedy notes, the relative stability did not come about because an Abbasid caliph "defeated and humiliated the Turks, . . . but rather they were assured a place in a new regime and integrated once more into the struc-

ʿAbbāsīd Capital?" *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 58 (1999): 241–57. Though the author's focus is not myth-making, he does show that later historical accounts deploy the Damascus story for rhetorical ends, namely, to prefigure an attack on the caliph's life (ibid., 246). He found a rare list of al-Mutawakkil's entourage, in Ibn ʿAsākir's history of Damascus, that shows plainly that virtually every prominent member of his Turkic force accompanied him (ibid., 248), thus casting doubt on the *adab*-based theory that he fled them. Most importantly, Cobb's careful analysis of sources illustrates how historical narratives are invented to serve the important function of addressing profound lingering questions about what happened and why.

¹⁰ al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985–), vol. 35, *The Crisis of the ʿAbbāsīd Caliphate*, trans. and annot. George Saliba, 1.

¹¹ Ibn al-ʿImrānī, *al-Inbāʿ*, 137.

¹² al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985–), vol. 36, *The Revolt of the Zanj*, trans. and annot. David Waines, xvi.

¹³ Ibn al-ʿImrānī, *al-Inbāʿ*, 137.

¹⁴ Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974) 1:488; Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphate* (London: Longman, 1986) 175.

tures of the state.”¹⁵ For al-Buḥturī and other courtiers, the post-Mutawakkil period between 861 and 892, stood in sharp contrast to the golden era before it. Al-Buḥturī mythologized the Samarran era, both its blissful and mortifying stages, through an intense program to shape public perception. This move had major consequences in Abbasid society by appealing to mythic sensibilities about human cycles of glory, sin, and redemption. He sublimated the Samarran era into a myth, translating Samarran memories into the poetic idiom of nostalgia as found in the elegiac *nasīb*, the opening section of the classical ode (*qaṣīda*).

Al-Buḥturī accomplished this aim with two complementing poetic endeavors. The first was an ongoing practice of allegorically embedding the archetypal joys and horrors of Samarra in his *nasīb*. The second was a single poem in which he poetically travels to the ruined Sasanian palace at Ctesiphon, Īwān Kisrā, and thereby redeems the Abbasids by acknowledging both the greatness and flaws of the Sasanian, which I have suggested elsewhere.¹⁶ In order to avoid duplication, I will focus primarily in this article on a series of Samarran odes prior to the Īwān Kisrā, which further indicate al-Buḥturī’s long-term project to redeem the Abbasids after the patricide of al-Mutawakkil. The Abbasid era was thereby transfigured into the archetypal ruined abode, a kind of prelapsarian paradise, with redemptive overtones. Samarra in particular became the *nasīb*ic ruined abode, evoking a deep yearning for security and glory. The past and the present are juxtaposed in al-Buḥturī’s *nasīb* in order to project a range of tragic sentiments, from bitter-sweet memories of an ideal past to endless estrangement from a gruesome present.

Joy and Horror at Samarra

We are told that the Arabic place-name Samarra is contracted from two possibilities. The first is *surra man ra’ā*—whoever sees it delights—and the second is *sā’ man ra’ā*—whoever sees it grieves.¹⁷ As the chief poet of the time, al-Buḥturī was largely responsible for instilling the sense that Samarra, the secluded haunt of kings, had returned to haunt secluded kings. The primary vehicle for mythologizing Samarra was the *nasīb*, the prototypical moment in the classical ode for lamenting the absolute loss

¹⁵ Kennedy, *The Prophet*, 175.

¹⁶ See Samer Mahdy Ali, “Reinterpreting Tragic Cycles of History,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 37 (2006): 46–67.

¹⁷ Abū al-°Abbās b. Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-a°yān*, ed. Iḥsān °Abbās, 8 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Thaqāfah, 1968–72), 1:42; Shihāb al-Dīn Yāqūt [b. °Abd Allāh al-Ḥamawī], *Mu°jam al-buldān*, 5 vols. (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, n.d.), 3:173–78.

of Love, Youth and Happiness, while bewailing the ravages of Fate and the tyranny of Death.

This *nasīb* mode of communication in Arabic culture is archetypal.¹⁸ Specific historical losses and yearnings become emblems of *all* losses and yearnings. Jaroslav Stetkevych notes that the poetic idiom enables historical denotative allusions to “open up to new ever different poetic uses.”¹⁹ The human experience of grief and yearning, under the theme of barren ruins, traitorous lovers and lost abodes reverberates between the specific and the universal to “express the full weight of contemporary events.”²⁰ For example, almost two centuries after al-Buḥturī, a poet-knight named Usāma b. Munqidh (d. 1188) would suffer great losses when his family and birthplace were destroyed in Syria’s earthquake of 1157. The poetic language he would use, though, as a messenger of his grief would be that of the *nasīb*, with its antiquarian but evocative idiom of effaced campsites and ghostly traces of bygone life.²¹ The poet “converted tangible things of measurable time into transcendent poetic symbols.”²² The power of the *nasīb* to express human sorrow is made infinite by the innumerable users of that mode of expression. One can trace a common denominator, if not a genealogy, of socio-cultural heartache; it “contains a whole people’s historical reservoir of sorrow, loss, yearning.”²³

There are several post-Mutawakkil poems by al-Buḥturī that implicitly or explicitly render Samarra as a *nasīb* ruin.²⁴ Perhaps the most poignant of the group is a poem that was delivered to the Caliph al-Mu‘tazz, himself a protégé of the poet, after a faction of Turkic guards challenged the caliphate in 867. The coup was narrowly averted when the faction leader, Bughā al-Ṣaghīr al-Shirābī, was defeated.²⁵ In the opening lines of the *nasīb*, al-Buḥturī unloads his heavy burden with an escape to

¹⁸ Jaroslav Stetkevych, *The Zephyrs of Najd: The Poetics of Nostalgia in the Classical Arabic Nasīb* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 52.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 62.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 52.

²² *Ibid.*, 62.

²³ *Ibid.*, 52. See also Usāma b. Munqidh, *al-Manāzil wal-diyār*, ed. Muṣṭafā Ḥijāzī (Cairo: Ministry of Culture [Wizārat al-Thaqāfa], 1994), 200.

²⁴ Abū ‘Ubāda al-Walīd al-Buḥturī, *Dīwān*, 5 vols., ed. Ḥasan Kāmil al-Ṣayrafī, 2nd ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, 1977), poems 262, 395, 771, 750.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 5:2793.

recollection (poem 771):

Will Time ever retrieve for me
 my days in white palaces and courtyards?
 There's no union with them momentarily,
 nor do they have a minute for a visit.
 A moment of merriment is not renewed
 in memory without renewing my ardor for them.
 A yearning, among many, left me awake
 at night, as if it were one malady among many.²⁶

In these four lines, al-Buḥturī adheres to a pattern of time consciousness, both measured time and Time acting as a fateful force antagonizing delicate human life. Though the coup in the background has been averted, al-Buḥturī draws attention to this event as an exception to a rule: the glory of the past is irretrievably lost, and Time isolates people from their beloved forebears. Descendants remain alone to fend off the horrors of Fate; the more the poet recalls the dead, the more it increases his ardor. The throes of Fate will continue unhampered. In that vein, the defeat of Bughā al-Shirābī receives recognition as an exception:

Fate to me has one grace for which to be thanked.
 It quelled what lies in the heart as enmity.²⁷

It was a trope of the time, as historians narrate it, that a caliph could not adequately achieve victory in any struggle without backing from one or another faction of Turkic guards. Put more bluntly, Turkic factions manipulated caliphs against other factions.²⁸ Even the most cunning of rulers found themselves allied with opportunistic guards, who were only nominally “protecting” them while jockeying for advantage against rivals. Alliances at the court were characterized by sudden betrayals. One can find that in the *nasīb* of another ode to al-Muʿtazz the poet uses the elegiac idiom to foreground the potential treachery of allies. The motif here is that of the elusive Ganymede (poem 262):

He modified and broke his promise,
 and fancied faithlessness but would not show it.
 Better than most, he will let the heart
 be captivated by his frolic and earnest.
 Magic sparkles in his eye,

²⁶ al-Buḥturī, *Dīwān*, 3:2015, ll. 1–4.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, l. 5.

²⁸ Kennedy, *The Prophet*, 174.

and flowers are plucked from his cheek.
 He soothes the heart, though he makes
 the mind a liar and betrays his promise,
 with a face rivaling the moon in beauty
 and a frame molded as a bough in form.²⁹

The motif of the elusive beloved, absolutely self-interested, allows al-Buḥturī to impress upon the nobility yet another dimension of the horrors at Samarra. Like the faction that propped al-Muʿtazz, the Ganymede lures and taunts his victim, fully conscious of his appeal, yet fully capable of betrayal.

There is, in addition, an important effect in the architectural appearance of Samarra that must have lent credence to al-Buḥturī's project in perpetuity. Though not necessarily of the architects' intent, it has become part of the effect. In brief, the palaces of the city were shaped with material that was readily available in Mesopotamia, meaning that mud brick, not stone, was preferable. Unlike stone, mud brick provided the convenience of quick construction.³⁰ Another consequence, though, was quick destruction. Mud brick, unlike baked brick or stone, was particularly susceptible to seasonal fluctuations in temperature and moisture. In the construction of Bulkuwāra (849-860?), architects seem to be toying with the properties of various materials. The palace is built using three types of brick, varying in degrees of vulnerability. The most delicate material, stamped earth or *pisé*, was used for the outer wall, then mud brick for the two courtyards, but baked brick was reserved for the innermost courtyard and throne chamber.³¹ Over the years, this meant that the palace took on the look of a ruin in a choreographed manner. The outer walls would crumble before the two courtyards and the very last would be the inner courtyard and throne chamber, the site of the caliphal sepulcher. For other palaces that were built completely with mud brick, the appearance of the ruin would hardly be as controlled, but nevertheless, there is a guarantee that it will give the appearance of ruin in a matter of years, not centuries.

Most importantly, the palace city was designed to become a gargantuan graveyard in consonance with *nasībīc* mood and imagery. Al-Muʿtaṣim founded the palace city in the first half of the ninth century, and al-Muʿtaḍid (r. 892-902) moved the court back to Baghdad in the

²⁹ al-Buḥturī, *Dīwān*, 2:656, ll. 1–5

³⁰ Robert Hillenbrand, *Islamic Architecture: Form, Function and Meaning* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), 398.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 406.

later half. We are told that most caliphs were buried in the caliphal city.³² It is reported though that most caliphs were buried in unmarked graves within their palaces.³³ In effect, this would render the entire city a precinct hallowed in the lyrical idiom of the *nasīb*. One anonymous poet fused his impression of Samarra with the prototypical *nasīb* of the pre-Islamic poet Imru' al-Qays. His ode begins,

Whoever-Sees-It-Delights has become ruined; what a pity.
Halt you both, let us weep for the memory of beloved and campsite.³⁴

In his geographic work, Yāqūt (d. 1229) expressed the *nasīb* effect of Samarra, after it was abandoned: the once splendid city had become “a ruin, a wasteland, at the sight of which the viewer takes fright. Before hand, there was nothing on earth more beautiful.”³⁵ It would seem that Samarra had become an uncanny fulfillment of Abū al-°Atāhiya's (d. 825) adage, “Get sons for death; build houses for decay.”³⁶ In short, Samarra had become the perceived graveyard of an Abbasid dream.

The city that was once called “whoever sees it delights” was transfigured into “whoever sees it grieves.” Raised to the level of mythology, the tragedies at Samarra become prototypical of human impermanence and frailty, despite bygone greatness and glory. Problems and crises that belonged properly to the court alone could take on a universal relevance, prompting generations to ask plaintively what happened and why. If al-Buḥturī's poetic practice in the *nasīb* were not enough, however, he gives us another single poetic instance in his Īwān Kisrā poem, which seals this transformation.

Mythologizing in Narrative

This article began with a question on how historiography on the patricide evolved from a stage of sketchy description to mytho-historical narrative. It has been shown how al-Buḥturī generates sympathy for intergenerational strife while summoning visions of reconciliation. But how do these archetypal issues seep into the narrative tradition? What cultural

³² Ibn al-°Imrānī, *al-Inbā'*, 137; Yāqūt, *Mu°jam al-buldān*, 178.

³³ *al-Ṭabarī, The History of al-Ṭabarī*, 34:223; Yāqūt, *Mu°jam al-buldān*, 3:178.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 176; cf. Julie Scott Meisami, “The Palace-Complex as Emblem: Some Samarran Qasīdas,” in *A Medieval Islamic City Reconsidered: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Samarra*, Oxford Studies in Islamic Art, 14, ed. Chase F. Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 69–78.

³⁶ In Meisami, “The Palace-Complex,” 69–70.

practices would make the influence possible?

I will first argue here that written knowledge of the past categorically relied on the oral performance of those texts from memory in assembly. Second, it will be demonstrated that al-Buḥturī's poetry was not marginal, but widely memorized and recited by *littérateurs* (*udabā'*). Third, there are several indicators that al-Buḥturī became the expert on the patricide because of his perspective as court poet and eye witness. While some resent his association with the momentous event, others such as al-Mas'ūdī (d. ca. 956) provide an outlet for his narratives. In either case, his association is affirmed. Needless to say, poets are expected to employ artistry and artifice, but this does not seem to detract from the appeal of the narrative to the historian, which validates El-Hibri's and Morse's findings that the goals of historiography were symbolic and persuasive.³⁷ Rather, the poet's skill seems to add to the ontological weight of the narrative.

Islamic knowledge, according to one scheme, was divided into two fundamental categories. One was reasoned (*'ilm ma'qūl*), the other was orally transmitted (*'ilm manqūl*).³⁸ The former included Greek philosophy and astronomy, and the latter encompassed the canonical texts of Islam, such as the Qur'ān, Ḥadīth, and law, in addition to supporting disciplines that helped in understanding the sacred texts of Islam, such as grammar, classical poetry and anecdotes (*kalām al-'arab*).³⁹ Ibn Khaldūn distinguished between reasoned and transmitted (cultural) knowledge based on the role of memory: If lost, the former could be regained by contemplation, whereas the latter had to be conveyed from

³⁷ According to Ibn Rashīq, poets were notorious for their artifice and mendacity, as would be expected in an artistic profession. He tells one anecdote in which this view is framed as a complaint: A wise man was once asked about poets. He said, "What can you say about these folk? Modesty is honorable except among them, and lying is dishonorable except among them." See al-Ḥasan b. Rashīq al-Qayrawānī, *Kitāb al-'umda fī ṣan'at al-shi'r wa naqdih*, ed. al-Nabawī Sha'lān, 2 vols. (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 2000), 1:18.

³⁸ George Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges: Institutions of Higher Learning in Islam and the West* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981), 75–80. Kraemer notes that other terms were used for remembered knowledge, such as knowledge of the forebears (*'ulūm al-awā'il*), knowledge of the Arabs (*'ulūm al-'arab*), human knowledge (*'ulūm al-insāniyya*); see Joel L. Kraemer, *Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam: The Cultural Revival during the Buyid Age* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986), 10.

³⁹ 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Muḥammad b. Khaldūn, *Muqaddima*, ed. 'Alī 'Abd al-Wāḥid Wāfī (Cairo: Dār Nahḍat Miṣr, n.d.), 1026.

one generation to the next orally. If lost it could never be regained.⁴⁰ In no uncertain terms, while books could aid memorization and performance, transmitted knowledge must never languish there. Ibn Khaldūn states, “Know that the storehouse for knowledge is the human soul.”⁴¹ He in fact stresses the dependence of writing on orality to the extent that he deems orthography solely a notational system for documenting spoken words.⁴² By this reasoning, since writing can never adequately capture the nuances of recitation, written texts must be taught by performed example.

Moreover, it would appear that oral performance offered scholars the unique advantages of a face-to-face interaction the quality of which was subject to review. For example, al-Ṣūlī was criticized, despite his erudition and expertise, for teaching texts he never heard recited.⁴³ Learned society offered its members the opportunity to gain credit and rank by displaying knowledge and forming bonds with others that would bear witness to the transfer of cultural information. This method of education stressed knowledge as much as the personal bonds between speaker and listener. Oral knowledge linked people through a mode of communication that conveyed information specifically from mouth to ear. Hodgson, on the subject of historical reports, identifies the importance of personal witness in guaranteeing the integrity of each link in a continuous human chain.⁴⁴ Bulliet likewise explains that the authority to communicate Ḥadith-knowledge rested in personally hearing it from someone who personally heard it in a chain going back to the Prophet himself or a companion.⁴⁵ A student aspiring to a career as a scholar would strive for the privilege of joining that historic chain. He would essentially become a permanent member of this cosmic chain by witnessing the oral event, what Bulliet calls “ear witness,” and by passing on the tradition to future generations.⁴⁶ In al-Ṣūlī’s case, without his aural reception being wit-

⁴⁰ Ibid., 1025–26.

⁴¹ Ibid., 1235.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Muḥammad b. Ishāq b. al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist* (Cairo: al-Maktaba al-Tijāriyya al-Kubrā, n.d.), 215; cf. Richard W. Bulliet, *Islam: The View from the Edge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 19.

⁴⁴ Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 1:352.

⁴⁵ Bulliet, *Islam*, 15.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 19–21. See Munir Ud-Din Ahmed, “The Institution of the Mudhākara,” in *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, suppl. 1. (No. 17, Deutscher Orientalistentag, 21–27 July, 1968 [1969], 595–630. He describes a

nessed by others, he lacked the license to transmit.

The pressure to memorize and perform, according to Ibn Khaldūn, ought to begin in childhood. He advises parents and teachers to encourage children to commit classical poetry and anecdotes to memory, so that a “loom” forms in the student’s mind that enables him to “weave” speech like that of the Arabs.⁴⁷ He applauds the people of Andalusia and the Arab East for the custom of introducing poetry to children early in their education, even *before* Qurʾān and Ḥadīth.⁴⁸ He admits that children are more receptive, in this manner, to learning and comprehending the revelation later in their education.⁴⁹

Not only was there a cultural incentive to perform texts from memory, we have specific indications that the poetry of al-Buḥturī was worthy of memorization and performance. Al-Buḥturī’s *diwan* and anecdote collector was Abū Bakr al-Ṣūlī (d. 947). In his collection of lore on the life of al-Buḥturī, he portrays the prestige of the poet in a anecdote of “first-encounter” when he was fifteen and the poet seventy-one.⁵⁰ He reports that he was at the educational circle (*majlis*) of al-Mubarrad the Basran grammarian (d. 898) when an elderly long-bearded man greeted the grammarian. The teacher stopped dictating to the class, and older students rose, hovered around the visitor and asked him if they could recite poetry to him. The celebrity indulged the adoring students and listened to their poetry recitations. In doing so, he verified the memory of each student. Soon al-Ṣūlī realized it was al-Buḥturī himself, but had no memorized poetry to recite to him. Al-Mubarrad consoled him, saying he could find the poet later at a certain place. Al-Ṣūlī the teenager seized the opportunity and worked with a friend to memorize some poetry, then checked his retrieval in the presence of a seasoned elder. Later, he found the poet at a literary gathering (*mujālasa*). When the occasion arose, he recited what he knew and finally received al-Buḥturī’s blessings. At the end of the anecdote, al-Ṣūlī noted that in a single evening students performed twelve full odes in the presence of the poet.⁵¹

more informal session wherein *Ḥadīth* students would share reports from memory before or after formal class. The institution attests not only to the value placed on memorizing knowledge, but on being able to process it and use it.

⁴⁷ Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddima*, 1252.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Abū Bakr b. Yaḥyā al-Ṣūlī, *Akhbār al-Buḥturī wa Dhayl al-Akhbār*, ed. Ṣāliḥ al-Ashtar (Damascus: Al-Majmaʿ al-ʿIlmī al-ʿArabī), 49–54.

⁵¹ Ibid.

There are key features in this piece of lore that have been embedded to make it appealing and believable. First, poetry is shown to be the currency of social interaction: competition, peer pressure, embarrassment, honor and self-recovery. They all factor into the value of poetry in society. Second, within this competitive environment, the anecdote illustrates that memorized poetry allows al-Şūlī to participate in an historic transfer of knowledge and thereby become one of an elite that will serve as curators of al-Buḥturī's corpus upon his death. At the age of physical maturation (*bulūgh*), he is acquiring verbal proficiency (*balāgha*). Poetry, memorized and delivered, qualifies him to become a transmitter of cultural texts that will remain important in perpetuity. Third, al-Şūlī's anecdote reflects the place of honor that al-Buḥturī occupied in Abbasid society. The poet is someone for whom al-Mubarrad, who was famed for his arrogance, would interrupt class.⁵² He is someone around whom devotees flutter, anxious to win his approval. Most importantly, the protagonist, al-Şūlī, goes to great lengths after his initial failure to seek the poet's blessings.

In death, al-Buḥturī continued to be a cultural icon. His work and legacy were promoted by seven reciters of high standing in Abbasid culture, the youngest of whom, °Alī b. Ḥamza al-Iṣbahānī (d. 985), is said to have lived 88 years after al-Buḥturī. Al-Şūlī collected the poet's verse and organized it according to the end-rhyme, and °Alī b. Ḥamza al-Iṣbahānī did the same, but organized them according to themes (*aghrād*).⁵³ Moreover, his poetry was considered part of the classical canon that was memorized by would-be scholars for centuries. Ibn al-Athīr (d. 1239) adds to his own credentials when he declares that al-Buḥturī's poetry was a cornerstone of his early learning.⁵⁴ After memorizing Qur'ān and a corpus of Ḥadīth by heart, he focused on memorizing poetry, particularly that of Abū Tammām (d. 842), al-Mutanabbī (d. 965) and al-Buḥturī.⁵⁵ Likewise, al-Sam'ānī (d. 1166)

⁵² Ibid., 49.

⁵³ Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-a'yān*, 6:28. In addition to his two collectors, there were at least five men who orally transmitted his poetry. They were: Muḥammad b. al-Mubarrad (d. 898), Muḥammad b. Khalaf b. al-Marzubān (d. 921), al-Huṣayn b. Ismā'īl al-Maḥāmilī (d. 941), Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Ḥakīmī (d. 947), and °Abd Allāh b. Ja'far b. Darastawayh al-Naḥwī (d. 958). Abū Bakr al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Tārīkh Baghdād*, 14 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-°Arabī, [1966?]) 13:447.

⁵⁴ Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-a'yān*, 5:389.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

reports that he memorized “more than a thousand lines” of al-Buḥturī’s work.⁵⁶ He notes that in his day al-Buḥturī’s diwan was “widely known,” *mashhūr*.⁵⁷

At literary gatherings it is thus likely that the mention of al-Buḥturī indexed a repertoire of anecdotes about the patricide, and these narratives indexed his poetry on the topic. The two were culturally and mentally linked. Al-Buḥturī was in fact widely believed to be a witness to the murder, a belief promoted by his elegy on al-Mutawakkil in which he describes the attack in the first person.⁵⁸ This poem gave him the needed credentials to speak on the subject as an expert witness. When Ibn Khallikān (d. 1282) describes al-Buḥturī’s long standing rapport with al-Mutawakkil and the vizier Faṭḥ b. Khāqān, he casually notes that “he is famous as regards what happened to them (*fī amrihimā*).”⁵⁹ The striking point here is that Ibn Khallikān, writing long after the whole incident, associates the poet with the murder. Similarly, al-Buḥturī’s rivals resented his fame and association, but even they could not ignore the cultural link. They could, however, mock him, as Abū al-ʿAnbas al-Ṣaymarī does when he laments Jaʿfar al-Mutawakkil and the absence of anyone to avenge him:

How grieved is this world over Jaʿfar,
 over the hero, the bright-faced king!
 Over a slain man from the clan of Hāshim
 who lived between the throne and the pulpit.
 By God, Lord of the House and pilgrimage rites,
 by God, if even al-Buḥturī were slain,
 An avenger from Syria
 would surely rise to avenge him,
 One of a thousand bastards
 from the Clan of Biting Crap,

⁵⁶ ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Samʿānī, *al-Ansāb*, ed. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Yaḥyā al-Yamānī, 13 vols. (Hyderabad: Maṭbaʿat Majlis Dāʾirat al-Maʿārif al-ʿUthmāniyya), 1962–82, 2:102.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ For an interpretation of al-Buḥturī’s ode pair, stigmatizing and then praising al-Muntaṣir, see Samer Mahdy Ali, “Praise for Murder? Two Odes by al-Buḥturī surrounding an Abbasid Patricide,” in *Writers and Rulers: Perspectives on Their Relation from Abbasid to Safavid Times*, Series Literaturen im Kontext, 16, ed. Beatrice Gruendler and Louise Marlow (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2004), 1–38.

⁵⁹ Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-aʿyān*, 6:30.

Led by every one of his base brothers,
each riding an old one-eyed ass.⁶⁰

The antithesis in this piece is not only humorous, but revealing: The leader of an empire remains unavenged, whereas the resented poet would be duly avenged by a band of brothers mounted on one-eyed asses. The august Hāshimite finds no one to avenge him, but for the poet, the “crap biters” display their machismo. No doubt, these juxtapositions do not flatter al-Buḥturī, but they illustrate the inextricable association between al-Buḥturī and the patricide.

Among the alluring narratives most likely recited about the patricide was al-Buḥturī’s putatively eyewitness account. The first written register is found in a historical work by al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab* [Meadows of gold], from the tenth century. This narrative seems to have traveled far. A variation reappears in the Arab west in a book by the Andalusian writer, Ibn Bassām al-Shantarīnī (d. 1147), in *al-Dhakhīra fī maḥāsini ahl al-Jazīra* [Treasure-trove on the virtues of the people of the (Iberian) Peninsula]. Not only does it find an audience far from Iraq, but some two hundred years after al-Masʿūdī. The narrative also reappears in history works by historians who followed the Masʿūdī tradition. A version of the narrative is retold in *Mirʾāt al-zamān* [Mirror of the ages] by Sibṭ b. al-Jawzī (d. 1257), and *Tārīkh al-Islām* [The history of Islam] by al-Dhahabī (d. 1347). Al-Masʿūdī’s narrative illustrates the rippling effect of al-Buḥturī’s message through the centuries. The narrative itself answers in literary detail moral, existential and communal questions about the cruelty of Fate, the impermanence of human greatness and the instability of allegiance. All three issues are treated by the sequencing of events and the use of literary devices. The most striking claim is the one never mentioned. The wayward heir, al-Muntaṣir, receives no blame. Despite the premium on a son’s obedience in patronage cultures, the narrative echoes a deep sympathy for all the Abbasids promoted in al-Buḥturī’s *Īwān Kisrā* ode, which transforms an otherwise sordid palace scandal into a mythic tragedy with widespread perennial appeal. The only unredeemable culprit is “Fate.”⁶¹

In light of El-Hibri’s and Morse’s findings, my interpretation of al-Masʿūdī’s narrative told by al-Buḥturī will stress his persuasive techniques and goals. Thus, the authority of the poet, the sequence of events,

⁶⁰ Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī, *Kitāb al-aghānī*, 24 vols. (Cairo: Al-Hayʾa al-Miṣriyya al-ʿĀmma lil-Kitāb, 1992–93), 21:35.

⁶¹ See Ali, “Reinterpreting Tragic Cycles of History.”

the props, the dialogue, are all taken as *strategies* meant to meet literary expectation and to serve homiletic purposes, whether explicit or implicit. As for the explicit “moral of the narrative,” al-Mas[°]ūdī concludes with a predictable sermon about the unpredictability of life, the cycles joy and sorrow and the impermanence of human power contrasted with the divine.⁶² While such rhetoric may be unsurprising for a pious scholar, it implicitly serves as a commentary for comprehending Oedipal struggle at the navel of Muslim power.

The most prominent strategy, and the one introduced first, is reliance on the authority of the poet, a persona known for transforming a sordid palace scandal into a meaningful tragedy. The narrative in al-Mas[°]ūdī’s text announces its beginning with the phrase, “al-Buḥturī relates a narrative, saying (*haddatha al-Buḥturī qāla*).”⁶³ This technique serves to feature the poet as the man with privileged intelligence, echoing an older meaning of the term *khavar* (report).⁶⁴ The authority of the poet resurfaces in the narrative when the historian punctuates the presentation with reminders such as “al-Buḥturī said” and “he said.”⁶⁵ Al-Mas[°]ūdī uses these narrative techniques in the first instance to distance himself from the narration, but in the second instance, the distance allows him to assume another even more literary voice. In fact, after he releases the audience from the literary grips of the narrative, he finally says, conscious of his rhetorical charm, “And we mention here only a smidgen of what we mentioned [in other works]. This is what we selected for now, since it is the most eloquent expression and the easiest to memorize.”⁶⁶ The historian precisely at this point seems to be self-conscious of his literary impact, wanting the text to be eloquent, that is, easy to memorize by heart.

It seems that later generations of *littérateurs* appreciated the importance of the poet’s voice. In the Berlin manuscript, dated 1673,⁶⁷ the scribe also recognized the significance of the phrase “al-Buḥturī relates a

⁶² Abū al-Ḥasan al-Mas[°]ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, ed. Muḥammad Muḥyī al-Dīn °Abd al-Ḥamīd, 4 vols. (Beirut: al-Maktaba al-Islāmiyya, n.d. [1948?]), 4:121–23.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁶⁴ *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, second edition, ed. H. A. R. Gibb et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1960–2006), 2:1289–90, s.v. “Khabar.”

⁶⁵ al-Mas[°]ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, 4:118.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 4:121.

⁶⁷ Abū al-Ḥasan al-Mas[°]ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, Ms. Spr. 48 (Staatsbibliothek, Berlin), *fol.* 595a.

narrative, saying,” by setting it apart from the rest of the text, using three markers: a new script style (*naskh*), new color (red) and a new size (double proportion). The result is an eye-catching heading, relative to the surrounding text. The look of the manuscript enhances its mnemonic value in accordance with al-Masʿūdī’s desire to make the narrative eloquent for the sake of easy learning by heart.

The beginning of the narrative deflects responsibility from al-Muntaṣir by blaming Fate, the caliph’s misjudgments and the palatine guards.⁶⁸ This narrative initially creates a tension by focusing on al-Mutawakkil’s violations of established conventions, indeed of good judgment. By his own will, the caliph brought danger into his immediate proximity. Moreover, there is strong commentary in this tenth-century narrative about his over-reliance on guards in matters that should be entrusted to no one but the most tested and competent personnel. These implicit criticisms, El-

⁶⁸ al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, 4:118: Al-Buḥturī said: We gathered that night with boon-companions (*nudamāʾ*) at al-Mutawakkil’s gathering (*majlis*) and we began to mention the topic of swords. One of the people present said, “O Commander of the Faithful, I heard that a man from Basra happened upon a sword from India without equal, and nothing like it was seen.”

Al-Mutawakkil ordered that a letter be written to the Governor of Basra asking him to buy it at whatever price. The letter was sent through the post and a letter from the Governor of Basra returned saying that a man from Yemen had bought it. Al-Mutawakkil then ordered that a message be sent to Yemen asking for the sword and for it to be purchased. And the letter was sent.

Al-Buḥturī added: While we were still with al-Mutawakkil, ʿUbayd Allāh suddenly entered with the sword. He let him know that it was purchased from its owner in Yemen for 10,000 dirhams. He [al-Mutawakkil] was pleased that it had arrived and thanked God for facilitating the matter. He drew it and liked it. Each of us said what he liked, and he [the caliph] placed it under the fold of his mattress.

When morning came, he said to al-Faṭḥ [his vizier and lover], “Bring me a slave-boy whose courage and valor you trust. Charge him with this sword, so he may hold it over my head [*sic*], never parting from me by day so long as I reign.”

He said: Talking did not resume until Bāghir the Turk came and al-Faṭḥ said, “O Commander of the Faithful, this is Bāghir the Turk. He was recommended to me for his courage and valor. He is fit for what the Commander of the Faithful wishes.” Al-Mutawakkil called him and charged him with the sword, and commanded him according to his wishes. He offered to elevate his station and increase his income. Al-Buḥturī said: By God, that sword was not drawn nor unsheathed from the time it was charged to him until the night that Bāghir struck him with that sword.”

Hibri notes, can also be seen in al-Ṭabarī's ninth-century narratives. The vizier al-Faḥ, a parvenu who rose from slavery by luck, suffers reproach for unwise counsel and dangerous adulation.⁶⁹ Furthermore, al-Mutawakkil's dependence on Turkic guards is viewed in retrospect as foolish and ominous. Their use of force during the Samarran period is roundly condemned. As El-Hibri notes, in contrast to Persian rebellions that had potentially noble causes, the palatines "do not rebel in order to restore a moral, pietistic, or social ideal, but merely to realize immediately material and political gains."⁷⁰ These soldiers, with rare exception, are figured into narratives as the quintessential traitors. The royal family is technically dependent on them for protection, but in reality they serve no practical purpose but to sow discord and sap the state's resources.⁷¹ In al-Mas'ūdī's narrative on the authority of al-Buḥturī, there is then sharp criticism when the poet portrays the caliph vainly purchasing the murder weapon and recklessly handing over his life to an untested guard. About a century after the dreadful event and al-Ṭabarī's later narratives, al-Buḥturī's depiction must have seemed to audiences the epitome of caliphal tragedy: A powerful ruler in need of aid, but surrounded by strangers. Al-Buḥturī's narrative points to that realization, as the caliph senses the fate he has brought upon himself.

In the second half of the narrative,⁷² the reproach of al-Mutawakkil

⁶⁹ El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography*, 193.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 210.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, 4:119: Then al-Buḥturī said: I saw a strange thing in al-Mutawakkil the night that he was slain. We were mentioning haughtiness and what kings used to do by way of insolence. We engaged the topic, but he abstained. Then he turned his face toward the Qibla [Mecca] and prostrated and rolled his face in the dust in humility to God, Mighty and Majestic be He. Then he took dust and sprinkled it on his beard and head. He erupted, "I am a slave of God, and he who is destined to dust must humble himself and not wax haughty."

Al-Buḥturī said: I took it as a bad omen for him, and downplayed what he did when he sprinkled dust on his head and beard. Then he sat down to drink. When one of the singers sang a tune, he liked it. He turned to al-Faḥ and said, "O Faḥ, there is no one who hears this song who is noble except you and me." Then he started to weep.

Al-Buḥturī said: I suspected a bad omen in his weeping and said [to myself], "Here comes the second one." While we were in the midst of that, a servant came—one of Qabiḥa's [the Caliph's wife's] servants—carrying a towel. Inside of it was a robe of honor sent to him by Qabiḥa. The messenger said, "O

escalates, depicting him as inverting the normal order of things: He virtually abdicates by freakishly putting his face in contact with the dust in front of his subordinates. Normally, caliphs conspicuously exhaust resources to evince privilege in ceremony. The will to hold and exercise power is an a priori condition of the caliphate. Here the caliph reduces himself with a conventional gesture of humility or mourning, essentially giving up the will to be king, and thus to live. Al-Buḥturī, in the narra-

Commander of the Faithful, Qabīḥa says to you, ‘I had this ceremonial coat [*khil^ca*] made for the Commander of the Faithful and I liked it, so I sent it to you that you may wear it.’” He [al-Buḥturī] said: In it was a red outer cloak [*durrā^ca*] the like of which I have never seen, and a red silk gown [*muṭraf*]. It was so delicate it looked like [Egyptian] silk from Dabīq.

He [al-Buḥturī] said: He put on the cloak on the *inside* and then wrapped himself in the gown. I chased him to warn him of a jutting object that might cause his gown to catch. Al-Mutawakkil moved into it and the gown coiled around him. It [the object] thus pulled him once and ripped the gown from end to end.

He [al-Buḥturī] said: He took it, wrapped it and gave it to the servant of Qabīḥa to take it [to her]. He said, “Tell her, keep this gown with you so that it may be a burial shroud when I die.”

I said to myself, “Verily, we are from God, and to Him we return. By God, this reign is over.” Al-Mutawakkil then became severely drunk. He said: It was his custom that if he keeled over when drunk, the servants at his head set him upright. As we were doing that—and some three hours of the night had passed!—Bāghir suddenly approached accompanied by ten soldiers of the Turks. Swords were in their hands sparkling in the light of the candle. They then attacked us and headed toward al-Mutawakkil so that Bāghir climbed the throne with other Turks. Faṭḥ cried out, “How dare you! Your master!”

When the slave-boys and others present, as well as [his] boon-companions, saw them, they fled in haste. No one else remained in the gathering except Faṭḥ. He fought them and pushed them. Al-Buḥturī said: Then I heard al-Mutawakkil’s death-cry [*ṣayḥa*]. Bāghir had struck him with the sword with which al-Mutawakkil had charged him. He struck him on the right side, cut him open to his waist, then turned him over to reach the left side and did the same.

Al-Faṭḥ approached, pushing them away, and one of them stabbed him with his sword in his stomach and it exited his back. He nevertheless remained steadfast, neither leaning nor dying. Al-Buḥturī said: I never did see a man with a stronger spirit nor more noble. He threw himself on al-Mutawakkil, and they died together.

They were rolled together in the carpet in which they died. They were cast aside in that state all night and most of the day until the caliphate rested in al-Muntaṣir. He gave orders that they be buried together. It is said that Qabīḥa wrapped him in the exact gown that was ripped.

tive, is alarmed, taking the display as a voluntary step toward death. The king relinquishes what makes him unique and sovereign. The next omen stems from another odd response from al-Mutawakkil. In the face of song and music, he does not rejoice, but turns inward and weeps.

The last omen seals his fate. He receives an exquisite present from his wife. However the standard practice for rulers in courtly anecdotes is to ask one of the poets present to compose a piece (*qitʿa*) that would forever capture the sublime moment and travel back to the gentle ears of the gift giver. This practice reciprocates delight with delight in perfect social symmetry. Instead what ensues is an anti-social, almost grotesque, response that absolutely precludes delight. He receives two gifts, a red cloak [*durrāʿa*] and a red silk gown [*miṭraf* or *muṭraf*]. The first is clearly designated as a ceremonial cloak [*khilʿa*]⁷³—not to be worn outside the proper occasion. The *khilʿa* was usually finely brocaded, embroidered with gold and, in the front, studded with rubies.⁷³ The second gift is a red silk gown, usually made of an oversized piece of cloth used as a wrap with bold borders that are embroidered.⁷⁴ The gown was used for any dignified visit, while the coat was reserved exclusively for high ceremonial. Thus the latter denoted a more auspicious occasion.⁷⁵ In essence, al-Mutawakkil makes a mockery of Abbasid sartorial conventions, which he himself instituted. Now he wears the ceremonial cloak without ceremony and drapes over it another *less* prestigious outer garment. Al-Buḥturī is careful to stress the point to the audience: “He put on the cloak on the *inside* and then wrapped himself in the gown.”

The situation devolves further. We are also told that he heedlessly allowed the gown to rip while moving about. An object snags his gown, which coils and tightens around him (note the metaphor), pulls him and finally tears. With cinematic effect, the coil-and-rip scene encodes the interplay of misjudgment and Fate. He makes an aberrant, incomprehensible choice of attire, then Fate seemingly snags him causing the whole outfit to coil and constrict him. The outfit, symbolic of his persona, is rent graphically “end to end.” The incident prefigures his demise, enabling him to face his destiny and visualize his burial. A gown for high-class living is therefore transformed into one of burial. In other narratives, the garment became such a locus of cultural attention that it appeared in al-Ṭabarī’s version in the more paradisiacal color of green

⁷³ M. M. Ahsan, *Social Life under the Abbasids, 170–289 AH, 786–902 AD* (London: Longman, 1979), 39.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 40–41.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

often used on the tombs of heroes.⁷⁶ Likewise, Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 1201) readjusts the prop as the gift of his mother⁷⁷—the one who gave him life would give him the symbol of his death.⁷⁸ After the ripping of the gown, the cruelest event in the sequence is his instruction to Qabīḥa’s servant. The wife gives him a beautiful gift meant to bring him joy, but he sends the destroyed fabric back with gloomy anticipations of his own destruction. Al-Buḥturī reacts to the disturbing scene with a formulaic phrase used upon hearing news of someone’s death. Symbolically, the Caliph has met his fate.

Thereafter, al-Mutawakkil became severely drunk. The drinking scene seems to have been an important element that was preserved in subsequent retellings of the same and variant narratives.⁷⁹ The intoxication scene redeems the hubristic father by creating the impression of an artful peaceful death despite fatal flaws. Along these lines, one poet captures al-Mutawakkil’s redemptive death in verse:

This is how the death of a nobleman should be,
among pipes, guitars and wine.
Among two cups that quench his thirst completely,
one cup for his joy and another for his Fate.⁸⁰

The father, in brief, dies tragically but nobly. In al-Masʿūdī’s view, though al-Mutawakkil lived unlike other men, he tasted the betrayal of Fate and death like all men. He reveals his homiletic aims when he says,

⁷⁶ al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 9:224.

⁷⁷ Abū al-Faraj b. al-Jawzī, *al-Muntaẓam fī tārikh al-mulūk wal-umam*, ed. Muḥammad and Muṣṭafā ʿAbd al-Qādir ʿAṭā, 18 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1992–93), 11:356.

⁷⁸ The introduction of al-Mutawakkil’s mother in this story has little or nothing to do with “historicity” or even literary consistency among historians in the same tradition. Al-Masʿūdī prefers to introduce the mother in a different way: He prefaces the murder story of al-Mutawakkil by saying ominously, just lines from al-Buḥturī’s alarming story, “In the year 247 [861], Shujāʿ, the mother of al-Mutawakkil, died . . . then al-Mutawakkil died six months after her death.” See al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab* 4:118. Obviously, the literary force of the mother’s role is more important than slavish consistency.

⁷⁹ ʿAbd al-Malik al-Thaʿālibī, *Thimār al-qulūb fil-muḍāf wal-mansūb*, ed. Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm, Dhakhāʾir al-ʿArab, 57 (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1985), 190; al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 9:226; Ibn al-ʿImrānī, *al-Inbāʾ*, 119; ʿAlī b. Anjab b. al-Sāʿī, *Tārīkh al-khulafāʾ al-ʿabbāsiyyīn*, ed. ʿAbd al-Raḥīm Yūsuf al-Jamal (Cairo: Maktabat al-Ādāb, 1993), 79.

⁸⁰ al-Thaʿālibī, *Thimār al-qulūb*, 191.

“Who therefore is deluded by this world and trusts it and thinks he is safe from betrayal and catastrophe, except a delusional fool? . . . Not even the careful soul is safe.”⁸¹ By this point, a palace scandal has become a locus of reflection on deep-seated questions.

Conclusion

Thus we return to the question of how written historiography on the patricide evolves from cryptic sentences to captivating mytho-historical narrative. There appears to be a convergence of factors that make it likely that poetry inspired the growth and relevance of narratives. We are faced first with a scandal, repulsive by Abbasid standards, that elicits al-Buḥturī’s mythicizing program. Second, the poet had enjoyed sufficient stature among the Abbasid nobility so that his literary creations (poetry and narrative) merited performance in assembly from memory. Over the course of some thirty years, al-Buḥturī lyricized and mythicized the troubles of the court and evoked cultural sympathy in a series of odes. He portrayed his texts as canonical presentations of the Abbasid collective past. Third, Abbasid society demanded and rewarded the performance of traditional knowledge, thus providing *littérateurs* ample opportunity to recite and witness poetry and narratives surrounding the patricide.

In the wake of the sudden appearance of narrative detail in al-Ṭabarī, one has to come to terms with the origin of these details. Could it be that al-Ṭabarī’s informants, a generation or two after the event, have more information to record in writing? Did al-Ṭabarī discover chains of narration whose reports had remained secret? It is unlikely that al-Yaʿqūbī, al-Dīnawarī and Ibn Qutayba found no public narratives about the patricide, whereas decades later al-Ṭabarī and al-Masʿūdī have discovered new information and secret chains of narration. The burgeoning of mytho-historical narratives suggests rather the gradual growth of a strain of narratives, which were publicly performed in gatherings for decades before they were actually preserved and conserved in the written annals of history. A likely scenario would involve the dissemination of patricide narratives inspired by topical poetry delivered in literary gatherings.

⁸¹ al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, 4:121.