Special Dossier

Acts of Rebellion and Revolt
in the Early Islamic Caliphate

Guest Editors
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Contents:

Introduction

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This thematic dossier is a product of the ongoing research project "Embedding conquest: Naturalising Muslim rule in the early Islamic Empire (600–1000 CE)" (EmCo), financed by the European Research Council. EmCo examines how interdependent relationships between individuals and groups contributed to the early caliphate's longevity and success. One way to understand how these relationships functioned—including what expectations of rights and responsibilities they produced; how they were established, maintained, broken, and restored; who was involved in making and entitled to make decisions about their character, range, and limits; and who felt ownership over them—is to trace what happened when such relationships were tested and threatened in moments of crisis. Rebellions and violent uprisings form an obvious instance of such moments of crisis. This dossier arose from a workshop[1] that examined social interdependency in the early caliphate through the lens of rebellions.

Acts of Rebellion

The caliphate experienced many challenges in the first centuries of its existence. Keeping together a conglomerate of diverse ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious populations in a variety of geographical and climatological conditions generated a wide variety of tensions. These tensions manifested themselves in a multiplicity of confrontations between state

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1. "Acts of Rebellions and Revolts in the Early Caliphate," Leiden, November 7–8, 2019; https://emco. hcommons.org/events/event/workshop-acts-of-rebellion-in-the-early-islamic-empire/.

agents and those living under their rule that left their mark in literary texts, documents, and material evidence.[2]

Generally, scholars have considered rebellions in the early Islamic world in terms of religious and ideological confrontations, juristic debate, and historiographical presentation—that is, how rebellions were remembered and told throughout history.[3] Building on this work, the articles in this dossier address the phenomenon of rebellions by focusing on case studies that illuminate their multifaceted nature as intersections of various domains, including law, politics, kinship, economics, material culture, and religion. They thus consider rebellions as reflections of social relationships in all their facets and their outbreaks as the result of a (perceived) failure of the rights and responsibilities that were expected to flow from such relationships. Such an approach allows us to highlight a variety of underlying explanatory factors for rebellions from the social, political, cultural, fiscal, and environmental to the religious, juristic, and ethical. Rebellions addressed multiple issues at once, regularly bringing together diverse groups and individuals who were joined through relations of dependency to one another and to the holders of power. In taking this approach, the articles in the dossier draw on methodological insights developed in scholarship on rebellions in other parts of the world, where a focus on the agency of rebels and their multiple and diverse agendas significantly changes how such movements are understood.[4]

The study of rebellions on the basis of historical sources is, however, complicated. The fact that narrative sources are often written post factum and influenced by later agendas and conceptions about the past is a well-known predicament. In the case of rebellions the

2. Coins are the main material source that has been used in the study of rebellions. See L. Treadwell, "ʿAbd al-Malik's Coinage Reforms: The Role of the Damascus Mint," *Revue numismatique* 165 (2009): 357–81; T. Bernheimer, "The Revolt of ʿAbdallah b. Muʿawiya, AH 127–130: A Reconsideration through the Coinage," *Bulletin of The School of Oriental and African Studies* 69 (2006): 381–93. Papyri occasionally make mention of rebellions, but they have not been used in a systematic way. See G. Levi Della Vida, "A Papyrus Reference to the Damietta Raid of 853," *Byzantion* 17 (1944): 212–22; C. J. Kraemer, *Excavations at Nessana: Non-Literary Papyri*, vol. 3 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1958), 112–14. There are ongoing archaeological excavations at centers of rebellion such as al-Mahdiyya in Tunisia, which served the Fatimids, Humayma in Jordan, where the ʿAbbasid family was holding out (https://www.queensu.ca/classics/archaeology/faculty-directed-field-work/humayma-excavation-project), and Alamut in Iran, which was home to the Nizaris (excavated by the University of Tehran).

3. See, for recent treatments, A. Elad, *The Rebellion of Muḥammad al-Nafs al-Zakiyya in 145/762: Ṭālibīs and Early ʿAbbāsīs in Conflict* (Leiden: Brill, 2015); K. Abou El Fadl, *Rebellion and Violence in Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); H. Keaney, *Medieval Islamic Historiography: Remembering Rebellion* (New York: Routledge, 2013); N. Haider, *The Rebel and the Imam in Early Islam: Explorations in Muslim Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); P. Lantschner, "Invoking and Constructing Legitimacy: Rebels in the Late Medieval European and Islamic Worlds," in *The Routledge History Handbook of Medieval Rebellions*, ed. J. Firnhaber-Baker and D. Schonaers, 168–88 (Milton Park: Routledge, 2017). For more sociopolitical analyses of rebellions, see P. Cobb, *White Banners: Contention in ʿAbbasid Syria, 750–880* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001); Y. Lev, "Coptic Rebellions and the Islamization of Medieval Egypt (8th–10th Century): Medieval and Modern Perceptions," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 39 (2012): 303–44.

4. J. Firnhaber-Baker, "Introduction: Medieval Revolt in Context," in Firnhaber-Baker and Schonaers, *Routledge History Handbook*, 1–15, at 1; J. C. Magalhães de Oliveira, "Late Antiquity: The Age of Crowds?" *Past and Present* 249 (2020): 3–52.

situation is even more problematic. The sources, reflecting the established authorities' point of view, are quick to label the ruler's opponents as "rebels" and to define expressions of dissent as "rebellious." Conversely, violent movements that succeed in toppling the state and establishing their own authority are not characterized as rebellions in our sources, since the latter were mostly written under the new regimes. Furthermore, as Şimşek shows in the case of Abū Ḥanīfa, subsequent generations worked out their own attitudes towards rebellions through competing representations of how major figures in the early caliphate approached the topic.

A further complication is the ambiguous language employed to describe uprisings: the sources use multiple words whose meaning is mostly retrievable only from the context. Instead of looking for characteristic (Arabic) terms or fixed qualities to present a definition of rebellion or a set of standard traits and attributes, we use "rebellions" as an umbrella term to denote a set of human actions and behaviors that are manifest in confrontations with the authorities—that is, the state and its representatives—and in which violence (or the threat of it) is imminent.

Rebellion and related phenomena (uprisings, revolts, resistance, armed negotiation, contention, confrontation, mutiny, kidnappings, assassinations) challenge existing power relationships. Crucially, this dossier maintains that rebellions need not necessarily be aimed at overturning the social and political order. There obviously were such movements, and they have understandably received much attention: the ʿAbbasids, Fatimids, Qarāmiṭa and different Kharijite movements all sought to upend the status quo. Such rebellions required long and careful preparation and organization. The acts of rebellion that are discussed in these papers, by contrast, show that some rebellions aimed not to *destroy* but rather to *restore* relationships, albeit in a way that fit the rebels' expectations. Such rebellions did not intend to *end* interactions but rather sought to *maintain* bonds in order to *communicate* grievances and thereby *negotiate* a different relationship.[5] The threat and practice of violence were part of this communication, and negotiations could turn into full-fledged disruptive and brutal rebellions.[6] Therefore, the contributions to this dossier explore the dynamics between individuals, groups, and institutions that underpinned certain rebellions and highlight what these can tell us about the social and political structures of the caliphate. Our use of the term "acts of rebellion" in the title of this dossier indeed stresses the dynamic and diverse nature of opposition movements and expressions of dissent.

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5. C. Wickham, "Looking Forward: Peasant Revolts in Europe, 600–1200," in Firnhaber-Baker and Schonaers, *Routledge History Handbook*, 155–67, at 155–56; E. S. Gruen, "When Is a Revolt Not a Revolt? A Case for Contingency," in *Revolt and Resistance in the Ancient Classical World and Near East: In the Crucible of Empire*, ed. J.J. Collins and J.G. Manning, 10–37 (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

6. This is what distinguishes rebellions from other venues to present grievances and demands for or expressions of disappointment with existing conditions supposedly providing social justice such as petitions, *maẓālim, qāḍī* and community courts. For such mechanisms, see for example M. Rustow, *The Lost Archive. Traces of a Caliphate in a Cairo Synagogue* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020) and P. Sijpesteijn, "Good Governance in Theory and Practice: Comparing Abū Yūsuf's *Kitāb al-Khārāj* with Papyri," in *The Historian of Islam at Work: Essays in Honor of Hugh N. Kennedy*, ed. M. van Berkel and L. Osti, 183–200 (Leiden: Brill, 2022).

While acknowledging the diverse immediate and long-term causes of individual rebellions, the articles bring out two major themes. First, considering rebellions as products of the societies in which they arose automatically raises the question what motivated people to join them and how rebel leaders mobilized support for their movements. As reflections of society, rebellions could appeal to a variety of interests that, on the one hand, served to create a distance between the rebels and their opponents but, on the other, could help cement alliances between diverse groups in the rebel camp. The second major theme concerns the ways in which rebellions functioned within existing political, social, and military frameworks. Rebels negotiated, set ultimatums, offered safe-conducts, strategized, brokered, and exchanged diplomatic messengers and negotiators, interacting with and operating very much like their opponents serving in state offices. The function of rebellions to communicate grievances and to reset the conditions for a renegotiation of relationships with the authorities is especially striking in this respect. Conversely, the authorities showed an interest in integrating rebels, obviously after appropriate punishment of the rebel leaders or key participants in the movement, quickly and fully into the existing system. As such individuals can be encountered in subsequent opposition movements having joined rebellions, being rehabilitated and rising in revolt in consecutive cycles. Indeed, an important observation is that rebellions often had one or more moments at which reconciliation, with due compromise on both sides, was possible.

Rebellions and Social Relations

One central goal of this dossier is to understand *why* people chose to participate in rebellions. Confronting the authorities was risky. Participating in a rebellion could and, as several cases discussed here attest, did result in imprisonment, material or financial losses, expulsion, and death. As Dar shows, Arab provincial elites in Egypt decided to plan an assassination of the Umayyad governor only after extensive consultation. And Abū Ḥanīfa, fearing the consequences of open support of the ʿAlids, preferred to contribute to their cause in secret, according to some sources discussed by Şimşek.

Whatever the specific intentions of the various groups of rebels, it is clear that they were all motivated in some way or another by the sense that their expectations—based on their position and their relationships with other groups and individuals in society and the rights and responsibilities that flowed from these—had been thwarted. The contributions by Dar, Sijpesteijn, and Huseini all show local elites' interests clashing with those of central authorities within a long-term process of realigning the relationship between central control and local governance. That these cases unfolded at either end of the Umayyad caliphate shows how rebellions could be driven by empire-wide political changes. Abū Ḥanīfa's alleged support of the ʿAlid revolts was motivated by the duty to stand up against tyrannical rulers (Şimşek). Another value system that that rebels often invoked is religion: rebels are often said to have accused government officials of having broken God's law (Hagemann, Huseini). A final potential connector was kinship. The role of familial relations and tribal affiliations is central in most of our case studies. Dar demonstrates that the

Banū Fahm took the lead in planning to assassinate the governor of Egypt. In the case of the rebellion of Ibn al-Jārūd in Iraq, which Sijpesteijn discusses, the sources present tribal factionalism as a crucial factor in people's choosing which side to join in the confrontation. Hagemann examines "tribal networks of rebellion" in the form of certain tribes and families that joined various Iraqi anti-Umayyad rebellions.

Rebel leaders could be very successful in bringing otherwise competing groups together. Creating a common enemy was an effective and commonly applied method (Sijpesteijn, Huseini, Hagemann). Rebellions could offer an opportunity to gain financial advantages and social license. Material benefits and symbols of power were a powerful catalyst to unite rebels, especially when existing privileges were taken away (Dar, Sijpesteijn), but also when the lack of material and symbolic expressions of power was especially keenly experienced (Grant).

Beyond social conditions and human relations, the natural and built environment played a role in the course of rebellions. As Huseini shows, al-Ḥārith b. Surayj's rebellion benefited from Khurasan's unique environmental conditions and its location far away from the caliphal center. Khurasan's mountains offered safe hiding places where rebels could regroup and recharge. In the case of the Banū Fahm's revolt, examined by Dar, the urban landscape, in this case the lighthouse in Alexandria, served as a meeting point where the rebels could plot in secret and unnoticed by the authorities. In the Zanj rebellion, discussed by Grant, the parading atop fortification walls of beautifully dressed and decorated former rebels who had defected to the Abbasids played an important role in undermining the remaining rebels' morale. The physical, natural and built, theater where rebellions took place as alluded to in these contributions seems an especially fruitful venue for future exploration in rebellion studies.[7]

Going against the System?

Contrary to common perception, most rebels operated as participants in or stakeholders of the caliphate, upholding existing governance structures and rules of law and order. The Zanj rebels' main objective was to become fully integrated into the existing value system and hierarchical governance structure (Grant). Even violent acts against government agents as described by Sijpesteijn and Dar were not attacks on the system, but rather attempts at repairing it. In these cases the rebels did not want to change or replace the system of local rulers representing central control, or even the existing mechanisms through which local rulers were appointed. Rather, they were interested in replacing one particular cog in the machinery of governance, an—in their eyes—malfunctioning element that was disturbing an otherwise acceptable system.

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7. See especially the analysis of the role played by the architecture of the bathhouse or the urban fabric in accounts of assassinations in Abbasid Bagdad or conflicts between tribal factions in seventh-century Kufa explored by Taryn Marashi ("Political Undercurrents: Justice and Interpersonal Hostilities in the Abbasid Bathhouse," in *Expectations of Justice in the Islamicate Medieval World*, ed. F. Kootstra, B. Kristiansen, and P. M. Sijpesteijn [forthcoming]) and Georg Leube ("Local Elites during Two *Fitnas*: Al-Ashʿath b. Qays, Muḥammad b. al-Ashʿath and the Quarter of Kinda in 7th-Century Kufa," in *The Ties that Bind: Mechanisms of Social Dependency in the Early Islamic Empire*, ed. E. Hayes and P. M. Sijpesteijn [forthcoming]) respectively.

In other ways, too, rebels participated in the governance structures and rules of state upheld by their opponents. They sent negotiators, offered ultimatums, and surrendered after negotiating deals for their supporters, like accomplished diplomats (Sijpesteijn). The rebellious governors in Khurasan discussed by Hagemann and Huseini maintained negotiations during their rebellions through letters exchanged between the rebels and the caliph. In short, rebels were not opposed to communicating via existing and well-established channels of exchange either before, during, or after military conflict. Consequently, rebellions rarely followed a linear pattern of escalation. Instead, both sides had access to potential exit points and actions that could put an end to the conflict. As Grant shows, the successful armed uprising of the Zanj was eventually ended not through military victory on the battlefield but rather by the granting of material gifts endowed with heavy symbolism in the form of silk robes. In this model, open and violent rebellion constituted not an end to communication with higher powers but another means of negotiation open to individuals and groups with a grievance. Rebellions, then, were an instrument through which displeasure was conveyed, marking another point on a spectrum of interactions with state functionaries.

Locating rebellions within a continuum of communications between different parties in the caliphate puts the punitive consequences of rebellions in a different light as well. In general, only the leaders of rebellions were punished by the authorities. The majority of the people who participated in rebellions rarely suffered immediate negative consequences. In the case of the Iraqi rebellion of Ibn al-Jārūd, it was only the leaders who were executed and crucified (Sijpesteijn). In Egypt, the governor Qurra b. Sharīk executed only three out of the hundred men who had been plotting his murder (Dar). Important rebels often received safe-conducts (sing. amān) from highly placed government officials or governors or even from the caliph himself (Hagemann, Sijpesteijn). This shows that rebels maintained networks in government circles to which they could turn when needed. It also indicates that the state was more interested in keeping these highly placed individuals on board than it was in annihilating them. Most interestingly, it is clear that joining a rebellion did not mean the end of one's political activity. There are numerous cases of rebels joining subsequent uprisings. An example is Ibn al-Jārūd, who joined multiple anti-Umayyad movements, starting with ʿAlī's war against Muʿāwiya, followed by Ibn al-Zubayr's fight against ʿAbd al-Malik, and who finally led his own rebellion against the governor al-Ḥajjāj (Sijpesteijn). The rebel leader Muṭarrif b. al-Mughīra could similarly count on several "professional" rebels who had obviously received pardons for past acts of insubordination and continued to enjoy high positions and status in the empire after their defeats (Hagemann). Al-Ḥārith likewise drew into his revolt members of the local elite who had forcibly expressed their dissatisfaction with central Umayyad rule on several previous occasions. They had evidently been rehabilitated after each uprising they had joined, maintaining important positions in the local administrative and government infrastructure. Other groups who joined al-Ḥārith's rebellion later protested encroachments on their positions and status via other channels and in other movements (Huseini). Abū Ḥanīfa's alleged support of the rebellion of Ibrāhīm b. ʿAbd Allāh in 145/762 did not stop the caliph al-Manṣūr from offering the jurist the office

of qāḍī of Kufa immediately after the suppression of the rebellion (Şimşek).

Surveying the acts of rebellion in the case studies presented here makes it clear that their participants were, whether collectively or individually, motivated by diverse dissatisfactions, motives, and programs. Moreover, their objectives could develop or change as the events unfolded in response to military confrontations, political incidents, or ideological debates. Conversely, the reasons behind rebellions could be and often were addressed during the conflict, potentially preventing or interrupting the outbreak of violence. Violence or the threat thereof nevertheless forms a defining backdrop to all the instances that are discussed.

This dossier thus makes two major interventions in scholarship on rebellions. It shows, first, that acts of rebellion do not move teleologically toward a certain outcome focused on one particular purpose, but rather are expressions of complex and contingent social relationships. Second, rebellions are instruments of power that fully participate in the political system instead of striving to break down the existing order and channels of communication. After this brief overview of some common features of the rebellions presented in this issue and some suggestions for evaluating and "reading" these uprisings anew, it is now time to turn to the case studies themselves.

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