

# THE BLACK FLAG OF THE ʿABBASIDS

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The People of My House shall meet misfortune, banishment,  
and persecution until people come from the East with black flags.

*ḥadīth* attributed to the Prophet Muḥammad<sup>1</sup>

Nasr the Chamberlain started out with the *Hujari* troops, the  
*Masaffi* infantry, and all the commanders left in Baghdad, preceded  
by the imperial ensign, which is like any other standard, only black  
in colour, with the legend in white *Muhammad is the Apostle of God*

From a fourth/tenth century chronicle.<sup>2</sup>

## ABSTRACT - RESUMEN

Flags and banners have played an important ceremonial role in Islam. The author studies the symbolic and historical meaning from its colours and typology.

Las banderas y estandartes jugaron un importante papel simbólico en el Islam. El autor estudia el significado simbólico e histórico de sus colores y tipología.

## KEY WORDS - PALABRAS CLAVE

Flags and banners. Symbology. Islam.

Banderas y estandartes. Vexilología. Simbología. Islam.

## FLAGS AND BANNERS DURING THE TIME OF THE PROPHET

Flags and banners were used by the Arabs in pre-Islamic times, where they seem to have played an important ceremonial role at solemn tribal meetings. In a poem by Taʿabbāṭa Sharrā there is a line:

Carrier of flags (*liwā*), ever present at assemblies of the tribe, eloquent speaker of unambiguous words...<sup>3</sup>

There is considerable information in the early sources on the flags and banners used by the Prophet. According to one *ḥadīth*, tradition, the Prophet had a white flag, *liwā*, and a

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<sup>1</sup> The *ḥadīth* of the flags, see note 4 below, also Lewis 1974, vol. II, pp. 51-52 from Ibn Māja, *Sunan*.

<sup>2</sup> From the chronicle of Abū ʿAlī Aḥmad b. Muḥammad Miskawayh (ca. 320/932-ca. 421/1030), Margoliouth 1921, vol. I, p. 199.

<sup>3</sup> Jones 1992, p. 215.

black one, *raya*.<sup>4</sup> The historian Muḥammad Ibn Ishāq (85-150/704-67) reported that when the Prophet set out for the battle of Badr he gave one of his companions a white flag and was preceded by his son-in-law and cousin ʿAlī ibn Abī Tālib and one of the *anṣār*, who each carried a black flag. The flag carried by ʿAlī was called *al-Uqāb*, the eagle, but the name of the other black flag has not been preserved.<sup>5</sup>

The traditionalist Sulaymān b. al-Ashʿath Abū Dāʿūd of Basra (202-75/817-889) recorded three *ḥadīth* mentioning the flags of the Prophet, in one he reported that:

When the Prophet entered Mecca his banner was white.<sup>6</sup>

and in what is regarded as a weak *ḥadīth* he says that the Prophet also had a yellow standard.<sup>7</sup>

Another *ḥadīth* recorded by the scholar Muḥammad ibn Ismāʿīl al-Bukhārī (194-256/810-70) seems to indicate that the *liwā* was assigned to a special flag bearer:

When Qays b. Saʿd al-Anṣarī who used to carry the flag (*liwā*) of the Prophet, intended to perform the Hajj, he combed his hair.<sup>8</sup>

Bukhārī also reports a *ḥadīth* in which on the day of the battle of Khaybar the Prophet said:

“I will give the flag (*al-ṛaya*) to a person at whose hands Allāh will grant victory.” So, the companions of the Prophet got up, wishing eagerly to see to whom the flag (*al-ṛaya*) will be given, and every one of them wished to be given the flag. But the Prophet asked for ʿAlī.<sup>9</sup>

Virtually the same tradition is reported by Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāh (d. 261/875) where during the battle of Khaybar ʿAlī fights in single combat the Jewish champion Marḥab:

The Messenger of Allāh said...I will give this banner to a man who loves Allāh and His Messenger or whom Allāh and His Messenger love...The Messenger of Allāh gave him (ʿAlī) the banner (and ʿAlī went to meet Marḥab in a single combat).<sup>10</sup>

In a later Shīʿā account compiled by ʿAllāma Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī (1037-1111/1627-28-1699-70), and said to be based on traditions passed down by the sixth Shīʿā *imām* Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq (ca.80-148/699-765), the flag given to ʿAlī at this time was the white standard:

Muḥammad gave him the white standard, assuring him, Gabriel attends you on your right, Mikhael on your left, Azrael in your front, and Israfael in your rear. Victory advances before you...<sup>11</sup>

It seems certain, therefore, that the Prophet had several flags or banners, the *liwa* and *ra-ya* and that his most important flag was called *al-Uqāb*. If the *ḥadīth* recorded by Abū Dāʿūd is correct, then this flag was:

black and square, being made of a woolen rug.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>4</sup> David-Weill 1960, p. 349.

<sup>5</sup> Ibn Ishāq 1982, p. 292.

<sup>6</sup> Abū Dāʿūd 1930, p. 1717, ch. 922, with an *isnād* traced to Jābir.

<sup>7</sup> Abū Dāʿūd 1930, p. 1717, ch. 922. *isnād* traced to Simāq on the authority of un-named men.

<sup>8</sup> Bukhārī 1987, vol. 4, no. 218, p. 138 *isnād* traced to Thaʿlaba b. Abī Malik al-Qurazī.

<sup>9</sup> Bukhārī 1987, vol. 4, no. 192 pp. 122-123 *isnād* traced to Sahl b. Saʿd.

<sup>10</sup> Muslim 1971, p. 1000 ch. DCCXLVII, vol. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Majlisī 1982, p. 274.

The historian Abū Abdallāh Muḥammad Ibn Saʿd (ca 168-230/784-845) also says:

It has reached me and Allāh knoweth best, that the name of the sword of the Apostle of Allāh, may Allāh bless him, was *dhuʿl-faqār* and that of his banner was *al-ʿUqāb*.<sup>13</sup>

## COLORS

Colors were important in the early Islamic period, they were thought to symbolise spiritual and moral qualities, were used to designate specific groups and families, furthermore, they were a key element in ceremonial events, *marāsīm*. At the time of the Prophet white was regarded as the color of both the Quraysh and the Yamanī clans and red that of the Qay-sites. White was especially associated with the Prophet, Louis Massignon quotes a ninth century poet who wrote that the *ṣūfī*'s wore white because this was:

the accepted habit in which the faithful witness (Muḥammad) bowed down before his Creator.<sup>14</sup>

White was also associated with angelic purity. One tradition regarding the angels who are reported to have helped the Muslims at the battle of Badr says they were clothed in white or wore white turbans.<sup>15</sup> Another tradition attributed to ʿAlī, maintains that all the angels wore white except Gabriel, who wore a yellow turban.<sup>16</sup> White was adopted by the Umayyads as the color of their caliphate. The Fatimids preferred white but retained the use of red as a royal prerogative; visitors were warned not to wear it because:

it is the colour of the caliph's dress as well as those who rebel against him.<sup>17</sup>

Red was also associated with the Prophet, who had a red tent and who, on occasion, wore a red cloak.<sup>18</sup> The texts, *sahifa*, which the Prophet kept with his sword were often said to have been kept in either a red leather bag, red case or red leather scabbard.<sup>19</sup> Douglas Crow saw a connection between this case and the pre-Islamic "portable shrine" (*al-Jafr*), which he thought might be analogous to the red leather tent "originally a place of refuge" under the guardianship of the tribal chief, and in battle carried on the back of a camel.<sup>20</sup> Red also connoted war and death. Ibn Ishāq writing about Abū Dujāna at the battle of Uḥud reports that he always wore a red turban when about to fight and is said to have wrapped a sword given him by the Prophet in a red cloth that was thereupon called the "dressing of death."<sup>21</sup> Later the red cap or turban came to symbolize a mortification undergone in the service of God and Abū Dujāna's distinctive headdress may have been the prototype for the dervish groups

<sup>12</sup> Abū Dāʿūd 1930, ch. 922, p. 1717 *isnād* traced to Yūnus b. ʿUbaid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibn Saʿd 1967, p. 577 *isnād* traced to ʿAlqamah Ibn Abī ʿAlqamah.

<sup>14</sup> Massignon 1982, pp. 104-105.

<sup>15</sup> Bukhārī 1987, vol. 7, p. 480.

<sup>16</sup> Ibn Ishāq 1982, p. 757.

<sup>17</sup> Sanders 1991, p. 518.

<sup>18</sup> Sanders 1991, p. 518.

<sup>19</sup> Friedlander 1908, pp. 104-07, the container was called *jafr* because it was written on, or the case was made of, the skin of a small ox. In some versions Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq is said to have possessed certain mystical documents and other objects including *dhuʿl-faqār*, the ring, staff, and cloak as well as Moses' staff, basin and Adam's shirt; all stored in this red leather case or bag (scabbard?); see Crow 1982 and Ibn Saʿd 1967, p. 577 who recorded a *ḥadīth* in which the text was on (in) the scabbard.

<sup>20</sup> For the red tent see also van Ess 1992, esp. pp. 102-103.

<sup>21</sup> Ibn Hishām's, notes in Ibn Ishāq 1982, p. 753.

known for their red headgear and called therefore *Qizil-bāshī*, or redheads, who adopted the color as their emblem and even carried red banners into battle.<sup>22</sup>

In the Qurʾān green is associated with life itself and as one of the signs of God. Green evoked the idea of tranquillity and refuge as is echoed in *ḥadīth* reported by Ibn Ishāq:

The martyrs are at Bāriq, a river at the gate of the Garden, in a green tent...<sup>23</sup>

Green was also the color of the mysterious al-Khaḍīr, the green one, and was regarded as the color of the Prophet and of the family of ʿAlī; consequently the Shīʿā, distinguished themselves from the ʿAbbasids by adopting green and sometimes white as their colors.

The use of black, however, is curious; certainly the Prophet had a black flag, *al-Uqāb*, but in general the color was regarded as inauspicious. It was the color of sorrow and misfortune.<sup>24</sup> This seems to have been one of the reasons that the ʿAbbasids adopted it as their dynastic color: It signified mourning for the members of the family of Hāshim who had been killed by the Umayyads and especially for Abu ʿAbbas's brother Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad (82-132/701-749) who launched an uprising against the Umayyads in 129/747, was imprisoned and probably murdered in 132/749.<sup>25</sup> There was, however, a more compelling reason for the use of black by the ʿAbbasids, specifically, it was a reference to the Prophet's flag and its use was intended to make a poignant statement about political legitimacy and messianic expectations.

#### MESSIANIC HOPES IN THE EARLY ISLAMIC PERIOD; THE BLACK FLAG AS AN ESCHATOLOGICAL SYMBOL

Possession of the Prophet's flag was important to the early caliphs, because it was part of the *mīrāth rasūl Allāh*, the "Legacy of the Prophet"<sup>26</sup> and was therefore relevant in the continuing dispute over who had the right to leadership in the Muslim community. The years following the death of the prophet Muḥammad in 11/632 saw the rapid spread of Islam but were also marked by a bitter struggle over the leadership of the Muslim community. The most vigorous argument was between ʿAlī, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, and some of the Prophet's closest and earliest followers. Finally, a large number of the companions elected Abū Bakr as caliph. When the latter died in 13/634 the caliphate passed to Umar, another of the Prophet's early followers, and upon his death to ʿUthmān, an Umayyad. The Umayyads were a powerful Meccan clan descended, as were the Prophet and ʿAlī, from ʿAbd Manāf.<sup>27</sup> ʿUthmān was subsequently murdered and in 35/656 ʿAlī became the fourth of the so called "orthodox" or "rightly guided" caliphs. Political tension, however, remained intense and ʿAlī faced a rebellion led by Muʿāwiya a relative of ʿUthmān. In 40/660 ʿAlī was murdered and Muʿāwiya was installed as the first Umayyad caliph. Paradoxically, in establishing Islam the Prophet had fought against the Jews and the pagan Arabs, but perhaps his most formidable

<sup>22</sup> The Ottomans also used red banners, many examples of which have survived. The widespread use of red banners is further demonstrated by the many examples depicted in Timurid, Turkoman, Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal miniature painting see Welch 1985, pls. 28, 33; Akurgal 1980, pl. 173; Welch 1976, folio 102v, p. 136; Beach 1981, cat. no. 12d.

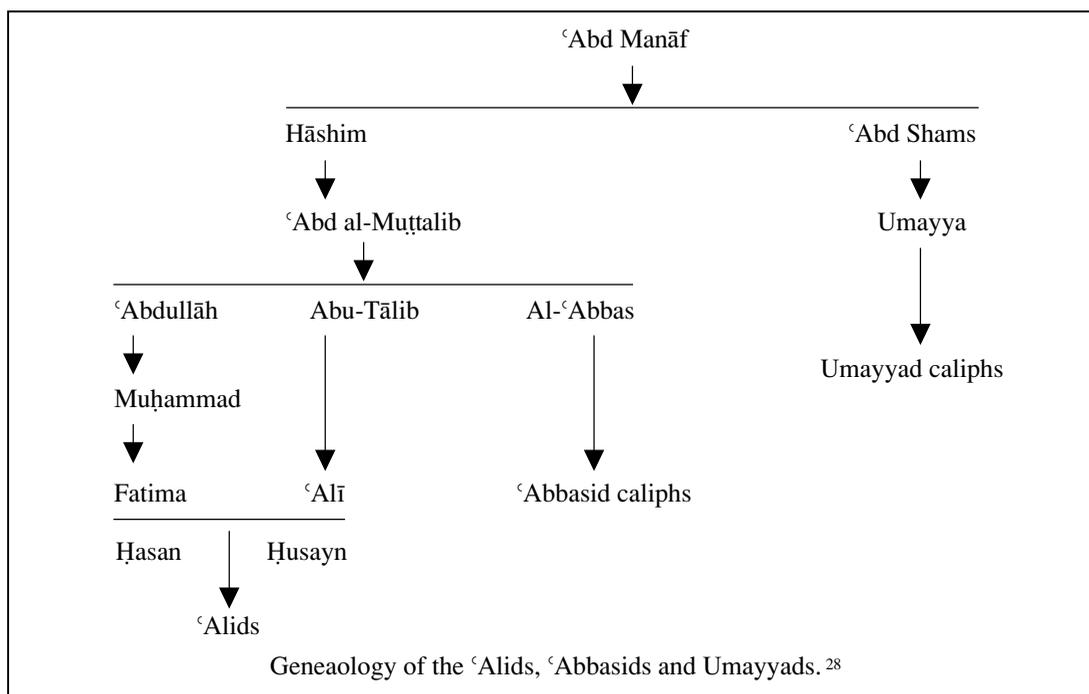
<sup>23</sup> Ibn Ishāq 1982, p. 401.

<sup>24</sup> Massignon 1982, p. 104.

<sup>25</sup> Lewis 1960, pp. 15-16. Black banners were also adopted by the Saljūqs and it has been suggested this in acknowledgment that they had been awarded the sultanate by the ʿAbbasid caliph, this theory remains uncertain, as they used black banners as early as 430/1039, see Bosworth 1973, p. 304.

<sup>26</sup> For a discussion of this see Alexander 1999. There is no complete agreement on the inventory involved, but most reports include his ring, cloak, staff and sword; while others include his flag and bow and even an assortment of ancient relics such as the staff and basin of Moses, the Ark of the Covenant and the shirt of Adam.

<sup>27</sup> The line of descent was through ʿAbd Shams whilst that of the Prophet and ʿAlī was through Hāshim



enemy had been Abū Sufāyn - ancestor of the Umayyads whose descendants now ruled the huge Muslim empire. Under their dynasty (40/660-132/750) Muslim armies penetrated as far as Poitiers in France to the west and Lahore in India to the East, but at the same time there was a continuing, sometimes murderous, power struggle with the supporters of the family of ʿAlī or Shīʿā.

During the Umayyad period the dispute over who had the right to lead the community became essentially a quarrel between various interrelated branches of the Qurayish, all descendants of ʿAbd Manāf. Dissent, conflict and rebellion multiplied and eventually an alliance formed between the Shīʿā and the ʿAbbasids, a family descended from al-ʿAbbās b. ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib al-Hāshim, the Prophet's uncle. Their propaganda, like that of their foes, the Umayyads, included a strong messianic component, bound up with widespread predictions and hopes for the coming of the *madhī*.

Large sections of the Qurʾān deal with the Last Days, *yawm al-qiyāma*, and belief in them and the Resurrection is a basic tenet of Islam. Certainly, it is stressed that the time when the Hour will arrive is unknowable, but there is every reason to believe that the Prophet and his early followers regarded it as imminent.

Bukhārī for example, lists a large number of *ḥadith* attributed to the Prophet on the signs that will presage the Last Days. These include the appearance of the *madhī* and the second coming of Jesus, ʿĪsa.<sup>29</sup> Followed by apocalyptic portents, earthquakes, cracking of the sky, mountains uprooted, then the trumpets of the angels, the gathering *ḥashr*, and Last Judgement.

It was predicted that one of the first occurrences in this series of events would be the arrival of the *madhī*, the rightly guided one,<sup>30</sup> who would restore the purity of religion and inau-

<sup>28</sup> Genealogical table based on those used in EI2 and The Cambridge History of Islam.

<sup>29</sup> Bukhārī 1987, vol. 4, p. 436-437.

<sup>30</sup> Traditions about the *madhī* are generally traced back to the Prophet; many, however, seem to have developed during the Umayyad period, see Madelung 1986.

gurate a new age of peace and justice. According to Madelung, the first use of the word *madhī* referring to a messianic ruler was early in the Umayyad period during the time of ʿAbd Allāh b. al-Zubayr and the caliph ʿAbd al-Malik (r. 65-86/685-705); he notes that several of the Umayyad caliphs were regarded as being the *madhī*. There is evidence which suggests that ʿAbd al-Malik also saw himself in this way. On his coinage he is depicted holding a sword with scabbard;<sup>31</sup> most likely *dhu'l-faqār*; a symbol of military power, political and spiritual legitimacy and of the Last Days.<sup>32</sup> A more important manifestation of this messianic fervor was ʿAbd al-Malik's building program on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. This included many elements one would expect to find in the Third Temple all relating to the theme of the Last Days.<sup>33</sup> His chief advisor in this was Ka'b al-Aḥbār who is reported to have said:

I have found in one of the Books of God that were sent down, that God, may He be exalted said: Rejoice oh Jerusalem (*abshirī urīshalam*), which means I shall send to thee my servant ʿAbd al-Malik who shall restore to you your first kingdom, and I shall adorn thee with gold, silver, pearls, and precious stones, that is the *Ṣakhra*, and I shall put my throne on thee as it was before. For I am Allāh there is no God but myself alone, no partners have I.<sup>34</sup>

By the late Umayyad period *ḥadīth* about the *madhī* included a reference to black flags. A famous *ḥadīth*, known as the “*ḥadīth* of the flags,” circulated at this time and was attributed to the Prophet:

While we were with the Messenger of God, there came some youths of the Banū Hāshim. When he saw them his eyes flowed with tears and his colour changed. We said ‘O Messenger of God, we have for some time seen in your face something we dislike’. He said, ‘God has chosen for us, the People of my House, the hereafter over this world. The People of My House shall meet misfortune, banishment, and persecution until people come from the East with black flags. They will ask for charity but will not be given it. Then they will fight and be victorious. Now they will be given what they had asked for, yet they will not accept it but will finally hand it (sc. the earth) over to a man of my family. He will fill the earth with justice as they had filled it with injustice.’<sup>35</sup>

The use of the black flag by the ʿAbbasids, therefore, goes to the core of the arguments not only about political legitimacy, but also to the nature of messianic expectations during the second/eighth century. The black flag was now regarded as the flag of the *mahdī* and ʿAbbasid propaganda maintained that their dynasty was destined to lead the Muslim community until the second coming of ʿĪsā and the advent of the Last Days

By God, after that (namely after the twelve caliphs predicted in a *ḥadīth* of the Prophet) there will come from us the Saffāh, the Maṣṣūr, and the *madhī* who will hand it (sc. the caliphate) over to ʿĪsā b. Maryam.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>31</sup> American Numismatic Society, New York, no. 1970.63.1, dated 75/694-95, illustrated in Blair 1992, p. 65, fig. 6; for the *mahdī* and the *dhu'l-faqār* see Alexander 1999.

<sup>32</sup> A sculpture, from Khirbat al-Mafjar depicts the caliph, possibly Hishām (r. 105-125/724-43) carrying what is probably the *dhu'l-faqār*, also Hishām was called the *mahdī* by the court poet Jarīr b. ʿAṭīyya (d. 110/728-9). For Khirbat al-Mafjar, see Baer 1986, pp. 10-17 and Hamilton 1969, pp. 61-67; for Hishām as *mahdī*, see Madelung 1986, pp. 1231-32.

<sup>33</sup> Elad 1992 and Aylon 1989 where the decoration of the dome is interpreted as referring to the Last Days. In addition many of the rituals practiced in the Dome of the Rock were based upon Jewish Temple ceremonial. A Christian writer of the late 7th century remarked that “they have erected a temple which they claim is the Temple of God.” in Flusin 1992, p. 29. and Elad p. 38, notes a tradition ascribed to Ka'b al-Aḥbār in which the Dome of the Rock is called “the Temple (*al-Haykal*) built by ʿAbd al-Malik.” Another tradition maintains that the Temple Mount will be the place of gathering during the Last Days, Elad 1992, p. 45.

<sup>34</sup> Elad p. 38, in a parallel text the last line reads “For I am Allah, the sovereign, and David is the King of the Children of Israel.”

<sup>35</sup> Madelung 1986, p. 1233, although Madelung argues that in fact it was fabricated by the Shīʿā propagandist Yazīd b. Abī Ziyād (d. 136/753-4).

<sup>36</sup> The prediction was ascribed to ʿAbd Allāh b. al-ʿAbbās, quoted in Madelung 1986, p. 1233.

In 132/750 an ʿAbbasid partisan, Abū Muslim, raised a black flag in Merv signaling a new rebellion against Umayyad authority. Although it has been suggested that the armies led by Abū ʿl-ʿAbbās and Abū Muslim marched under the Prophet's black banner *al-Uqāb*,<sup>37</sup> it is uncertain whether the rebels really possessed it. However, their use of the black flag made a symbolic claim to their being his true heirs; waging war as his flag bearers. The use of this symbol was especially poignant in that it evoked memories of battles such as Badr and Uḥud when the Prophet had also fought the Umayyads. It was also in complete contrast to the Umayyad color which was white. The historian Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (208-311/823-923), for example, describing the siege of Constantinople in 99/714 by Maslama, the son of the caliph ʿAbd al-Malik wrote that:

Maslama proclaimed the *tabkir* and entered alone into the city of Constantinople. He wore a silk tunic, a cuirass, and over the cuirass a cloak. Around his helmet was wound a band of white cloth. His sabre was suspended over his shoulder and he carried a lance at the tip of which was a white flag.<sup>38</sup>

Within a few months of the unfurling of the black banner a new dynasty ruled the Islamic world. The Shīʿā seem to have expected that power would be transferred to the family of ʿAlī, but the ʿAbbasids assumed the caliphate and the dispute over political legitimacy continued. Each family based its claim to power on genealogical grounds and the old symbols resurfaced continually, but now the color of rebellion was white; for example, Tabarī reports that in 151/769 the Shīʿā staged a revolt led by ʿAbdullāh b. Muḥammad and his brother Ibrāhīm. One of their followers, ʿUmar b. Ḥaḥḥ had:

white banners and robes and *qalānsūwas* made, and prepared white garments to wear when he went to the *mimbar*...<sup>39</sup>

This was one failed revolt amongst many and the ʿAbbasid dynasty remained in power until its destruction by the Mongols in 656/1258.

Black, not only for flags but also for clothing, was the color of the ʿAbbasid dynasty. They and their followers wore black clothes and raised black flags for ceremonial and for battle. The use of this color was reserved for the caliph, his family and court and its misuse was regarded as a serious offense as when in the year 220/835 a maker of umbrellas, tents and camel equipment arrived at the palace of the caliph al-Muʿtaṣim wearing a black *durrāʿa*, a sword and a sword belt. The vizier al-Faḍl b. Marwān was outraged and exclaimed:

In truth, you are only a merchant and black and the sword are not for such as you.<sup>40</sup>

The presumptuous merchant was beaten and then released. Religious leaders of the ʿAbbasid period also wore black; for example, the Andalusian traveler Ibn Jubayr (540-614/1145-1217) described the use of black clothing and banners during the Friday prayers in Mecca. He recorded how the *khataḥ*, preacher, approached the *mimbar*, pulpit:

He wears a black dress, worked with gold, a black turban similarly worked . . . he slowly paces between two black banners held by two muezzins of his tribe. Before him goes another of his people bearing a red staff . . . he goes to the pulpit led by the Zamzan muezzin . . . also dressed in black clothes . . .

<sup>37</sup> Masudī 1914, vol. 6, p. 77; others have argued that black was adopted as the dynastic color of the ʿAbbasids to signify mourning for the members of the family of Hāshim who had been killed by the Umayyads e.g. Lewis 1960, pp. 15-16.

<sup>38</sup> Ṭabarī 1980-84, vol. 3, p. 210, the account Ṭabarī gives of the siege undoubtedly contains many legendary elements, but there seems no reason to doubt his attribution of a white flag to the Umayyad prince.

<sup>39</sup> Ṭabarī 1988, vol. 1, p. 211.

<sup>40</sup> Marin 1951, p. 19.

The muezzin girds the khatib with the sword . . . . During the khutbah, the two black banners are planted at the first step of the mimbar.<sup>41</sup>

Written sources of the ʿAbbasid period indicate that some banners were very large and some small; Ṭabarī, for example, records that the ʿAbbasid general al-Afshīn:

used to carry twelve huge black banners . . . and about five hundred small banners.<sup>42</sup>

Green replaced black for a brief time during the caliphate of al-Maʿmūn (r. 198-218/813-33)<sup>43</sup> but Zainab bint Sulaiman b. ʿAlī a dowager of the ʿAbbasid house complained:

O Commander of the Faithful, you have behaved more dutifully towards your relatives, the descendants of Ali, than they have towards you; there is no need for you to abandon an old custom of your ancestor. Give up green clothes and do not encourage anyone's ambitious plans.<sup>44</sup>

The caliph relented and reverted to black.

Tradition maintains that the Prophet's banner was preserved after his death, by the Umayyad and ʿAbbasid caliphs. This and the other objects comprising the *mīrāth rasūl Allāh*, was probably lost either during the Fatimid period<sup>45</sup> or in 656/1258 when the Mongols sacked Baghdad and destroyed the ʿAbbasid dynasty. Later, the Mamluks established a restored ʿAbbasid dynasty and claimed to be in possession of the *mīrāth*, but there is no real evidence to support the truth of this claim. Black was however, the color of this restored dynasty and the historian Ibn Iyas records by the caliph in the investiture of a Mamluk Sulṭān:

The royal insignia were brought to the Sulṭān, that is to say, the black cloak, the black turban, and the Bedawī sword.<sup>46</sup>

In 922/1517 the Mamluks were in turn conquered by the Ottomans under Selīm I (r. 918-26/1512-20) and objects said to be the *mīrāth* were transferred to Istanbul along with the caliph al-Mutawakkil.<sup>47</sup> This group of "relics" is said to have contained a bow and a banner of the Prophet. The banner, *sançak-i-şerif*, was taken by the Ottoman sultans on major military campaigns (as well as on the pilgrimage to Mekka).<sup>48</sup> When it became too worn for further use it was apparently taken apart and pieces of it were incorporated in new flags to make three new "sacred" banners.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Broadhurst 1952, pp. 91-93.

<sup>42</sup> Ṭabarī 1951, p. 33, following in the tradition established by the Prophet a banner was often given to an individual when he was promoted to an important position, such as governor of a district. There are numerous instances of this recorded from the ʿAbbasid period; during the caliphate of al-Tāʾiʿ (r. 363-81/974-91), for example, it is recorded that when al-Dawla Abū Maṣūʿ was appointed governor of Jurjan and Tabaristan he was sent "the deed of appointment, the banner and the imperial robes", Margoliouth 1921, vol. I, p. 79. Indeed the possession of such a banner seems to have become synonymous with the governorship over a large area of land, and much later during the Ottoman period the Turkish word *sançak*, designated both a large banner and also a territorial unit.

<sup>43</sup> When al-Maʿmūn temporarily adopted green, he probably did so as a means of rapprochement with the Shīʿā whose colors were white or green.

<sup>44</sup> Masudī 1989, p. 408.

<sup>45</sup> Canard 1951, says the Fāṭimids used the "relics" in their courtly ceremonial and Canard 1960, p. 1074, notes that the objects sent to Cairo were the turban, *mindīl*, cloak, *ridāʿ*, and a latticed screen, *shubbāk*; see also Hitti 1977, p. 622.

<sup>46</sup> Ibn Iyas 1921, p. 72.

<sup>47</sup> İnalçık 1970, p.320. The Ottomans claimed that this also transferred the caliphate to them.

<sup>48</sup> Żygulski 1992, pp. 18-24.

<sup>49</sup> See also introduction, Swords and Sabers, under the discussion of *dhu'l-faqār*. For a detailed account of the banner's history, see Żygulski 1992, pp. 17-24.

## THE IMPERIAL TRADITION, NON-ARAB INFLUENCES ON 'ABBASID FLAGS

The most complete visual record of 'Abbasid flags is in a miniature painting by Yaḥyā b. Maḥmūd b. Yaḥyā al-Wāsiṭī, painted in Baghdad in 634/1237 (Fig. 1).<sup>50</sup> This miniature, executed only a few years before the destruction of Bagdad by the Mongols depicts a group of horsemen three playing musical instruments and the others carrying a variety of flags; some are triangular, one is like a figure eight seemingly made from a long strip of fabric rather like a long scarf, one is long and rectangular with a number of lozenge shaped fabric attachments along its side, and the other five are squarish. These five are of various colors, and are covered with Qur'anic verses; one is black and possibly represents the Prophet's flag *al-Uqāb*.

As a visual document al-Wāsiṭī's painting must be interpreted with caution. Its coloring is delicate and its line strong, but it is cartoon-like in its conception and although it may reflect an actual event its components can only have been formed by copying from an existing pattern. Evidence for this can be seen in the treatment of the drapery in the horsemen's costumes and in the way the ribbon-like flags are depicted with hard pointed ends. Fabric stylised in this way was a hallmark of early Arab and Syrian Jacobite painting.<sup>51</sup> This tendency to extreme stylization has caused some confusion about the flag types represented in al-Wāsiṭī's painting. The figure eight, scarf-like flag is almost certainly not a distinct flag type but rather a furled banner.<sup>52</sup> Banners furled in this way are frequently depicted in Chinese painting (Fig. 2) and its presence in this Arab miniature must be the result of a misunderstood borrowing.<sup>53</sup>

The other flag types represented in the painting were probably used by the 'Abbasids. The five squarish flags represent an Arab tradition that can be traced to the Prophet's flag *al-Uqāb*. The others had their antecedents in Greece, pre-Islamic Iran, Central Asia and China. This is true also of the symbolism of the painting which is sometimes described as representing the guard of the caliph,<sup>54</sup> and the scene fits the historian Abū Zayd 'Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn Khaldūn's (ca. 732-84/1332-82), description of imperial pomp:

One of the emblems of royal authority is the display of banners and flags and the beating of drums and the blowing of trumpets and horns.

He goes on to say that music and flags are useful on the battlefield and that flags have been used by armies since the earliest of times.

This was also the case in the time of the Prophet and that of the caliphs who succeeded him. The Muslims however, refrained from beating drums and blowing trumpets at the beginning of Islam. They wanted to avoid the coarseness of royal authority and do without royal customs...The caliphate then came to be a royal authority, and the Muslims learned to esteem the splendour and luxury of this world. Persian and Byzantine clients, subjects of the preceding (pre-Islamic) dynasties mixed with them and showed them their ways of ostentation and luxury. Among the things the Muslims came to like were those emblems. Therefore, they used them, and permitted their officials to use them to increase the prestige of royal authority and its representatives. 'Abbāsīd or 'Umayyad caliphs would often grant permission to display their flags to officials such as the master of a border region or the commander of an army. Such officials then, setting out on a mission or going from the house of the caliph or from their own houses to their offices, were accompanied by a cavalcade of people carrying flags and trumpets. The only distinction between the cavalcade of an official and that of the caliph was the number of flags, or the use of particular colors for the caliph's flag.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>50</sup> The miniature is from a *maqāmāt* of al-Ḥarīrī now in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, MS. Arabe 5847, folio 19r; folio 94 v also contains representations of ribbon like flags.

<sup>51</sup> See for example the comparative study in Buchthal 1939 and Buchthal 1940.

<sup>52</sup> Ackerman 1938-9, p. 2776, where it is described as "a narrow streamer draped as a figure eight."

<sup>53</sup> Compare for example the furled banners carried by the Uigurs in the painting of Kuo Tzu-i receiving homage from the Uigurs ca. 1049-1106, National Palace Museum, Taipei, ill. in Smith 1973, p. 151.

<sup>54</sup> Rice 1975, p. 109.

<sup>55</sup> Ibn Khaldūn 1970, pp. 214-215.



Fig. 1. Square flags, scarf-like flags, small triangular flags, and rectangular flag with streamers  
 Maqāmat of al-Harīrī, Bagdad, dated 634/1237, Bibliotheque Nationale Paris. Ms.  
 Arabe 5847, folio 19 recto.



Fig. 2. Triangular ribbons attached to a circlet, Sasanian investiture scene Taq-i Bostān.

Ibn Khaldūn certainly seems to have yearned for the simplicity and purity of the early Islamic period; and he was not alone in maintaining that the ʿAbbāsids were strongly influenced by the ceremonial practices of the Sasanian empire. Al-Wāsiṭī provides a visual record for the influence on the Islamic world of the imperial traditions of other peoples.<sup>56</sup>

The most direct and strongest influence upon the new Muslim empire was that of Sasanian Iran. In 15/636 during the caliphate of ʿUmar, a Muslim army led by Saʿd b. Abī Waqqāṣ defeated the Sasanians at the battle of Qādisiyya and the Muslims captured the imperial Sasanian banner, said to be the apron of the legendary blacksmith Kavad. According to legend Kavad lived during the time of the monstrous snake-shouldered Dhahak, and one day Dhahak demanded the lives of his sons. At this Kavad rose in rebellion and lacking a proper flag hoisted his blacksmiths apron which subsequently became the battle standard of the Iranian kings who embellished it with precious stones. When the bejeweled standard was captured the victorious Muslims cut it up and divided it as booty.<sup>57</sup> The shape of this stan-

<sup>56</sup> Masudī also relates numerous stories supporting the view that the ʿAbbasids borrowed heavily from the Persians, e.g. he reports that the caliph Muʿtasim “imitated the Persian kings in his table service and in the fashion for wearing a turban over a soft cap.” Masudī 1989, p. 392. There is little evidence for the influence of Byzantine flag types upon the ʿAbbāsids, perhaps, because Byzantium remained an unconquered foe during this period.

<sup>57</sup> Duchesne-Guillemin 1966, p. 126; according to Masudī this banner was extremely large, about 7 x 3 meters, was made of panther skin and covered with rubies, pearls and other gemstones. It is said to have been sold for 30,000 dinars, Masudī, quoted in Pope 1938-39, vol. VI, pp. 2769-2770.

dard is unknown but other Sasanian flag types are well documented on rock carvings and in the minor arts of the Sasanian period.

#### RIBBON-LIKE FLAGS

Sasanian influence is clearly evident in al-Wāsiṭī's painting. Specifically, in the triangular ribbon-like flags which echo the ribbon-like streamers used by the Sasanians as a mark of royalty. Sasanian rulers rode into battle with long ribbons attached to their helmets, ribbons adorned their crowns and belts and the sacred rings that were used in their investitures (Fig. 2). The Arabs seem to have adopted this Sasanian convention at a very early date as is indicated by a fresco depicting a hunting scene at Qaṣr al-Hayr al-Gharḇī of ca. 109/727 (Fig. 3). Al-Wāsiṭī flags, like those in the fresco, are forked at their ends, and like most of the Sasanian ribbons are tapered from the end nearest the pole.



Fig. 3. Horseman with royal ribbons, Qaṣr al-Hayr al-Gharḇī ca. 109/727.

#### FLAGS WITH “TAILS”

The long flag with lozenge shaped attachments in the painting by al-Wāsiṭī has prototypes in both Europe and in China. Early representations of flags with attached cloth are of three types. Firstly, flags with small attachments such as on a fresco from Paestum in southern Italy of the fourth century B.C., depicting a warrior carrying a flag with a row of tassels attached to its lower edge.<sup>58</sup> According to Phyllis Ackerman tassels were used on Per-

<sup>58</sup> Gamber 1978, fig. 341, p. 330. The warriors wear Greek style armor and their flag may be a Greek type.

sian banners of about the same period.<sup>59</sup> Secondly, flags with long streamers attached to the body of the flag of which the earliest depiction is on a Han dynasty carving of about the A.D., 2nd century.<sup>60</sup> Several banners with very long streamers dating to the 8th century were found at Dunhuang in north-western China and are now preserved in the British Museum.<sup>61</sup> It has been suggested that this type developed from the streamer-like dragon banners used by the Sarmatians and other Central Asian nomadic tribes. Flags with “streamer-like” tails are paralleled in Central Asian wall paintings and metalwork of the immediate pre-Islamic period (Fig. 4).<sup>62</sup> Thirdly, there is an intermediate type represented by flags in a wall painting of about 865 from Dunhuang; these have a long streamer at the top and progressively smaller attachments along the side and bottom.<sup>63</sup>



Fig. 4. Banners with “tails” attached to the fly, from a Central Asian wall painting, A.D. 6th century State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

<sup>59</sup> In Pope, p. 2768, fig. 959 a banner of between the 3rd and 1st century B.C.

<sup>60</sup> For a discussion of this type of flag see especially Nickel 1981, pp. 41-76, who illustrates the Han example fig. 6.

<sup>61</sup> Whitfield and Farrer 1990, especially cat. no. 46.

<sup>62</sup> They are depicted in a painting of about the A.D. sixth century from Pandzhikent, see Azarpay 1981, pls. 8, 9; on a possibly ninth-century jug from Nagyzentmiklos in Hungary in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, no. VII.B.33; also on the the “fortress plate” possibly of the immediate pre-Islamic period, now in the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg where square banners with tails are depicted see Rice 1975, fig. 47.

<sup>63</sup> The painting depicts the retinue of the donor Chang I-chou, cave 156, Tun-Huang.

## FLAGS WITH TAB-LIKE ATTACHMENTS

The attachments on the flag in the 'Abbasid painting are neither tassels nor streamers but more like flaps, and although these are a variant of a flag with streamers, they form a distinct type of which three other examples of approximately the same period have been preserved. The first example, a large flag, elaborately decorated with an eight-pointed star and Arabic inscriptions, was captured from the Almohads by Alfonso VIII at the battle of Las Navas de



Fig. 5. Almohad flag captured by Alfonso VIII at the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa in 609/1212, Museo de Telas Medievales, Monasterio de Santa María la Real de Huelgas, Burgos 00652193.

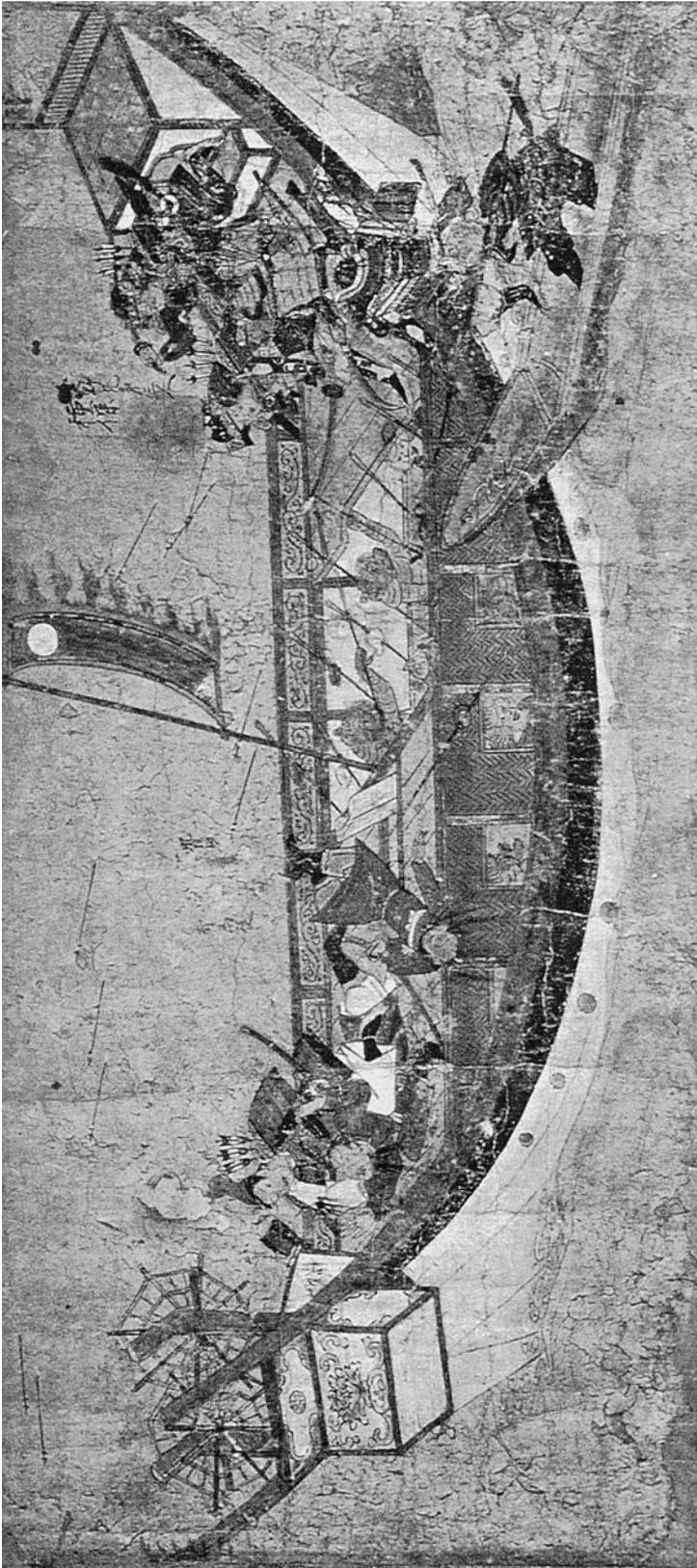


Fig. 6. Mongol flag from the *moko shūrai e-kotoba*, late 13th century. Imperial Household Collection, Kyoto

Tolosa in 609/1212.<sup>64</sup> [Fig. 5] The second example is Mongol, and an almost exact parallel to that in al-Wāsiṭī's painting. It is represented in the *mōko shūrai e-kotoba*, the Mongol Invasion Scroll, painted in Japan in about 1293 (Fig. 6). This scroll depicts one of the failed Mongol invasions of 1274 and 1281<sup>65</sup> In the Japanese painting the flag is that of the Mongol general in charge of the invasion, indicating that perhaps for the Mongols such flags were a mark of rank. The third example is on the so-called "fortress plate" in the State Hermitage Museum. Two flags are illustrated on this plate; one is slightly rounded and has triangular shaped tabs; the other is of the same type as in the 'Abbasid miniature.<sup>66</sup>

Unfortunately, the material survivals are insufficient for determining exactly when or where long flags with short attached flaps developed. It seems very likely however, that this was not originally an Arab type but that it was adopted by the Umayyads or 'Abbasids from the military and royal ceremonial life of their neighbours; and adapted by the addition of religious texts, to comply with the example of the Prophet.

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<sup>64</sup> Dodds 1992, no. 92, two other banners of the fourteenth century from the battle of Salado are said to be preserved in the cathedral of Toledo.

<sup>65</sup> The scroll is now in the Imperial Household Collection in Kyoto, ill. in Smith 1964, pp. 118-19.

<sup>66</sup> The rounded flag is of the type depicted on the Dunhuang wall-painting and perhaps this might substantiate Rice's dating of the plate to the ninth or tenth century, Rice 1975, pl. 47, p. 54.

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