

Mütevekkil - Allah, Ca'fer b. Muhammed

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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 rôle of a major Abbasid poet, al-Buhturî (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 ʿalā 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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