

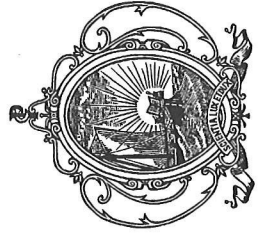
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AL-QĀSĪM B. ʿUBAYD ALLĀH — THE VIZIER AS VILLAIN:
ON CLASSICAL ARABIC GOSSIP

LETIZIA OSTI

[The caliph' s] vizier, al-Qāsim b. ʿUbayd Allāh, inspired great fear, was a violent man and a shedder of blood. Both the great and the humble were terrified by him, as none of them could derive any comfort from him. He died in his thirties, on the evening of Wednesday, the 10th of Rabiʿ II, 291 [1st March, 904].¹ On this, a man of culture (ʿAbd Allāh b. al-Ḥusayn b. Saʿd has claimed it was he) composed [the following verses in *mutaqarib*]:

We drank, the night the vizier died // and we are still drinking, people,
on the third day.

May God not bless those bones // or grant His blessing upon his heir!²

AL-QĀSĪM'S CAREER AND CULTURAL INTERESTS

Not very much is known of Abū ʿl-Ḥusayn al-Qāsim b. ʿUbayd Allāh b. Sulaymān b. Wahb, the *kātib* and vizier, apart from the few dates and scant genealogical information which accompany the name of almost every ʿAbbasid government official. His public life and career can be reconstructed in the roughest of outlines. He was born in the second half of the Third/Ninth Century³ into an old family of *kātib*s of Christian origin,⁴ and began working in the chancellery, in his mid teens.⁵ When in

¹ The date more commonly given for al-Qāsim's death is Dhū ʿl-Qaʿda, 291/October, 904.

² AL-MASʿŪDĪ, *Murāj al-Dhahab wa-Maʿādin al-Jawhar*, ed. BARBIER DE MEYNARD, PAVET DE COURTEILLE and CH. PELLAT, Beirut, 1965-1979, §3373.

³ According to AL-ŠAFĀDĪ, *Kitāb al-Wafī bi-l-Wafayāt*, ed. H. RITTER et al. (*Bibliotheca Islamica*), Leipzig - Wiesbaden - Beirut, 1931-, XXIV, p. 128-130, al-Qāsim was born in 259/872-873. The earlier sources which I have been able to consult do not mention this date, which is however consistent with al-Qāsim's age at the time of his death.

⁴ For a general portrait of the family, see the article by C.E. BOSWORTH, *Wahb, Banū, ʿabbāsīde de 749 à 936*, Damascus, 1959-1960, p. 745.

⁵ See for instance the account of his teacher al-Zajjāj, according to whom al-Qāsim began his apprenticeship in the chancellery at the age of sixteen, together with other children of *kātib*s, during the caliphate of al-Muʿtamid and the vizierate of Ismāʿīl b. Bulbul: AL-TANŪKHĪ, *Nishwār al-Muḥādara wa-Akḥbār al-Muḥādara*, ed. ʿA. AL-ŠĀLĪ, VII, Beirut, 1975, p. 200-201. If the birth date given by al-Šafādī is correct, this would have been in 275/888-889.

278/891 his father 'Ubayd Allāh became vizier for the caliph al-Mu'taḍid, al-Qāsim became his assistant together with his elder brother al-Ḥasan. The vizier 'Ubayd Allāh seems to have thought from the beginning of giving al-Qāsim more responsibilities, although he was the younger, as a few verses by Ibn al-Rūmī (d. 283/896), the family poet, seem to imply.⁶ However, competition between the two brothers never became an issue because al-Ḥasan died while his father was still alive, in 284/897-898. 'Ubayd Allāh, who had some control of the army besides that of the chancellery, was often away from Baghdad on military or diplomatic campaigns. On such occasions, he left al-Qāsim in charge as his substitute. When 'Ubayd Allāh himself died in 288/901, al-Qāsim was appointed by the caliph as the new vizier. Scarcely a year had passed when, in 289/902, the caliph al-Mu'taḍid himself died. It was al-Qāsim who took the necessary steps to have the *bay'ā* sworn to the new caliph, al-Muktafi,⁷ who in turn reconfirmed al-Qāsim as vizier, a post which he held up to his death, possibly from diarrhoea,⁸ in 291/904. Although he was vizier for approximately some three years, al-Qāsim was the first to be given the title *wālī al-dawla*, and also the first to address correspondence to the heads of the various *dīwāns* in his own name, and not in the name of the caliph.⁹ Moreover, unlike his father and most of his colleagues, in about fifteen years as a high secretary not once was he either arrested or in disgrace.

Historians are not generous with information on al-Qāsim's public life, which is overshadowed by that of his father, who had a much longer career and was a superior vizier. However, from his youth al-Qāsim's personality and cultural interests attracted the attention of the sources. For example, we know that he wrote poetry: in the *Fihrist* Ibn al-Nadīm mentions him in his list of 'poets who were secretaries',¹⁰ and in al-Marzubānī's entry on him in his *Mu'jam al-Shu'arā'* a few lines by him are quoted with the *riwāya* of the prestigious poetry editor Abū Bakr al-

⁶ IBN AL-RŪMĪ, *Dīwān*, ed. H. NAṢṢĀR *et al.*, II, Cairo, 1973-1981, poem 541, v. 80-84, a poem in which Ibn al-Rūmī encourages 'Ubayd Allāh to promote al-Ḥasan as well as his brother, because it will help, rather than hinder, al-Qāsim's career. The poem is also mentioned in R. GUEST, *Life and Works of Ibn er Rūmī*, London, 1944, p. 35 and 103.

⁷ The caliph was then in his twenties: see AL-MAS'ŪDĪ, *Murūj*, §3357.

⁸ Cf. the piece of *hiǰā'* reported by IBN AL-ATHĪR, *al-Kāmil fī 'l-Tārīkh*, ed. C.J. TORNBORG, VII, Leiden 1851-1871, p. 533-534, a piece attributed to Ibn Sayyār.

⁹ IBN AL-ABBĀR, *I'tāb al-Kutāb*, ed. S. AL-AṢHTAR, Damascus, 1961/1380, p. 185, for the latter information, which is on the authority of al-Ṣūlī.

¹⁰ IBN AL-NADĪM, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, ed. R. TAĀJADDUD, Teheran, 1973/1393?, p. 193. The only note Ibn al-Nadīm adds to his name is *muqill*, a poet who wrote a small amount.

Ṣūlī.¹¹ Apparently he also entertained an interest in astronomy, as we have the title of a *risāla* on this subject which Thābit b. Qurra addressed to him. The physician and translator Ishāq b. Ḥunayn was attached to him and became his confidant,¹² and the Basran grammarian al-Zajjāj (d. 310/922) was his private tutor and was introduced through him to the caliph al-Mu'taḍid.¹³ Not surprisingly, al-Qāsim also seems to have been a good calligrapher, as a poem by Ibn al-Mu'tazz addressed to him testifies.¹⁴

His political success and intellectual refinement notwithstanding, al-Qāsim emerges from the sources with a very clearcut personality: a nasty, cruel, ruthless individual who could harbour a grudge for years and did not hesitate to eliminate potential obstacles to his success; a mediocre vizier, unlike his father, one who could only maintain his position of power through scheming and betrayal. It is quite rare to find an anecdote, or *khabar*, describing al-Qāsim performing an act of disinterested generosity. Even when helping his friends, al-Qāsim seems to do it dishonestly. Thus, the overall image offered by the sources is not that of a ruthless statesman; it is rather that of an all-round villain, a person unpleasant in every facet of his existence. What follows is a collection of *khabars*, grouped thematically, which detail al-Qāsim's cruelty.

AN UNRULY STUDENT AND A DISHONEST INTELLECTUAL

The first group of accounts concerns al-Qāsim basically as a young student and are mostly to be found in al-Zubaydī's biographical dictionary on grammarians and lexicographers.¹⁵ The first story shows al-Qāsim sitting in the *majlis* of an already aged Tha'lab, the Kufan grammarian (d. 291/904), together with two friends. In the *majlis* there is a

¹¹ AL-MARZUBĀNĪ, *Mu'jam al-Shu'arā'*, ed. A. FARRĀJ, Cairo, 1960/1379, p. 337. Al-Marzubānī does not add any information on al-Qāsim's life, or comment on the poetry he quotes. Another piece is quoted in *Nishwār*, VII, p. 256.

¹² *Fihrist*, p. 343; IBN KHALLIKĀN, *Wafayāt al-A'yān*, ed. I. 'ABBĀS, I, Beirut, 1968-1972, p. 205.

¹³ *Fihrist*, p. 66.

¹⁴ AL-ṢŪLĪ, *Ash'ār Awlād al-Khulafā'*, ed. J. HEYWORTH DUNNE, Beirut, 1934-1936, p. 260-261. See also his *Adab al-Kutāb*, ed. A. BASAJ, Beirut, 1994/1415, p. 79. YAQŪT, *Mu'jam al-Udabā'*, ed. I. 'ABBĀS, Beirut, 1993, p. 1523 has another couple of examples of poetry by Ibn al-Mu'tazz addressed to 'Ubayd Allāh and his son.

¹⁵ AL-ZUBAYDĪ, *Ṭabaqāt al-Nahwīyīn wa-l-Lughawīyīn*, ed. M. IBRĀHĪM, Cairo, 1973, p. 151-152 (al-Zubaydī is quoting from his usual source, Hārūn b. 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Awārīj, d. 344/955). The second part of the story is quoted from al-Zubaydī's book in YAQŪT, *Mu'jam*, p. 2762.

simpleton, whom al-Qāsim and his friends persuade to approach Tha'lab and ask him to explain a rather obscene line of modern poetry. Initially Tha'lab, who is by that time seriously deaf, does not understand the line and then cannot explain it. When he realises that al-Qāsim and his friends are laughing at him, he expels them from the *majlis*. Al-Qāsim, already a spoiled child, goes home and complains to his father about Tha'lab. 'Ubayd Allāh is usually portrayed in the sources as a lenient man, one whose leniency extends even, for instance, to satiric poets; nevertheless, this time he 'was upset about it and believed that Tha'lab had been in the wrong'.

The outrage is remembered for years, and at the earliest occasion is publicly vindicated. When 'Ubayd Allāh is appointed vizier and can then afford to hire a private tutor for his children, he asks Tha'lab to send one of his students to him. Tha'lab sends Hārūn b. al-Hā'ik, his most faithful disciple, it was said. But when Hārūn arrives at the vizier's home, he finds that someone else is there: Abū Ishāq al-Zajjāj, the student of al-Mubarrad (d. 285/898), Tha'lab's arch-rival. Competition ensues:

[‘Ubayd Allāh b. Sulaymān] said to the two [grammarians]: ‘I want to reach the more knowledgeable among you two, so please ask questions of each other’. Al-Zajjāj asked Hārūn: ‘How do you say *ḍarabtu Zaydan ḍarban*?’ He replied: ‘*ḍarabtu Zaydan ḍarban*.’ ‘And how do you refer to Zayd and *ḍarb* with pronouns?’ [This question] silenced him. He did not respond, but was at a loss and shamefully stopped [talking], so that ‘Ubayd Allāh obtained what he wanted: he showed his affection for Tha'lab, then he turned Hārūn away and kept al-Zajjāj as a trick played on Tha'lab, in order to let him know [who was] the best grammarian of all. The answer to this question is *ḍarabtu-hu iyyā-hu*, and it is one of the basics of grammar. Hārūn could not have forgotten it, but if God wills something, it will certainly come to pass. The reason for his fate was what happened to [Tha'lab] during that *majlis*.

So, al-Zajjāj became al-Qāsim's private teacher, and in al-Zajjāj's own biography in the same book, we find a story showing al-Qāsim as an unruly child, lacking in concentration and unwilling to learn grammar.¹⁶ The influence of al-Zajjāj seems to have been a mixed blessing, as this teacher did not hesitate to advise his former pupil to take shortcuts. One account,¹⁷ reported by al-Tanūkhī, is narrated by al-Zajjāj himself, who asks his young pupil what he will give him when he becomes vizier. Al-

¹⁶ AL-ZUBAYDĪ, *Ṭabaqāt*, p. 111-12.

¹⁷ *Nishwār*, I, p. 75-77. Al-Tanūkhī mentions a precise, apparently oral, *isrād*: Abū 'l-Ḥusayn b. 'Ayyāsh transmitted to me: Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm b. al-Sarī al-Zajjāj transmitted to me... This story is also quoted by YĀQŪT, *Mu'jam*, p. 52-53.

Qāsim asks what al-Zajjāj wants, and the teacher wishes for twenty thousand *dīnārs*. Once appointed, al-Qāsim is afraid that the caliph will not allow him to be so liberal with the treasury's money, so he gives the promised money to al-Zajjāj by way of appointing him to oversee people's petitions and encouraging him to ask for payments to the amount he thinks proper. When al-Zajjāj reaches the twenty thousand *dīnārs* which were originally promised to him, he is so fond of the job that al-Qāsim lets him continue indefinitely.

Another episode, occurring a few years later, again has Tha'lab as its indirect victim. The account is reported by al-Zubaydī on the authority of a known bibliophile, Abū Bakr al-Ṣūfī.¹⁸

Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. Yahyā al-Ṣūfī said: Ahmad b. Yahyā Tha'lab died on Saturday the 10th of Jumādā I, 291 [30th March, 904]. He was buried at the cemetery of Bāb al-Shām. He appointed as executor [of his testament] 'Alī b. Muḥammad al-Kūfī from among his students, and directed him to hand his books over to Abū Bakr Aḥmad b. Ishāq b. Sa'd al-Qutrubulī. Ibrāhīm al-Zajjāj told al-Qāsim b. 'Ubayd Allāh: 'These books are precious, do not let them evade you'. Al-Qāsim then instructed 'Alī b. 'Ubayd Allāh Ra's al-Baghī that he should have the books priced and take them for him. So ['Alī] summoned Khayrān the copyist, who priced books worth ten *dīnārs* at three *dīnārs*, for a total of less than 3,000 *dīnārs*. Later, I saw (I was present at the sale of the books bought by the sons of al-Qāsim) the *Dīwān al-Masā'il* of al-Akhfash, with '4 *dīnārs*' written on it in the handwriting of Khayrān, and in the handwriting of Aḥmad b. Yahyā: 'I wrote to Abū Ḥātim al-Sijistānī to copy for me all the *Masā'il* of al-Akhfash regarding grammar, and he presented me with this copy, informing me there was no *mas'ala* which was not included in this book'. The lot arrived and one of the sons of al-Qāsim got it, as I could not afford it.

Al-Ṣūfī's regret at not being able to get hold of such a precious book is palpable. However, al-Qāsim's victory is, literally, shortlived, as one discovers a couple of lines later:

He died in 291. Al-Qāsim b. 'Ubayd Allāh b. Sulaymān b. Wabḥ, *walī al-dawla*, died in the same year.¹⁹

A MAN WHO BEARS A GRUDGE

The accounts illustrated above show a certain affection between al-Zajjāj and his pupil. Not all *adibs*, however, were lucky enough to be in

¹⁸ AL-ZUBAYDĪ, *Ṭabaqāt*, p. 150; see also YĀQŪT, *Mu'jam*, p. 546.

¹⁹ See above, foot-note 1.

al-Qāsim's good books. Two notable examples are the poets Ibn al-Rūmī and Ibn Bassām.

We know that the poet Ibn al-Rūmī was for most of his life attached to the Banū Wāhib, and we still have several pieces of *madhīḥ* poetry by him praising this family, most of which is specifically addressed to al-Qāsim. A few sources agree that al-Qāsim eventually had him killed, but the reason is left vague: al-Qāsim, apparently, fearing the poet's ever more frequent satiric attacks, employed his friend Ibn Firās (who was one of those who had played the trick in Thālab's classroom) to administer the poison.²⁰

Apparently, another *Hijā'* poet, Ibn Bassām (d. 302/916), narrowly escaped having his tongue cut off, simply because he had friends in high places. The story is related by several sources, but its best rendition (according to the taste of this reader at least) is given by Yāqūt, who juxtaposes three different *khābars*, in order to give the story an appropriate beginning, explaining the antipathy between poet and vizier, and an entertaining finale. As with most of the anecdotes discussed thus far, this also contains two episodes set a few years apart from each other.²¹ The first installment is set in 284 when, on the death of al-Ḥasan b. Ubayd Allāh, Ibn Bassām composes a poem where he mockingly consoles the vizier (*basīḥ*):

Say to Abū 'l-Qāsim, in whom I place my hopes,²² // fate has confronted you with marvels:
A son of yours has died, an adornment [to your honour], // while the one who brings [your name] discredit and dishonour lives on.
That one should live is as bad as the loss of the other; // thus you are not short of calamities!

On hearing the poem, Ubayd Allāh is angered but readily forgives Ibn Bassām as the poet composes and recites another, serious piece. This first part is followed by an intermission where the paternity of the satiric poem is discussed. After this, a new *khābar* is introduced. It is set during the vizierate of al-Qāsim and narrated by the boon companion Ibn Ḥamdūn, a relative of Ibn Bassām. Firstly Ibn Ḥamdūn mentions that the caliph had had an artificial lake built in one of his castles and spent

²⁰ IBN KHALIKĀN, *Wafayāt*, III, p. 361-362. This is not the only version of Ibn al-Rūmī's death: see also B. GRUENDLER, *Medieval Arabic Praise Poetry. Ibn al-Rūmī and the Patron's Redemption*, London-New York, 2003, p. 45-46 and note 40.

²¹ YĀQŪT, *Mu'jam*, p. 1860-1862. Parts of the story, or only the poetry, are related in several sources, among which are: AL-ṢULĪ, *Akhbār al-Shu'arā' al-Muḥaddathin*, ed. J. HEYWORTH DUNNE, Beirut, 1934-1936, p. 223; AL-MARZUBĀNĪ, *Mu'jam*, p. 154; *Murāj.* §§ 3413 and 3420; IBN KHALIKĀN, *Wafayāt*, III, p. 364.

much time there with his slave girls. When he heard a piece of *hijā'* which Ibn Bassām had composed on the matter, the caliph had the lake destroyed without saying anything to the poet. Ibn Ḥamdūn continues:²³

I was playing chess with al-Mu'taḍid one day, when al-Qāsim b. 'Ubayd Allāh, who was the vizier, entered. He asked to receive his orders and left. When he had gone, al-Mu'taḍid recited the words of al-Bassām on al-Qāsim:

That one should live is as bad as the loss of the other; // thus you are not short of calamities!
and kept repeating the line. Al-Qāsim returned to him on some other business; al-Mu'taḍid was busy playing and unaware of his presence, and was still repeating the line. I managed to get him to notice his presence; he looked up and was clearly embarrassed. He said: 'Abū 'l-Ḥusayn (this was the first time that he called him by his *kunya*, because of the embarrassment which had seized him), why don't you cut out the tongue of this shameless man and free yourself from his iniquity?' So al-Qāsim hurried off to his *maḥlis*, catching at the opportunity [to get back at] Ibn Bassām, and ordered him to be searched for.

Ibn Ḥamdūn said: I was aghast and my hands were shaking while playing, for fear of what would happen to Ibn Bassām, as we were very closely related. Al-Mu'taḍid said: 'What's the matter with you?' I answered: 'Commander of the Faithful, one cannot tell [such jokes] to al-Qāsim b. 'Ubayd Allāh when he is angry;²⁴ I can already see him cutting out the tongue of Ibn Bassām out of spite — of Ibn Bassām, a nobleman and poet! And this would bring shame on the Commander of the Faithful!' [Al-Mu'taḍid] ordered al-Qāsim to be summoned and asked him what he had done about Ibn Bassām. He answered: 'I have told Mu'nis²⁵ to summon [Ibn Bassām] so that I can cut out his tongue.' Abū 'l-Ḥusayn, when I ordered you to cut out his tongue, I meant that you should do so by [showing him] loving kindness, giving him presents and donning robes of honour on him, so that he progresses from satirising to praising you!' He answered: 'Commander of the Faithful, if you really knew him and knew what he said, you would deem it right to chop his head off!' (he was alluding to what [Ibn Bassām] had said about al-Mu'taḍid and the slave-girl Durayra). Al-Mu'taḍid smiled saying: 'Abū 'l-Ḥusayn, this is exactly why I ordered the lake to be destroyed; now go fetch him yourself and pay him three hundred *dīnārs* [from the Treasury], as that is what he deserves, rather than anything else' ... al-Qāsim summoned him after three days,

²² Hopes of remuneration addressed to a patron.

²³ The *isnād* is: al-Salām transmitted, on the authority of Abū 'l-Qāsim al-Mujammī b. Muḥammad b. al-Mujammī; Ibn Ḥamdūn the boon companion transmitted to me ... This was probably Ibn Bassām's cousin on his mother's side, who died 309/921-922.

²⁴ *Lā yuṣṭalā bi-nāri-hi*, an idiomatic expression literally meaning 'one cannot get warm at his fire,' i.e. 'one cannot approach him when he is inflamed with rage.'

²⁵ Mu'nis al-Khāzin (d. 301/914), who was *ṣāhib al-ḥaras*, i.e. commander of the guard, under al-Mu'taḍid (see the article by C.E. BOSWORTH, *Mu'nis al-Fahl*, in: *EI2*, VII, p. 575).

gave him a robe of honour and appointed him to the *barīd* of Ṣaymara and its surroundings. [Ibn Bassām] remained in this office until the end of al-Muʿtaḍid's reign, then his whimsy drove him to insult [al-Qāsim] again. He said (*baṣīṭ*):

Send word to the vizier of the *imām*²⁶ from me // and proclaim:
'O thou of the two calamities!

The friend of generosity²⁷ dies and [he who] lives on // is the friend of dishonour, Abū 'l-Ḥusayn.

Because of the one, your heart is afflicted // because of the other, your eye is weeping.

The life of the former is like the loss of the latter // so strike your head with both hands!

The last part of the above story, which sanctions the victory of leniency and generosity over the petty al-Qāsim, introduces the theme of the relationship between the barely twenty-year-old vizier and his master, the caliph al-Muʿtaḍid. Al-Tanūkhī reports several accounts in which the caliph plays tricks on al-Qāsim, who is too cowardly and inexperienced to react. In one account²⁸ we see al-Qāsim drinking and partying with his slave girls, but in secret because he fears that the caliph may think he is still too young. The caliph, however, knows everything because he has a spy, whom al-Qāsim cannot imprison even when he is discovered. In another story²⁹ Ibn Ḥamdūn, instructed and aided by the caliph, finds a way of getting the miser al-Qāsim to give him a large sum of money, by pretending to know why the caliph is angry with him. These stories, while not really providing solid information, contribute to fleshing out the portrait of al-Qāsim as an unpleasant young man. The major consequences of this bad character, however, are seen in al-Qāsim's activity as a vizier and vizieral assistant.

A FEW OBSTACLES REMOVED

As this category falls within the purview of what modern scholarship considers history, it is perhaps here that al-Qāsim's most famous bad deeds are found. Among these is certainly the death of Abū 'l-Ṭayyib al-Sarakhsī, a student of al-Kindī and tutor, then boon companion, of the

²⁶ The caliph.

²⁷ I.e. both al-Ḥasan b. Ubayd Allāh, the object of the original poem, and al-Muʿtaḍid, the one who advised al-Qāsim in favour of generosity.

²⁸ *Nishwār*, III, p. 276-283; a summarised version, related on the authority of al-Šūfi, is in: AL-TANŪKHĪ, *al-Faraj ba'da 'l-Shidda*, ed. 'A. AL-SHALĪJĪ, II, Beirut, 1978, p. 85.

²⁹ *Nishwār*, I, p. 334-337. This story too has an *ismād*: 'my father transmitted to me: Abū Muḥammad transmitted to me: Ahmad b. Ḥamdūn transmitted to me ...'

caliph al-Muʿtaḍid. The relevant sources agree that he was disgraced in 283/896, when he was arrested and his property confiscated. Three years later he was executed. As Rosenthal shows,³⁰ the reason for the arrest is not clear but is probably related to unorthodox views with which the caliph did not want to be associated.³¹

Ibn al-Nadīm gives an explanation which involves al-Qāsim much more deeply: because the caliph was on such intimate terms with al-Sarakhsī, he had confided in him a secret regarding Badr and al-Qāsim, asking him not to divulge it. Al-Sarakhsī later divulged it though, because 'of a ruse employed against him by al-Qāsim, which is very well known'.³² The caliph had him arrested because al-Sarakhsī had betrayed his trust and revealed something which he had told him in confidence, but he did not want to have him killed. It was al-Qāsim who slipped al-Sarakhsī's name into a list of people who were to be executed, which the caliph had already sealed. So al-Sarakhsī was executed and when the caliph asked after him, al-Qāsim could show him the list and say that he had only followed the caliph's orders. But apparently the *Fihrist* (and the sources quoting from it) is the only source to provide this version of the story.

Another victim of al-Qāsim, probably the best known of all, was Badr al-Muʿtaḍidī in 289/902. Here, it is al-Ṭabarī³³ who gives us the most detailed account. The death of 'Ubayd Allāh and the subsequent accession of al-Qāsim to the vizierate is not mentioned by al-Ṭabarī. The first mention of al-Qāsim as vizier is as a participant at al-Muʿtaḍid's funeral, immediately followed by his part in the death of Badr. During al-Muʿtaḍid's illness which led to his death, al-Qāsim had planned to swear the *bay'ā* not to one of his children, but to another member of the family. Badr, the military commander closely attached to al-Muʿtaḍid, refused to betray his master's wishes. But Badr had been away from Baghdad when al-Muʿtaḍid had eventually died, so al-Qāsim had the *bay'ā* sworn to al-Muktafi who was, indeed a son of al-Muʿtaḍid, but

³⁰ F. ROSENTHAL, *Ahmad b. al-Ṭayyib al-Sarakhsī: a Scholar and Littérateur of the Ninth Century* (*American Oriental Series*), New Haven, 1943.

³¹ ḤU'ĀL AL-ŠĀBĪ, *Ruṣūm Dār al-Khilāfa* (*The Rules and Regulations of the 'Abbasid Court*), translated by E.A. SALEM, Beirut, 1977, p. 45, says that al-Sarakhsī had revealed the caliph's opinion of al-Qāsim, which the caliph had told him in confidence; YAQŪT, *Mu'jam*, p. 290-291, reports the *Fihrist* more or less verbatim.

³² *Fihrist*, p. 320-321. There is no source quoted. YAQŪT, *Mu'jam*, p. 290-291 quotes the *Fihrist* more or less verbatim; other later compilers who follow this version are al-Qifī, Ibn Abī 'Usaybi'a and ḤIĀL al-ŠĀBĪ.

³³ AL-ṬABARĪ, (d. 310/923), *Ta'rikh al-Rusul wa-l-Mulūk*, ed. M.J. DE GOEJE et al., III, Leiden, 1879-1901, p. 2209-2215.

who had had disagreements with Badr in the past. Al-Qāsim then persuaded al-Muktafi that Badr was dangerous and had to be kept away from the capital. He was afraid that Badr, if allowed into the presence of al-Muktafi, would reveal his scheming to the new caliph. Badr, making the same mistake Abū Muslim had made with Abū Ja'far al-Manṣūr, insisted on coming to pay his respects to the new master and, tricked into leaving his troops behind, was killed while performing the prayer.

This is according to what al-Ṭabarī says. To make the story perfect, the later Ibn al-Abbār³⁴ adds that it had been Badr himself who had persuaded al-Mu'taḍid to appoint al-Qāsim as vizier after the death of his father. A consummate example of generosity repaid with cruelty.

The only other death which al-Ṭabarī ascribes to al-Qāsim is that of 'Amr b. al-Layth the Ṣaffarid in 288/901. Al-Ṭabarī³⁵ tells us that al-Mu'taḍid had ordered the killing of 'Amr b. al-Layth on his deathbed, but this order had been disregarded because of al-Mu'taḍid's condition. The very day of his arrival in Baghdad, the new caliph al-Muktafi enquired about 'Amr, and when al-Qāsim said that he was still alive, the caliph was happy. Al-Qāsim disliked this and had 'Amr killed immediately.

Other victims who suffered at the hands of al-Qāsim but survived, were al-Ḥusayn b. 'Amr al-Naṣrānī and 'Abd al-Wāhid b. al-Muwaffaq. The former was a favourite of the caliph al-Muktafi. According to al-Ṭabarī³⁶ al-Qāsim had him arrested in 290/903 and released him on condition that he left Baghdad. The latter was a brother of al-Mu'taḍid. Al-Ṭabarī mentions his disappearance but does not say that it was due to al-Qāsim. On the other hand, al-Mas'ūdī provides a very graphic account. According to him, it was al-Qāsim who had him arrested and killed, although he had no interest in power whatsoever, and was only into 'playing with young boys'. Al-Muktafi himself was persuaded that there was nothing to fear from his uncle and that he should be left alone. But, al-Mas'ūdī says,³⁷

al-Qāsim did not stop trying to get at 'Abd al-Wāhid until he managed to kill him. When al-Qāsim died and it became clear that he had killed 'Abd al-Wāhid, al-Muktafi wanted al-Qāsim to be dug up from the grave in order to flog his corpse and then burn it.

Al-Mas'ūdī wisely adds: 'it was said that this happened otherwise, and God knows best'. It is again al-Mas'ūdī who mentions a few other

³⁴ IBN AL-ABBĀR, *I'tāb*, p. 182-185.

³⁵ AL-ṬABARĪ, *Ta'rikh*, III, p. 2208; IBN KHALLIKĀN, *Wafayāt*, VI, p. 430.

³⁶ AL-ṬABARĪ, *Ta'rikh*, III, p. 2230.

³⁷ AL-ṬABARĪ, *Ta'rikh*, III, p. 2216; AL-MAS'ŪDĪ, *Murājī*, §§3374-3375.

victims of al-Qāsim, two of whom were sent into exile in Basra but disappeared en route and were never seen again.³⁸

NOT A RELIGIOUS MAN

To complete a perfect portrait, al-Qāsim was also accused of impiety in various ways. Besides the drinking sessions which have already been mentioned,³⁹ al-Qāsim's Christian origins earned him more poetry from Ibn Bassām, who accused him of favouring Christians and of being a crypto-Christian himself.⁴⁰ Al-Ṣafadī,⁴¹ in his biography of al-Qāsim reports two *khabars* on the authority of al-Ṣūlī where al-Qāsim and his friend Ibn Firās make fun of the Qur'ān. In fact, the biography of al-Ṣafadī does not mention al-Qāsim's cruelty (on the contrary, he underlines his generosity), but concentrates on his being a *zindīq*.

AN ABUNDANCE OF EVIDENCE BUT NO CORROBORATION

The themes summarised above cover grammar, poetry, philosophy, politics and religion, all of which goes to show that al-Qāsim was nasty in all subjects. However, when one considers this impressive, though far from exhaustive, list, one has the impression that there is indeed plenty of evidence of al-Qāsim's villainy, but this evidence is scattered throughout the sources. If, for instance, the *Kitāb al-Fihrist* says that al-Qāsim caused the death of al-Sarakhsī, it does not mention the death of Ibn al-Rūmī. The story of Ibn al-Rūmī's death is found in Ibn Khallikān, where, however, nothing about Badr can be found. The story of Badr is told by al-Ṭabarī, who however does not mention that 'Abd al-Wāhid b. al-Muwaffaq was killed by al-Qāsim. Moreover, while most of the accounts concerning court anecdotes and gossip are equipped with some kind of *isnād* and originate with sources which are widely quoted by the compilers, the stories reported by al-Ṭabarī are universally introduced by *dhukira*. In other words, a detective would conclude that there is plenty of evidence but no corroboration. One is tempted to suspect, here and there, that al-Qāsim was simply the easiest villain to blame for an 'unsolved' murder. Why is this? Is al-Qāsim only a villain in his *Nacht-leben*, or did he simply succeed in completely covering his traces?

³⁸ *Murājī*, § 3359.

³⁹ Cf. above p. 239-240.

⁴⁰ See, for instance, *Murājī*, §3359.

⁴¹ AL-ṢAFADĪ, *al-Wāqf*, XXIV, p. 128-130.

Part of the answer must lie in the passage by al-Mas'ūdī which was quoted at the beginning of this article. The *Murūj al-Dhahab* plays a very important role in the construction of the character of al-Qāsim, because it is the source which puts everything together and furnishes a summary profile of al-Qāsim, a man who 'inspired great fear, was a violent man and a shedder of blood', capped with a few examples of his cruelty. Interestingly enough, al-Mas'ūdī explains, at times in detail, how al-Qāsim managed to kill or hurt someone, but never mentions his motives, never says *why*. For him, al-Qāsim is just a villain, whose cruelty does not demand any further explanation. Confronted with such a powerful portrait, it is probably easy for later sources to add the odd act of cruelty here and there to this already impressive CV. However, the final word on the construction of such a one-sided persona could only be found in a work which has not come down to us except in fragments quoted by later sources: the *Kitāb al-Wuzarā'* by al-Šūlī,⁴² from which many of the accounts with an *isnād* originate. Sadly, it is not possible to scrutinize al-Šūlī's global view of al-Qāsim.

Finally, there is the question of how such a generally bad person could remain in power, and actually gain power, if we believe our sources that (1) al-Mu'taḍid did not want to appoint him and was only persuaded to do so by Badr, who then paid the consequences; (2) he was not as able a vizier as his father, or at least he was less honest and (3) al-Mu'taḍid did not like him. It is of course possible that al-Qāsim was simply lucky: maybe al-Mu'taḍid died before he could decide to get rid of him, and al-Muktafi was too young to be really independent of him. Thus, it is possible that the al-Qāsim which the sources deliver to us is not, or not only, a literary type, for none of the stories devoted to him contain the exaggerations typical of completely fictional stories. They do not portray al-Qāsim as *unbelievably* evil; rather, they show him, pretty consistently, as a thoroughly unpleasant individual.

Is it important, in the greater scheme of things, whether al-Qāsim really was such an unpleasant person? Certainly not, as the gossip about him remains enjoyable: above all, it remains gossip. It is, however, significant as an example of the process through which an individual's life and character are fitted within a literary framework. The important question becomes, then, whether it is possible for such a process, and the resultant image, still to yield information which may be safely used by

⁴² The extant fragments of this work are collected in D. SOURDEL, *Fragments d'al-Šūlī sur l'Histoire des vizirs 'abbāsides*, in: *Bulletin d'Études Orientales* 15 (1957), p. 99-108.

an historian as well as a student of literature. Much depends on how, and in which hierarchical order, one interprets the material. If, for instance, the episodes with a political theme were given pre-eminence, al-Qāsim would emerge as a very powerful and determined vizier,⁴³ and most of the other stories devoted to him could be written off as the gossip of envious people, the inevitable by-product of a successful career. However, it is difficult to see why greater importance should be attached to certain accounts to the detriment of others. If, for example, one were to dismiss the story of al-Qāsim and Ibn Bassām as an entertaining literary anecdote, which it certainly is, could one then accept the account concerning Badr al-Mu'taḍidī as more or less factual? Given that both accounts share the same *ḵabar* structure and that the latter has no *isnād*, one would rather be tempted to see the former as potentially more reliable.

To be sure, Yāqūt's *Mu jam al-Udabā'* and al-Ṭabarī's *Ta'rikh* are works quite different from one another. This, however, does not make one account automatically more truthful than the other. Based on the extant evidence, either could be genuine or invented, and either could have been the cause of the other during the formation of al-Qāsim's persona.

The fundamental, still unresolved problem is whether it is possible, or indeed useful, to distinguish between fact and fiction in a classical text.⁴⁴

LETIZIA OSTI
Basel

⁴³ Consider how his career is portrayed in HUGH KENNEDY'S *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates*, London - New York, 1986, p. 186-187.

⁴⁴ I would like to express my gratitude to Julia Bray and Hilary Kilpatrick for their suggestions and support.

al-Qāsim's good books. Two notable examples are the poets Ibn al-Rūmī and Ibn Bassām.

We know that the poet Ibn al-Rūmī was for most of his life attached to the Banū Wāhib, and we still have several pieces of *madhīḥ* poetry by him praising this family, most of which is specifically addressed to al-Qāsim. A few sources agree that al-Qāsim eventually had him killed, but the reason is left vague: al-Qāsim, apparently, fearing the poet's ever more frequent satiric attacks, employed his friend Ibn Firās (who was one of those who had played the trick in Thālab's classroom) to administer the poison.²⁰

Apparently, another *Hijā'* poet, Ibn Bassām (d. 302/916), narrowly escaped having his tongue cut off, simply because he had friends in high places. The story is related by several sources, but its best rendition (according to the taste of this reader at least) is given by Yāqūt, who juxtaposes three different *khābars*, in order to give the story an appropriate beginning, explaining the antipathy between poet and vizier, and an entertaining finale. As with most of the anecdotes discussed thus far, this also contains two episodes set a few years apart from each other.²¹ The first installment is set in 284 when, on the death of al-Ḥasan b. Ubayd Allāh, Ibn Bassām composes a poem where he mockingly consoles the vizier (*basīḥ*):

Say to Abū 'l-Qāsim, in whom I place my hopes,²² // fate has confronted you with marvels:
A son of yours has died, an adornment [to your honour], // while the one who brings [your name] discredit and dishonour lives on.
That one should live is as bad as the loss of the other; // thus you are not short of calamities!

On hearing the poem, Ubayd Allāh is angered but readily forgives Ibn Bassām as the poet composes and recites another, serious piece. This first part is followed by an intermission where the paternity of the satiric poem is discussed. After this, a new *khābar* is introduced. It is set during the vizierate of al-Qāsim and narrated by the boon companion Ibn Ḥamdūn, a relative of Ibn Bassām. Firstly Ibn Ḥamdūn mentions that the caliph had had an artificial lake built in one of his castles and spent

²⁰ IBN KHALIKĀN, *Wafayāt*, III, p. 361-362. This is not the only version of Ibn al-Rūmī's death: see also B. GRUENDLER, *Medieval Arabic Praise Poetry. Ibn al-Rūmī and the Patron's Redemption*, London-New York, 2003, p. 45-46 and note 40.

²¹ YĀQŪT, *Mu'jam*, p. 1860-1862. Parts of the story, or only the poetry, are related in several sources, among which are: AL-ṢULĪ, *Akhbār al-Shu'arā' al-Muḥaddathin*, ed. J. HEYWORTH DUNNE, Beirut, 1934-1936, p. 223; AL-MARZUBĀNĪ, *Mu'jam*, p. 154; *Murāj.* §§ 3413 and 3420; IBN KHALIKĀN, *Wafayāt*, III, p. 364.

much time there with his slave girls. When he heard a piece of *hijā'* which Ibn Bassām had composed on the matter, the caliph had the lake destroyed without saying anything to the poet. Ibn Ḥamdūn continues:²³

I was playing chess with al-Mu'taḍid one day, when al-Qāsim b. 'Ubayd Allāh, who was the vizier, entered. He asked to receive his orders and left. When he had gone, al-Mu'taḍid recited the words of al-Bassām on al-Qāsim:

That one should live is as bad as the loss of the other; // thus you are not short of calamities!
and kept repeating the line. Al-Qāsim returned to him on some other business; al-Mu'taḍid was busy playing and unaware of his presence, and was still repeating the line. I managed to get him to notice his presence; he looked up and was clearly embarrassed. He said: 'Abū 'l-Ḥusayn (this was the first time that he called him by his *kunya*, because of the embarrassment which had seized him), why don't you cut out the tongue of this shameless man and free yourself from his iniquity?' So al-Qāsim hurried off to his *maḥlis*, catching at the opportunity [to get back at] Ibn Bassām, and ordered him to be searched for.

Ibn Ḥamdūn said: I was aghast and my hands were shaking while playing, for fear of what would happen to Ibn Bassām, as we were very closely related. Al-Mu'taḍid said: 'What's the matter with you?' I answered: 'Commander of the Faithful, one cannot tell [such jokes] to al-Qāsim b. 'Ubayd Allāh when he is angry;²⁴ I can already see him cutting out the tongue of Ibn Bassām out of spite — of Ibn Bassām, a nobleman and poet! And this would bring shame on the Commander of the Faithful!' [Al-Mu'taḍid] ordered al-Qāsim to be summoned and asked him what he had done about Ibn Bassām. He answered: 'I have told Mu'nis²⁵ to summon [Ibn Bassām] so that I can cut out his tongue.' Abū 'l-Ḥusayn, when I ordered you to cut out his tongue, I meant that you should do so by [showing him] loving kindness, giving him presents and donning robes of honour on him, so that he progresses from satirising to praising you!' He answered: 'Commander of the Faithful, if you really knew him and knew what he said, you would deem it right to chop his head off!' (he was alluding to what [Ibn Bassām] had said about al-Mu'taḍid and the slave-girl Durayra). Al-Mu'taḍid smiled saying: 'Abū 'l-Ḥusayn, this is exactly why I ordered the lake to be destroyed; now go fetch him yourself and pay him three hundred *dīnārs* [from the Treasury], as that is what he deserves, rather than anything else' ... al-Qāsim summoned him after three days,

²² Hopes of remuneration addressed to a patron.

²³ The *isnād* is: al-Salām transmitted, on the authority of Abū 'l-Qāsim al-Mujammī b. Muḥammad b. al-Mujammī; Ibn Ḥamdūn the boon companion transmitted to me ... This was probably Ibn Bassām's cousin on his mother's side, who died 309/921-922.

²⁴ *Lā yuṣṭalā bi-nāri-hi*, an idiomatic expression literally meaning 'one cannot get warm at his fire,' i.e. 'one cannot approach him when he is inflamed with rage.'

²⁵ Mu'nis al-Khāzin (d. 301/914), who was *ṣāhib al-ḥaras*, i.e. commander of the guard, under al-Mu'taḍid (see the article by C.E. BOSWORTH, *Mu'nis al-Fahl*, in: *EI2*, VII, p. 575).