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The first Abbasid caliphs had established strict tests for doctrinal orthodoxy in an inquisition known as the mihna. The atmosphere darkened. The veracity of revelation couldn't be based solely on the Quran's own claim to truth, for that would be tautological. The monarchy lost its nationalist physiognomy and the nationalists became at heart antimonarchic.“ The d enouement came in July 1958, with the coup led by Major-General Abdul Karim Kassem, who proclaimed a republic. As Marozzi puts it, Abu Nuwas, perhaps ‘the boldest and most brilliant of the Abbasid poets, celebrated illicit sex with a fearlessness that would be met with the hangman’s noose in some parts of the Arab world today’ – and not just in the Arab world, if we think, say, of the institutionalised homophobia in neighbouring Iran. It seems to have survived the devastation brought by Hulagu, grandson of Genghis Khan, in 1258, but not the city’s subsequent development. Thanks to George’s courage and persistence in preventing the sale of such objects at international auctions, many were returned to the museum (including the Warka Vase, in twenty fragments) before death threats forced him to leave for North America, where he died in 2011. Marozzi gives a graphic account of the assassination of the royal family by an army captain called Abd al Sattar Saba al Abusi who had offered to take the king and his party to safety. When they were in the middle of the palace courtyard ... the officer suddenly swung round, aimed his submachine gun at the royals and cut them down from behind, triggering wild shooting on all sides. Roman law, Greek medicine, mathematics and philosophy, Indian mysticism and Persian scholarship were all ‘harnessed in this rush to understand the world’. By the time the British commander, Major-General Charles Townshend, capitulated on 29 April 1916, conditions were apocalyptic. Owls and crows made their nests in royal palaces. He was a figure around whom legends accrued. ‘There are stages such as these, and there are stages of calm,’ he said. Things took a turn for the worse once the British and Indian prisoners had crossed the bridge-of-boats into west Baghdad, where they were ordered to march through a crowded ‘filthy bazaar’ in which ‘bearded Arabs in flowing kaftans and red-frezzed youths gazed at us in amazement and disgust’. There were numerous Shiite revolts in the tenth century, including a rebellion among Berbers in North Africa which led to the establishment of a Shia dynasty in Egypt. The great mosque adjoining it was originally made from sun-baked bricks set in mortar; it was reconstructed by Mansur’s grandson, the legendary Harun al-Rashid, who built a sturdier version using kiln-baked bricks. It is said to have been topped by the figure of a horseman with a lance that swivelled like a weathervane to point towards the caliph’s enemies. Harun, a contemporary of Charlemagne, presided over an empire stretching from the Indus to Tunisia. Theologians who resisted were tortured and in some cases executed. According to one contemporary, ‘they swept through the city like hungry falcons attacking a flight of doves, or like raging wolves attacking sheep, with loose reins and shameless faces, murdering and spreading fear ... the massacre was so great that the blood of the slain flowed in a river like the Nile, red as the wood used in dyeing.’ A second assault by Tamerlane in 1401 was even more devastating. Marozzi cites Muhammad ibn Zakaria al-Razi (d. It was here, in the time of the Caliphs, that the ‘Thousand and One Nights’ were set. Marozzi’s quotations from a memoir written by an RAF flight sergeant taken prisoner in Kut and shipped to Baghdad hint at the city’s confessional divisions: Beneath loudly clacking storks, the upper balconies of riverside houses were crowded with unveiled Christian girls and women shouting ‘Bonjour!’ and ‘Good Morning!’ to the haggard new arrivals. Marozzi indulges his readers with a feast of sexual and gastronomic details, including the story of a pair of slave girls summarily decapitated for having a lesbian affair. He also left a demographic time bomb by giving his men licence to rape, kill and plunder Muslims, while sparing Christians and Jews. The end of Ottoman rule came with the arrival of the British in March 1917, at the head of an Anglo-Indian army, almost a year after the debacle at the town of Kut, south of Baghdad, where, following a five-month siege, the British had surrendered in one of the worst military defeats of the First World War. The bloody end of the monarchy – followed by a sanguinary succession of coups, culminating in the regime of Saddam Hussein – raises questions about the seemingly arbitrary character of violence in Iraqi society. Seven tunics of fine Rashidi linen in a feminine cut were then dipped into the mixture, a prelude to the delights to come. Although Harun’s name has forever been associated with Baghdad, he doesn’t appear to have much liked the city, which he compared to a steam-room, and spent much of his time in hunting lodges near the Zagros mountains and at the palace he built at Raqqa on the Euphrates, in what is now nominally Syrian territory but is currently controlled by Isis. The monarchy’s fate was sealed, however, during the Second World War when the prince regent, Abdul Ilah, sided with the Allied troops – including forces from Transjordan’s Arab Legion – that Churchill, overruling General Archibald Wavell, sent to suppress the revolt led by Rashid Ali al-Gailani, a nationalist lawyer, and a group of anti-British colonels. Hulagu destroyed not only the city, but also its capacity for renewal by sabotaging the elaborate infrastructure of waterways and dykes on which the prosperity of Iraq had depended since Sumerian times. In later Arab times, Marozzi relates, ‘the almost unbroken string of towns and villages along the Tigris gave rise to the Baghdad expression that “a cock could hop from house to house all the way to Basra.”’ Mansur’s city, like others in the region, was circular. But his book, which is highly readable, often dramatic and based on excellent research, provides an abundance of material for analysis. A more sober assessment of the great caliph’s reign is hard to come by. In 2006, when Baghdad was mired in sectarian killings and the murder rate was more than a thousand a month, Justin Marozzi spoke to Donny George, the director of the National Museum of Iraq, which had been looted after the invasion of 2003. Ahmed ibn Hanbal, a collector of prophetic traditions, became a popular hero for refusing to renounce his views, and the Hanbali faction formed its own inquisition, sentencing leading Shias (who held Mutazilite views) to be burned alive, despite fruitless efforts by the caliph to preserve the peace. Batatu cites a hawsah or satirical chant that expresses the attitude of the tribes towards central government: ‘It is a flabby serpent and has no venom, we have come and have seen it, and it’s only in times past that it kept us in awe.’ He adds: ‘It would appear that in the centuries preceding ours, when the flame of the riverine cities burned low and tribal power was rampant, there was a process of tribalisation of towns.’ The tribal underpinning of Baghdad’s society, with its tendency towards violence and fracture, sometimes on sectarian lines and also within sectarian groupings, is a sociological matter Marozzi leaves alone. Here, in the first new history of Baghdad in nearly 80 years, Justin Marozzi brings to life the whole tumultuous history of what was once the greatest capital on earth. In One Thousand and One Nights – the tales originated in India and Persia but had Arab accretions from Iraq, Syria and Egypt– he features as the carousel caliph who explores the streets of Baghdad in disguise, accompanied by his friend Jafar the Barmakid, the eunuch Masruq and the poet Abu Nuwas. The museum had lost as many as 15,000 pieces, including the priceless alabaster Warka Vase, thought to be the world’s oldest carved stone ritual vessel. To many, this was heresy: effectively to deny the eternity of God’s word. By the mid-ninth century it contained the world’s largest repository of books, ‘the seed from which sprouted all the subsequent achievements of the golden age of Arabic science, from Uzbekistan in the east to Spain in the West’, in the words of the physicist Jim al-Khalili. A famous Sumerian writer described the scene here in 2000 BC, saying that people are looting and killing and nobody knows who the king is. Groups of women ‘with tattooed faces and ragged clothes shrieked at us and spat on the ground to signify contempt. So you see, nothing is new.’ Founded in 762 by the Abbasid caliph al-Mansur, Baghdad, situated on the Tigris and close to the Euphrates, was built on the site of older settlements that benefited from the region’s legendary fertility. That is why truth became thoroughly silenced and concealed.’ Many forces contributed to the decline of the Abbasids, including the civil war between Harun’s sons Amin and Mamun, the overextension of their territories, and the constant friction between Sunnis, who saw themselves as adherents of the laws instituted by Muhammad, and Shias, who ‘delegitimised’ the caliphs by insisting that leadership was the preserve of the prophet’s family and those acting for them. Powered by petrodollars from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, Hanbalism – in its Wahhabi variant – remains a vigorous force that challenges modern rationalism in the name of religious purity. It had expanded far beyond Mansur’s circular city and was now a vast unplanned metropolis, spreading for miles on both sides of the Tigris. Ottoman government, subcontracted to a succession of Mamluk emirs from Georgia, did nothing to arrest the city’s decline. The walls commanded impressive views of the city and of the miles of lush palm groves and emerald fields that fringed the Tigris. He re-established orthodoxy and submission to traditional religious values.’ Yet this was a gentle decay compared to the catastrophe of the Mongol conquest in 1258.Marozzi gives a vivid account of the city’s destruction by Genghis Khan’s grandson Hulagu, an event often seen as signalling the end of Arab civilisation. Then one of the tattooed ladies came close to me and spat full into my face.’ When the British entered Baghdad as victors in March 1917 the atmosphere had changed. This is the history of its storytellers and its tyrants, of its philosophers and conquerors.Here, in the first new history of Baghdad in nearly 80 years, Justin Marozzi brings to life the whole tumultuous history of what was once the greatest capital on earth.History Nonfiction Over thirteen centuries, Baghdad has enjoyed both cultural and commercial pre-eminence, boasting artistic and intellectual sophistication and an economy once the envy of the world. Only once this elaborate process was complete could lovemaking begin. No physical traces survive, but we know it became the centre of Baghdad’s intellectual life, combining the functions of a royal archive, learned academy, library and translation bureau, with a dedicated staff of scholars, copyists and bookbinders. Yet it has also been a city of great hardships, beset by epidemics, famines, floods, and numerous foreign invasions which have brought terrible bloodshed. Herodotus remarked that ‘as a grain-bearing country Assyria is the richest in the world ... The blades of wheat and barley are at least three inches wide.’ The ruins of Ctesiphon, imperial capital of the Parthian and Sassanid empires, lay just twenty miles to the south (providing a useful source of building materials), while the previous capital of Seleucia, founded in the late fourth century bce, had been a great world city in the Hellenistic and Roman eras. He also noted the enmity between Turks and Persians, which Marozzi believes had dire consequences. Groups of schoolchildren danced in front of us, shouting and cheering, and the women of the city turned out in their holiday dresses.’ ‘Less than a century later,’ Marozzi comments, ‘Baghdad would welcome American soldiers with an equally short-lived enthusiasm.’ Marozzi does a good job of navigating the turbulent rapids of Baghdad’s post-Ottoman history, including the betrayal by Britain of nationalist hopes under the terms of the League of Nations mandate. In the populist fervour of the early tenth century the tables were turned on the rationalists. The House of Wisdom (Bait al-Hikma), though possibly founded by Mansur, is usually credited to Mamun. Thereafter Islamic cultural energy would flourish most impressively in the three ‘gunpowder empires’ of Mughal India, Safavid Iran and Ottoman Turkey, with their three great cities of Delhi, Isfahan and Constantinople, all of them distant from the Fertile Crescent where Islam had originally established itself, nurtured by the Judeo-Hellenic and Christian cultures it appropriated. Al-Jahiz, a ninth-century polymath and essayist, proclaimed that he ‘had never seen a city of greater height, more perfect circularity, more endowed with superior merits or possession of more spacious gates or more perfect defences than the City of Abu Jafar al-Mansur’. The historian Masudi, who died in 956, traced its cultural decline to Mutawakil, traditionally seen as the last great Abbasid caliph (between 847 and 861), who ‘abolished free thought, philosophical disputes and the things that had preoccupied men’s minds under his predecessors. In line with their open-minded approach to learning, Mamun and his successor Mutasim patronised an elite group of scholars known as the Mutazilites, ‘those who keep to themselves’, who argued that God, while beyond any human capacity to imagine or define, nevertheless existed within the framework of rational thought; the Quran, therefore, was subject to rational analysis. Thereafter, as the Iraqi scholar Hanna Batatu puts it, ‘nationalists and Hashemites moved on different planes of thought and feeling. The German traveller Leonhard Rauwolff visited the city in 1574 and commented on its commercial vibrancy and cosmopolitan character, with Arabs living alongside Persians, Indians, Turks, Armenians and Kurds. 925), the great Persian physician known in the West as Rhazes, who studied medicine in Baghdad: ‘If the people of religion are asked about proof for the soundness of their religion, they flare up, get angry, and spill the blood of whoever confronts them with this question. The air was putrid with the stench of corpses decomposing fast in the midsummer heat. The stories of Harun al-Rashid’s wine-drinking and womanising began to circulate at around this time, perhaps because they conferred an element of legitimacy on behaviour that challenged the more austere and puritanical norms of Arabian tribal culture. The best-known chronicler, Tabari, probably embellished his narrative with fanciful details. When he visited in 1652 after a nine-day journey down the Tigris from Mosul, the French diamond-dealer Jean-Baptiste Tavernier estimated the population at no more than 14,000; Manuel Godinho, a Portuguese Jesuit who visited in 1663 on his way to India, put it at 16,000, noting that it contained Turks, Arabs, Kurds and Persians, along with some three thousand Jewish families. Yet it has also been a city of great hardships, beset by epidemics, famines, floods, and numerous foreign invasions which have brought terrible bloodshed. According to the historian Rashid al-Din the Mongols killed 800,000 people in Baghdad, a figure authenticated by later historians, in what Marozzi calls ‘a massacre of 20th-century proportions’. Yet despite the achievements of Mamun and his immediate successors, they also helped bring about an intellectual debacle – the defeat of rationalism – from which the mainstream tradition of Sunni Islam has yet to extricate itself. Speaking to Marozzi, George put the events in Baghdad in historical perspective. One suspects it may be related to the way that tribal systems, based on segmentary formations under patriarchal control, react when those controls are loosened and the state is weak. Edmund Chandler, a war correspondent, noted that crowds of Baghdadis – Arabs, Jews, Iranians, Armenians, Chaldeans and the various Christian sects – came out to meet the new conquerors, lining ‘the streets, balconies and roofs, hurrahing and clapping their hands. ‘Each can last a hundred years, but it passes. They forbid rational speculation, and strive to kill their adversaries. Its roundness, he wrote, made it seem ‘as though it is poured into a mould and cast’. In the view of the historian Hugh Kennedy he wasn’t a significant political actor, but ‘at best an adequate caretaker of what he had inherited. Paper, introduced from China, accelerated the process of translation, paving the way for the libraries, reading rooms and bookshops that flourished during this period. The four straight roads that ran to the centre from the symmetrically placed outer gates were lined with vaulted arcades of shops and bazaars, with sidestreets giving onto residential areas, and an inner wall containing the royal palaces at the city’s heart. First they removed their clothes and were dressed in the exquisitely scented linen shifts. While the Tartar hero, famed for his piety, prayed at the shrine of Abu Hanifa, founder of one of the four Sunni law schools, his soldiers put the finishing touches to the 120 towers of skulls they had erected around the flattened city. They took their place on pierced seats above piles of burning incense, until their clothes were dry and their bodies were perfumed to the caliph’s taste. By the time Harun al-Rashid succeeded in 786 Baghdad was the largest city in the world outside China: it was one of the centres of world civilisation and the pinnacle of Islamic power. Nor was he a great patron of culture: he left virtually no surviving architecture and it was his son and eventual successor, al-Mamun (813-33), who fully established the reputation of the Abbasid court as a place of learning and scientific endeavour.’ Marozzi dwells on the artistic and scientific achievements of Mamun’s reign. The caliph’s palace was surmounted by a green dome which could be seen for many miles around. By the time of the Ottoman occupation, which began in 1534, Baghdad had settled into provincial decline, punctuated by episodes of violence occasioned by sectarian friction between Shiite Persians and Sunni Turks. It had a circumference of four miles and massive crenellated walls of mud-brick crowned with battlements. Vultures circled above the ruins of Baghdad, dropping out of the sky to pluck eyes from their sockets. Writing in 985, the geographer al-Muqaddasi lamented that Baghdad had been ‘the most beautiful possession of the Muslim, a most splendid city’, yet was ‘now falling into ruin and disorder, its splendour departed’. This is the history of its storytellers and its tyrants, of its philosophers and conquerors. He wrote, Marozzi tells us, of how during the most scorching days of summer, when Harun would take an afternoon siesta in his pavilion, a silver urn was brought in to the caliph in which the royal perfume merchant had blended a fragrant mixture of scent, saffron, aromatic substances and rosewater. Marozzi’s final chapters bring Baghdad’s story up to the present. The members of the royal family were killed instantly, except for [the young king] Faisal who died in hospital later ... Recalling the assassination years later, Captain al Abusi, who had not been party to the coup planning and joined the rebels only on hearing that morning’s radio appeal, said he had been in a ‘state of frenzy’, as if blinded by a ‘black cloud’ and had pressed the trigger ‘unconsciously’. ‘Never can I forget the cats, starved of course, eating dead Turks and feeding out of their skeletons,’ a British doctor wrote. Jump to ratings and reviewsOver thirteen centuries, Baghdad has enjoyed both cultural and commercial pre-eminence, boasting artistic and intellectual sophistication and an economy once the envy of the world. Every day seven girls were brought into the caliph’s chamber, where they observed a meticulously devised protocol. As the writer George Antonius put it, ‘instead of enjoying Arab rule with a measure of British assistance, the people found themselves subject to British rule with nominal Arab assistance.’ The monarchy installed by the British under Faisal ibn Hussein, leader of the Arab revolt with T.E. Lawrence, and steered, until its overthrow in 1958 by his companion-in-arms Nuri al-Said (known as ‘the Pasha’), succeeded in creating a sense of Iraqi identity in the inhabitants of what had been three Ottoman provinces based around the cities of Mosul, Baghdad and Basra.