CHAPTER THREE

PROPHETIC DOMINION, UMAYYAD KINGSHIP

Varieties of mulk in the early Islamic period

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, research into titles assumed by the early rulers of the early Islamic polity has uncovered a rather surprising finding. Looking merely to the documentary evidence (such as coins, papyri, inscriptions, and graffiti), one finds that the rulers of the early Islamic polity assumed two official titles, but the title ‘caliph’ (khalifa) was not one of them until the reign of ʿAbd al-Malik b. Marwan (r. 685/692–705). Even with the reign of ʿAbd al-Malik, ‘caliph’ can by no means be regarded as the dominant official title of the rulers of the early Islamic polity. Rather, a ruler was known in official documents and inscriptions as ʿabd Allah, usually in front of his given name, and, after his name, amir al-ʾumin. That is, the ruler was first God’s slave (ʿabd) and, second, a military commander (amir) of the faithful believers (al-ʾumin). Amir in many ways is directly parallel with the Roman title imperator, whence the English ‘emperor’, inasmuch as both titles simply meant a powerful military commander in their archaic sense. It is the addition of a host of believers as the military leader’s force that makes the title amir al-ʾumin distinctively Islamic.

The piety and militarism of these early Islamic titles are, of course, striking, but equally striking in the titulature is the break with regional precedents. The rulers of the early Islamic polity rejected the imperial titulature of the Byzantines and Sasanians in their inscriptions, monuments, and coinage. The rulers did not claim to be shahanshah, ‘the king of kings’, on the Sasanian model, and they avoided the title of ‘king’ in official proclamations just after the Byzantine emperor Heraclius had adopted the Greek title basileus, or ‘king’, as an official title, thus codifying a long-standing vernacular precedent of referring to Roman emperors as ‘kings’. Where influence on titles does appear, it is the early Islamic titulature that seems to influence its neighbors rather than the other way around. Hence, even in the pietistic, royal titulature of Byzantium, one must wait until the first reign of Justinian II (685–95) until an emperor deigns to call himself servus Christi, ‘servant of Christ’, on his coinage, just as a Muslim ruler would refer to himself as ʿabd Allah, ‘servant of God’.
One of the reasons that this finding is surprising is that early Arabic historical narratives and other literary sources – such as poetry and oratory – paint a different picture of the titles chosen by the rulers of the Islamic polity. Most conspicuously, titles that connote the ruler’s vicarious kingship vis-à-vis God’s sovereignty, which are either rare or absent in the documentary record – especially titles like ‘caliph (khalifa)’ and ‘shadow of God (zill Allah)’ – are much more prevalent. Yet, such a division between literary and official titles is notably characteristic for Byzantine sources as well. Where the documentary and literary sources do converge, however, is on the point that the official titulature used for rulers in the early Islamic polity marked a distinct departure from regional precedents. Perhaps no example of this is as vivid as these rulers’ rejection of the title of ‘king’ (Ar. malik).

The title malik was not unknown to pre-Islamic Arabia and the Arabian tribesmen who populated the post-conquest elite of the early Islamic polity – to the contrary, the title malik is widely attested in the epigraphic record of the Arabian Peninsula for a period stretching over a millennium prior to the Islamic conquests. However, when Muslim sovereigns adopted their titles, they broke from this ancient precedent. Early Muslim historians asserted that the reason that they called their ideal rulers amirs rather than ‘kings’ is that amirs and kings were rulers of an entirely different sort. According to a saying attributed to the Companion Abu Musa al-Ashʿari (d. c. AH 48/688 CE), ‘The power of an amir is in his ability to command, but the power of a king is in his ability to conquer with the sword (al-imra ma ‘tamara fi ha fa-inna l-mulk ma ghalaba ‘alayhi bi-l-sayf).’

Syriac-speaking chroniclers of the Eastern Christian communities who first witnessed the arrival of the new power in their lands noted the change, too, even if they still referred to their new rulers as ‘kings’ (Syriac, malke) in their language. A seventh-century chronicler described Mu’awiya b. Abi Sufyan’s (r. 661–80) assumption of power in Jerusalem as follows:

the commanders (amire) and many Arabs gathered and offered the oath of allegiance (yamina) to Mu’awiya. Then an order went out that he should be proclaimed king (malka) in all the villages and cities under his rule (šūltaneh) ... Furthermore, Mu’awiya did not wear a crown (klila) like other kings in the world. He placed his throne (kursayeh) in Damascus and refused to go to Muhammad’s throne.

While the Syriac chronicler regards Mu’awiya as a king, the chronicler notes that the ceremonial surrounding his rise to power was distinct: though he sat upon a (new) throne, he refused to wear a crown like other kings. He was a ruler of different sort.

Because the title ‘king’ (malik) was excluded from the official repertoire of early Islamic rulers, modern historians have often also claimed that that the Arabic concept of mulk, taken to mean ‘kingship’, was likewise rejected as a model for the rule of the Islamic polity. Polemical propaganda directed against the Umayyad caliphs often blamed them for the devolution of the caliphate (al-khilafa) into kingship (al-mulk). The Umayyads, the old polemic goes, were ‘caliphs’ only in name, but in truth they were the worst sort of rulers: kings (muluk). In their enemies’ eyes, the only thing that exceeded the audacity of Umayyad impiety was their audacity to claim to rule as sublime caliphs who – in the words of one their
most debauched dynasts Walid II (assassinated in 744) – ruled ‘on the model of prophecy (ʿala minhaj al-nubuwwa), all while persecuting the truly pious and shedding the blood of Prophet’s kin.⁹

Hence, it is common to find modern historians portraying the concept of mulk as something that early Muslims despised in the most absolute terms. Umayyad caliphs were so loathed, the argument often runs, because they reintroduced mulk into the early Islamic polity. Or, as one scholar has recently written,

In the early Islamic centuries mulk was used as a term of condemnation to distinguish between the man-made impious and arbitrary rule of worldly sovereigns and the just and divine rule of caliphs. So while the era of the Orthodox Caliphs was referred to as khilafa, symbolizing justice and piety, the reign of the Umayyads was dismissed as mulk, a term carrying connotations of usurpations and oppression.¹⁰

Mulk is thus depicted as merely a counter-factual idea marshalled by early Muslims to distinguish the autocratic governance of kings and emperors from caliphal authority (khilafa). As Patricia Crone summarizes the classic distinction, ‘imāma/khilāfa stood for theocracy, government by God, whereas mulk stood for autocracy, government by selfish, arbitrary, and shortsighted human beings’.¹¹

This account of mulk ties up the relationship of early Islamic rulers to mulk rather neatly, but it has fundamental drawbacks and stands in need of a corrective. Most glaringly, this account of mulk fails to make sense of the broader usages of mulk in early Islamic political discourse. Indeed, this understanding renders incoherent many usages of the term mulk in the early Islamic period. What, for instance, does one do with references to Muhammad’s prophetic mulk? Take the following hadith where Muhammad describes a visionary experience:

My Lord laid out the Earth before me from its eastern to western horizons; truly the dominion of my community (mulk ummati) shall reach all that God laid out before me.¹²

The promised mulk of Muhammad’s community is certainly not a promise of the universal tyranny; it is a mandate given to the Prophet’s umma for universal rule, and presumably one that is just and righteous. Here, mulk approximates to what today we would call ‘empire’. Mulk of this type appears in another famous tradition in which the early Jewish convert to Islam, Ka’b al-Ahbar, relates the prophecy of Muhammad’s advent in the Torah:

It is written in the Torah: Muhammad is my chosen servant. He is neither crude nor coarse, nor does he raise his voice in the streets (aswaq). He shall not repay evil with evil, but rather with clemency and forgiveness [compare Is. 42:1ff.]. His birthplace is in Mecca, his place of refuge in Tayba [that is to say, Medina], and his dominion in Syria.¹³
Following a loose citation of the biblical Isaiah, Ka’b’s tradition offers a tripartite division of the prophet’s destiny, a destiny to be fulfilled in a future dominion in Syria, where the Umayyads later established their powerbase as caliphs. Again, *mulk* cannot be tyranny here, but must be something else.

The ‘*mulk* as tyranny/autocracy/kingship’ trope runs into other problems, too. The common view of *mulk* as tyranny and, therefore, antithetical to caliphal rule also renders much of Umayyad courtly life unintelligible. Umayyad constructions from Qusayr ‘Amra to Khirbat al-Mafjar are awash with the imagery of kingship and royal dominion, and a vocabulary of royal dominion suffuses the verses of their court poets.\(^{14}\) Hence, it was to honor, not to impugn, the memory of the young Yazid II b. ‘Abd al-Malik that the Umayyad poet Jarir declared in his dirge at the caliph’s death in 724:

Wrapped in the raiment of dominion (*sirbala mulkin*) freely granted (*ghayra mughtasabin*).

Before the man of thirty dominion was of mixed lineage (*inna la-mulk mu’tashib*).\(^{15}\)

As Garth Fowden has noted, ‘The Umayyads … and their courtiers were wholly at ease with the vocabulary of kingship.’\(^{16}\) It would be a mistake to cast the Umayyad caliphs as rather feckless rulers who were mostly on their back foot while attempting to articulate their own discourse of political legitimacy. The Umayyads did not have tin ear to the debates over politically legitimate rulership; rather, they actively shaped that discourse into its earliest, recognizably ‘Islamic’ form. ‘Without the contributions of the Umayyads’, notes Fred Donner, ‘it seems doubtful whether Islam, as we recognize it today, would even exist’ – an assertion that remains equally true for the religio-political discourse of early Islamic legitimism.\(^{17}\)

Why else would the Umayyad caliph Mu‘awiya reputedly express being content when scorned as a king?\(^{18}\) He chose to cite in his defense the succession of the Israelites’ King David, whom the Qur’an calls a caliph, by a righteous king, his son Solomon. According to another story, it was the Prophet’s grandson, al-Hasan b. ‘Ali, who first counseled Mu‘awiya to emulate the kingship (*mulk*) of the Israelites’ king Solomon.\(^{19}\) Thus, Mu‘awiya reputedly boasted, ‘I am the first king and the last caliph’ (*ana awwalu malikin wa-akhiru khilafa*).\(^{20}\)

For reasons stated above and many more to be addressed below, I would like to suggest that the once useful historical cliché about *mulk* being the antithesis of *khilafa* has outlived its utility. Rather than illuminating the political ideologies of the early Islamic polity, it has now, instead, come to obscure the continuities between how the early Islamic polity articulated its legitimacy and its predecessor empires.\(^{21}\) Against the recent trend among some historians to view *mulk* in exclusively negative terms and to hold that early Muslims regarded *mulk* as the worst sort of government, I contend that a closer examination reveals that *mulk* was not broadly construed as the antithesis of the Islamic polity. Rather, *mulk* was construed as its very foundation.
MULK IN THE NEGATIVE

To reconstruct the story of *mulk* in its full complexity requires first an account of the origins of the anti-Umayyad polemic inasmuch as this polemic has often been cast as pre-Umayyad and reflective of the most archaic forms of Muslim religiosity. Crone located negative attitudes toward *mulk* in three sources that converged in the anti-Umayyad polemic: 1) an ancient monotheistic tradition that exalted God as the sole true king; 2) an Arabian tradition of rejecting the rule of kings, and 3) anti-Umayyad sentiment cultivated by a pietistic opposition who regarded the dynasty as usurpers who perverted the pristine ideal of prophetic and caliphal rule. Of these three, the third proves to be the strongest and most compelling source of the polemic. 22

It is notable that Crone does not mention the Qur’an as a direct source of this critique of Umayyad *mulk*. The justification for excluding the Qur’an is strong and also provides us our first glimpse beyond the historians’ cliché about *mulk*. The Qur’an evinces neither a strong condemnation of *mulk* as evil nor does it issue a blanket denunciation of kings (*muluk*; sing. *malik*). That the designation ‘king/ruler’ (*malik*) does not carry an inherently negative connotation in the Qur’an is immediately apparent insofar as God himself is designated as a *malik* at least five times. The Qur’an calls God ‘the true king’ (*al- malik al-haqq*) (Q. 20:114), ‘the holy king’ (*al- malik al-quddus*) (Q. 59:23, 62:1), and ‘the king of humanity’ (*malik al-nas*) (Q. 114:2). ‘King’ is not merely a divine epithet either, but applies to righteous humans as well. God commands Moses to remind the Israelites of ‘the grace (*niʿma*) God bestowed on them’ when He placed prophets in their midst and ‘made you into kings’ (Q. 5:20). Of all the Israelite kings, the Qur’an explicitly confers the epithet of *malik* only to Saul (Q. 2:246–7); however, the scripture speaks positively of the *mulk* of Joseph in Egypt (Q. 12:101) and the *mulk* of Israelite kings, such as David and Solomon (Q. 2:102, 251). David is even called a caliph (*khalifa*) with *mulk* (Q. 38:20, 26), suggesting that the being a *khalifa* and a *malik* were more or less synonymous in the Qur’anic idiom. 23

‘Lord, pardon my sins and grant me dominion (*wa- hab li mulkan*) not to be surpassed by anyone after me,’ the Qur’anic Solomon successfully beseeches God (Q. 38:35). Most importantly, perhaps, the Qur’an avers that God has given the entire progeny of Abraham ‘a glorious dominion’ (*mulkʿ azim*) (Q. 4:53) – a verse we shall revisit below.

The most negative evaluation of kings in the Qur’an – perhaps not without irony – comes from lips of a queen addressing a king. Thus, when the Queen of Sheba arrives at Solomon’s court, she declares to the Israelite king, ‘Kings, when they enter a town, bring it to ruin and humiliate its honored denizens’ (Q. 27:34; Q. 18:79). While this verse certainly paints kingship in a negative light – much like its biblical counterpart in 1 Samuel 8:10–20 – this amounts not so much to a withering criticism of kingship and a rejection of its legitimacy as to a mere matter-of-fact description of political reality. Two other passages of the Qur’an do hint of the dangers that come with *mulk* and its temptations. In Q. 43:51, the tyrannical Pharaoh boasts to his subjects, ‘Do I not possess dominion over Egypt and these rivers that run beneath me?’ and thus reveals his arrogant impiety. In Q. 20:120, Iblis tempts Adam and his spouse not merely with the tree of eternal life (*shajarat al-khuld*) but with undying dominion (*mulk la yabla*). Yet even here the point is not so much that *mulk* is evil as much as the arrogance of not recognizing the true source of life and *mulk*: God’s
providential dispensation. Hence, with regard to mulk, the message of the Qur’an is to affirm God as the ultimate ‘sovereign of [all] dominion (malik al-mulk)’. Dominion is providentially distributed throughout the course of human history to whomever God wills: ‘You grant dominion to whom You will and take dominion from whom You will just as You exalt whom You will and humble whom You will’ (Q. 3:26).

The Qur’an offers, therefore, a reprise of ancient monotheistic themes of God as the cosmogonic king developed in the Hebrew Bible, early Christianity, and even Pythagorean and Stoic political philosophy insofar as mulk joins hikma, or wisdom, in the Qur’an’s ideal kings (for example, Q. 2:251). The Psalms and the Qur’an strongly reject the sacrality of earthly kings by associating true kingship with God and by specifying that kingship is bestowed on men only through a divine dispensation. In both traditions, divine kingship is expressed through the royal imagery of enthronement (Q. 2:255; Psalms 47, 93–9), and the affirmation of divine sovereignty is cosmological and eschatological (for example, Q. 22:56, 25:26; cf. Ps. 24:1 f., 7 ff.; Exodus 15:17–18). The Qur’an speaks of God’s dominion as manifest in his ‘kingdom’ (malkut). God’s malkut is the entire cosmos, ‘the [divine] kingdom of the heavens and the earth’ (malkut al-samawat wa-l-ard) (Q. 6:75, 7:185) and encompasses all created things: ‘in his hand resides the [divine] kingdom of all things’ (bi-yadihi malkutu kulli shay) (Q. 23:88, Yāsīn 36:83). Of course, the Qur’anic malkut closely resembles cognate notions drawn from ancient monotheistic themes the biblical tradition (Hebrew, malkut; cf. 1 Chr 29:11, 30; Ezra 1:1 f.) and strongly resonates with the New Testament notion of ‘the kingdom of God’ (Greek, basileia tou theou/Syriac malkuteh d-alaha) and ‘the kingdom of heaven’ (basileia ton ouranon/malkuta dašmaya). However, in the Qur’an malkut is exclusively divine and never human.

This Qur’anic data is important for a number of reasons. First, it represents the fundamental vocabulary of early Islamic piety whose salience remains unmitigated with the passage of time: malik and its plural muluk, meaning ‘king(s)’ or ‘ruler(s)’, are applied to both God and men; mulk, ‘sovereignty’ or ‘dominion’, is possessed by God and granted to specific persons and peoples; and malkut is the all-encompassing realm of divine dominion and sovereignty. This baseline of Qur’anic data strongly suggest that the connotations of mulk are essentially neutral and bereft of a blanket condemnation mulk as unjust or tyrannical.

Hostility to kings and kingly rule has also long been conflated with the egalitarian social structure of the tribes of the Arabian Peninsula, a perception with ancient roots in Roman-era depictions of Arabian warriors and marauders. Yet, it is another question altogether as to whether or not this allegedly ancient aversion to hierarchy fed into the polemics against Umayyad mulk. To imagine that the tribes of the Arabian Peninsula knew no hierarchy would be a grave mistake, as tribal leadership manifested in many hierarchical forms. Indeed, the social stratification of pre-Islamic tribal society often appears as the enemy to Muslim egalitarianism in early Islamic historiography rather than a resource for its preservation.

As is well known, long before the advent of Islam in Hijaz and the victories against Byzantium and Iran, the Arabian tribes that inhabited the inner reaches of the Arabian Peninsula had evaded inclusion into the territorial boundaries of neighboring empires. The stereotypes foisted upon these peoples by outsiders as an indomitable tribal people who defied civilization and preferred barbarism enjoyed a
long currency; it even came to be appropriated by the inhabitants of Arabia themselves. As early as the writings of Greek historian Diodorus Siculus (fl. first century BCE), one already finds this theme of the indomitable Arabians:

[T]he Arabians who inhabit this country [that is, between Syria and Egypt], being difficult to overcome in war, remain always unenslaved; furthermore, they never at any time accept a man of another country as their over-lord and continue to maintain their liberty unimpaired.32

Of course, the inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula did know many kings – even kings who spoke their own languages and cultivated familiar tribal lineages and alliances, such as the crown-wearing phylarchs in Syria and Southern Iraq and the kings of Himyar and the Yemen.33 But many Arabian tribes boasted of their evasion of these kings’ reach and deemed their tribes be laqah, that is to say, freemen who recognized the authority and religion (din) of no king.34 In words of the pre-Islamic poet ‘Amr b. Hawt al-Riyahi:

They are the freemen (laqah) and reject the kings’ religion (din al-muluk)
And make kings tremble when they rush to war.35

The significance of din here is somewhat difficult to parse given that din can carry not only the sense of ‘religion’ but also ‘judgement’; these tribes’ rejection of a kings’ din apparently reflects not merely a rejection of a royal cultic identity, but also a king’s customs and law.

Only some Arabian tribes boasted of being laqah,36 but Muhammad’s tribe, the Quraysh of Mecca, reputedly ranked among their number.37 ‘Mecca was a land of freemen (laqah)’, as one early scholar notes, because ‘they accepted no king’s religion’ and ‘they recognized the authority of no king’.38 Yet, though the laqah defied kings and rejected their religions, the pre-Islamic poets clearly believed that the laqah had mulk, too. The pre-Islamic poet Afwah al-Awdi boasts of his tribe:

Our dominion is the first dominion of freemen
and our fathers of the Awd are the best.
Mulkuna mulkun laqahun awwalun
wa-abuna min Bani Awdin khiyarun.39

Emblematic of the defiant spirit of the laqah tribes was their refusal to bow to kings, assimilated perhaps into Islam in the proverbial Muslim refusal to bow to any man except for God.40 Many Arabian tribes, such as Mecca’s neighbors, Thaqif and Hawazin, famously chaffed at the practice of prostrating even in prayer, and petitioned Muhammad to exempt them from the practice, albeit to no avail.41 Muhammad’s main rival to prophecy in Arabia, Musaylima of Yamama, reportedly curried favor with laqab of the Tamim by exempting them from the humiliation of paying alms-tax and the indignity of raising their butts into the air while prostrating in prayer.42

Vestiges of the defiant laqab’s attitude towards kings also entered the highly idealized, literary accounts of the early conquests. Before the battle of Yarmuk in 636,
the Qurashi general Khalid b. al-Walid purportedly entered into a colorful exchange with the Byzantine high commander, named Bahan, in which the topic of kings arose:

Bahan said, ‘Praise God who made our prophet [that is, Jesus] the most excellent of prophets, our king [Heraclius] the most excellent of kings, and our community is the best community …’

But Khalid interrupted his speech, saying, ‘Praise God who made us faithful to our prophet and your prophet, who made us affirm the truth of our scripture and your scripture and who made the amir over us to be one of us. Were he to claim to be our king, then we would remove him! We do not regard our amir as more excellent than us save in his piety or his fear of God.’

Pious braves who defy kings and leave their enemies abashed by their otherworldly courage populate the narratives of the early Islamic conquests and make for compelling protagonists. Yet, one should also not lose sight of the ideology that undergirds these narratives: despite these braves’ defiance of kings, they are nonetheless emblems of early Islamic triumphalism more than they are emblems of a new, egalitarian vision of society. These Arabian braves humbled kings and would not be cowed by them, yet they are not icons of the end of all dominion; rather, they are the harbingers of the emergent dominion of a new hegemon.

Hence, neither the Qur'an nor the pre-Islamic tribal tradition imparted the unambiguously negative sense of mulk found in anti-Umayyad polemic. The trope was also not, as often assumed, an Abbasid-era invention intended to tarnish the Umayyads. ‘The hostility to the Umayyads is too pervasive in the sources to reflect the change of dynasty’, Crone notes. Beyond the violence of the dynastic transition, the Abbasids’ hostility to the historical memory of Umayyad caliphs was, furthermore, not as absolute as modern historians had once imagined. As will be seen below, the trope was primarily a development of the hadith folk of Iraq. Although the trope gained wide currency beyond their circles, it is in the traditions of the hadith folk that mulk first sheds its meaning of ‘dominion’ or ‘sovereignty’ to mean something unambiguously akin to ‘tyranny’.

Perhaps the most famous version of this trope comes in a prophetic report related by a freedman of the Prophet named Safina: ‘The caliphate shall last thirty years’, the Prophet portends, ‘then after that there shall be tyranny (mulk)’. The calculation of a 30-year span featured in Safina’s report is, in many ways, an early attempt at historical periodization. The 30-year span encompasses the so-called ‘rightly-guided caliphs’ beginning with Abu Bakr’s reign in AH 11/632 CE and ending with ’Ali’s assassination in AH 40/661 CE. As such, the tradition certainly counts as one of the earliest statements of the ‘four-caliph thesis’ that would eventually become a staple of Sunni historiography. It was also a direct attack on the legitimacy of the Umayyad caliphs as it compared their caliphal rule unfavorably to an idealized past. In other versions of the tradition, this attack against the Umayyad legitimacy is explicit. The main transmitter of the hadith, the Basran traditionist Sa’id b. Junhan, responds to Safina, ‘The Umayyads claim that the caliphate resides with them.’ ‘Those sons of pale-eyed women (banu l-zurqa) lie’, Safina responds, ‘rather they are worst of kings and Mu’awiya is the first king!’
The expectation of a period of prophecy followed by a period of caliphal rule and then a period of tyranny appears in many versions, some attributed to the Prophet and many more attributed to his Companions. As above, most versions place the watershed moment at the accession of Muʿawiya to the caliphate in the wake of the assassination of his sole rival, ʿAli b. Abi Talib, in AH 40/661 CE – a year simultaneously praised as the ‘year of unity (al-jamaʿa)’ and bemoaned as the end of caliphal ideal.59 Yet, not all versions posit that the tyranny of mulk begins at ʿAli’s assassination. Others assert, rather, that the age of the utopian caliphs ended with the caliphate of ʿUthman b. ʿAffan (r. 644–56), placing the appearance of mulk after his assassination and simultaneous with the outbreak of first civil war (al-fitna al-kubra).51 For instance, when the news of the caliph’s assassination reached the governor of Yemen in Sanʿa’, Thumama b. ʿAdi, he reportedly opined, ‘This is the time when the caliphate of prophecy (khilafat al-nubuwwa) is snatched away; rule has now become tyranny and despotism (wa-sara l-amru mulkan jabriyyatan).’52 Such traditions implicate communal strife with ending the ideal caliphal period and, consequently, implicate ʿAli along with Muʿawiya in its dissolution. Along this vein, ʿAmr b. al-ʿAs (d. c. 662–4) – the famed Qurashi conqueror of Egypt and ally of Muʿawiya – reproached al-Hasan b. ʿAli for his initial refusal to recognize Muʿawiya as caliph after the death of his father ʿAli:

You sons of ʿAbd al-Muttalib, God will not grant you dominion (mulk) just because you kill caliphs and declare licit the shedding of blood that God has declared sacred, or just because you covet after dominion and carry out impermissible acts!53

Other traditions posit an even earlier time for the devolution of the caliph. The Medinan scholar, Saʿid b. al-Musayyib (d. c. 709–10), purportedly once declared: ‘The caliphs are three and the rest are kings: Abu Bakr, ʿUmar, and ʿUmar.’ Saʿid’s audience presses him to name the second ʿUmar, whom they did not know, but later readers clearly understood that he portended the future caliphate of the Umayyad ʿUmar b. ʿAbd al-ʿAziz (r. 717–20) and ranked ʿUmar II’s caliphate as highly as those of Abu Bakr and ʿUmar.54

Not all traditions draw the lines so starkly. The Qurashi Companion and early governor of Syria, Abu ʿUbayda b. al-Jarrah (d. 639), quotes the Prophet as saying:

Your religion shall begin with prophecy and mercy, then dominion and mercy, then sullied dominion, then dominion and despotism under which even wine and silk will be deemed licit (awwalu dinikum nubuwwa wa-rahma, thumma mulk wa-rahma, thumma mulk aʿfar thumma mulk wa-jabrut yastabillu fiha al-khamr wa-l-harir).55

Such ‘gradualist’ versions of the tradition dispense with the negative meaning of mulk altogether. The community begins with an ideal, but then God subsequently grants mulk – here, ‘sovereignty’ or ‘dominion’ and not ‘tyranny’ – to less ideal rulers. ‘A caliphate of prophecy, then God gives dominion to whom He wills’, one such hadith declares.56
Wherever such traditions draw the line, civil strife (fitna) over control of the community, not a single man’s autocracy, is what most often ends the utopian phase and ushers in a new era. *Fitna* is among the earliest and most important themes of early Islamic historiography and imbedded in the architectural logic of its periodization. The impact of this theme on non-Arabic historiography appears even as early as the Syriac historiography from Umayyad Syria. Although accusations abound against Mu‘awiyah and the Umayyads as the guilty party, such complaints are also expressed during the second civil war (683–92), during which the Umayyads in Syria and the Zubayrids in the Hijaz battled for the control of the caliphate. The Hashimite Ibn ‘Abbas warns fellow Muslims to flee both the Umayyads and the Zubayrids lest they be led to Hell, stating, ‘This affair started with prophecy and mercy and then a caliphate, but today it is futile tyranny (*mulk ‘aqim*).’ The attribution of this utterance to Ibn ‘Abbas is likely spurious, but one finds similar themes in a verse of the poet Ibn Qays al-Ruqayyat (d. 699) as he praises the victorious arrival in Basra of Mus‘ab b. al-Zubayr:

His dominion is a dominion of mercy, in it
Is neither despotism nor high-handedness.

*Mulkuhu mulku rahmatin laysa fih
jabarutun minhu wa-la kibriya‘u.*

The second civil war is also the purported context in which Sa‘id b. Jumhan was inspired to circulate Safina’s report. Sa‘id b. Jumhan had not met the Prophet’s freedman until the days of al-Hajjaj b. Yusuf al-Thaqafi, that is, after the Umayyads’ victory over the Zubayrids in 692. The Abbasid-era historian al-Mada’ini relates the story of a Yemeni man who, when faced with the oppression of the caliph’s governor in his homeland, traveled to the court of Umayyad caliph ‘Abd al-Malik in distant Syria. While ‘Abd al-Malik delivered his Friday sermon, the Yemeni man interrupted him to ask for redress against the misdeeds of the caliph’s governor. The caliph threatened to kill him if he dare utter another word, and the man replied, ‘I have heard that first there shall be prophecy, then the caliphate and mercy, and then tyranny and despotism. Prophecy and the caliphate have certainly departed, for this is despotism!’

The rudimentary periodization of early Islamic history into three stages – the eras of prophecy, of caliphal justice, and of kingship/tyranny – had an inherent appeal to early Islamic historiography. Positing the earliest caliphs as embodying a higher ideal did come at the expense of downgrading current rulers, but this was not always a full-frontal attack on the legitimacy of those in authority. The periodization also served a hortatory function, marking off who was worthy of their rulers’ emulation and who was not. Such traditions also gave voice to a nostalgia for past glories of simpler times. Indeed, throughout early Islamic historiography, nostalgia often afflicts the participants in the early Islamic conquest before any indication of future tragedy has reared its head. In his first public address to the Muslim armies after the founding of Basra, the victorious Qurashi general ‘Utba b. Ghazwan (d. 638) warns his warriors thus: ‘Prophecy has never appeared without being replaced by tyranny, and I seek refuge in God from the fate of seeing that time.’
Still, the message is clear: what’s done is done, the utopian past will not return, and one can only emulate that past in the present. This hortatory function of the tradition emerges in particular in the literary adaptation and expansions of the tradition. Thus, the caliph Abu Bakr al-Siddiq allegedly declared:

Of all people in this world and the next, kings are the most pitiable (ashqa) … If a king comes to power, God makes him lose interest in what he owns and makes him covet all that others have … Today you are in the time of the caliphate of prophecy and at a crossroads, but after me you shall see biting kingship and tyranny gone awry (mulkan ’adudan wa-mulkan ’anudan).”

This statement, and those like it, easily lent themselves to the view that mulk meant oppression and a malik was a tyrant, yet even the authority that the belletrist al-Jahiz cites for the sermon, Ibrahim al-Ansari, comments: ‘Caliphs, imams, and commanders of the faithful are all kings (muluk), but not every king can be a caliph or an imam (wa-laysa kullu malik yakunu khalifatan wa-imaman), and for that reason Abu Bakr distinguished between the two in his sermon.” From these comments, one gets a distinct sense the early caliphs are depicted in such lofty terms in order to be aspirational and, moreover, to dissuade rulers from overstepping their bounds.

One also sees this in a famous exchange between the Medinan scholar Abu Hazim ‘the Lame’ (al-ʿraj, d. ca. 758) and the Umayyad caliph Sulayman b. ʿAbd al-Malik (r. 715–17). In the frame story of the exchange, the caliph arranges a meeting with Abu Hazim while he tarries in Medina before continuing onwards to Mecca when it is rumored that Abu Hazim had met Companions of the Prophet. When Sulayman asks for the man’s opinion of the Umayyad caliphs, Abu Hazim answers with unbridled honesty:

Commander of the Faithful, your father used the sword to subdue the people, and they seized this dominion with violence and without the consultation of the Muslims and their consent (akhadhu hadha l-mulk ‘anwatan ‘ala ghayr mashwaratin min al-muslimin wa-la ridan lahum). They even slaughtered a number of them.

Again, although mulk still receives strong condemnation in these stories, the focus falls squarely the manner in which mulk has been claimed: mulk becomes unjust when seized unjustly.

Of all people, even ʿUmar b. al-Khattab reportedly felt confused on the issue, or at the very least his piety drove him to seek clarification thereon. Once ʿUmar asked Salman al-Farisi whether or not he was a caliph or a king, and Salman warned him, ‘If you levy more or less a single dirham from the lands of the Muslims and then apportion it to any unworthy purpose, then you are a king and not a caliph.’

Earlier scholarly treatments of mulk in Islamic political discourse – less reliant on the hadith folk and other opponents of Umayyad legitimacy – regarded mulk in more neutral terms as meaning simply ‘sovereignty’ or ‘dominion’. Still, it remains true that many of the early, piety-minded Muslims bemoaned the decline of caliphal rule into a type of tyrannical mulk and that they laid the blame for the development at the feet of Muʿawiya and subsequent Umayyads given their embrace of the courtly pomp...
of regional species of despotic monarchism (often labelled with terms referring to the Roman and Persian monarchs, such as qaysariyya, hiraqliyya, kisrawiyya). While salient as an anti-Umayyad critique, it must also be contextualized as merely one current of early Muslim pietistic discourse on governance among many. Mulk was a capacious term that the piety-minded opposition winnowed down to a narrower sense, meaning not ‘sovereignty’ or ‘dominion’ in general but specifically ‘tyranny’.

**MULK IN THE POSITIVE**

According to an early narrative of Mecca’s conquest in 630, the Umayyad leader of the Meccan Quraysh, Abu Sufyan, beheld the spectacle of Muhammad marching into the city while seated next to the Prophet’s uncle al-‘Abbas. A recent convert to Muhammad’s faith, Abu Sufyan observed his former nemesis at last enter the city and exclaimed, ‘The dominion (mulk) of your nephew has become great!’ Al-‘Abbas rebuked him, ‘It is not dominion; rather, it is prophecy (nubuwwa)! At the moment of the Prophet’s triumph, Muhammad was foremost a conquering prophet, not a conquering king. Yet, as seen above, in the broader frame of early Islamic discourse, prophecy and mulk were not prima facie as incompatible as the story would have us believe – indeed, they often go hand in hand.

Another tradition portrayed Muhammad’s rejection of the kingly office as a conscious decision, yet simultaneously posited kingship (mulk) as entirely in accord with prophethood (nubuwwa): once while Muhammad sat in the company of Gabriel, a second angel descended to pay him a visit and posed him a question, ‘Shall your Lord make you a prophet king or a messenger servant (a- fa- malikan nabiyyan yaj‘aluka aw ‘abdan rasulan)?’ Counseled in humility by Gabriel, Muhammad chose to be a messenger servant. The tradition did not denounce kingship per se, rather it demonstrated that Muhammad’s motivation lay not in love of power and wealth. Other traditions struck a similar chord but highlighted the prophet’s rejection of the pursuit of wealth. ‘Revelation was not given to me so that I might gather wealth (ajma‘a al- mal) or be a merchant (akuna min al- tajirin)’, the Prophet is said to have averred.

Mulk in the narrow sense of being a king, a malik, does not apply to early portraits of Muhammad’s prophecy, but a rejection of a royal office was not tantamount to a rejection of mulk as ‘dominion’ in a broader sense. This distinction between mulk as kingship and mulk as dominion is subtle and, therefore, often missed, but it is key for understanding how the early Islamic polity drew upon the precedence of Muhammad’s prophethood as a source of its mandate to rule and how its early rulers viewed his prophecy as concomitant with the polity’s earthly triumph. The distinction between the two types of mulk – ‘kingship’ and ‘dominion’ – appears quite vividly in a famous incident from the early Meccan period from Muhammad’s life narrated by Ibn Ishaq (d. 150/767). 'Utba b. Rabi'a, an 'Abshami chieftain of the Quraysh and Mu‘awiya’s maternal grandfather, approached Muhammad to conciliate him as the opposition began to intensify against the Prophet and his early followers. Never one keen to deride his kinsman, 'Utba presents Muhammad with a proposal: wealth (mal) shall be Muhammad’s if he has need of it, status (sharaf) if he yearns for it, kingship (mulk) if he desires it, and even a doctor to treat him if it is madness that afflicts him. In response, Muhammad recites the opening verses from Surat al-Fussilat until he
reaches the fifth verse, ‘They say: our hearts are shielded from the faith to which you call us ...’ Stricken dumb with awe at the scripture’s eloquence, Utba returns to the elders of the pagan Quraysh and declares what he heard to be neither poetry, magic, nor divination and advises them to leave Muhammad be. ‘His words will doubtlessly spread far and wide (la-yakumnana li-qawlihi ... naba’un ’azimun),’ Utba portends,

... if he gains the upper hand over the Arabs, then his dominion will be your dominion, his exaltation your exaltation, and through him you will be the most fortunate of people (in yazhar ’ala l-arab fa-mulkuhu mulkukum wa-izzuhu ʿizzakum wa-kuntum asʿad al-nas bib).

‘Utba’s last comment echoes the wording of Q. 3: 26 and homes in on an important, if often neglected, theme found in the sirā-maghāzī literature: although as a prophet Muhammad roundly rejects the trappings of kingship (mulk) for himself, his prophethood brings with it a future dominion (mulk) for his people and community.

Early biographical accounts of Muhammad’s life reject royal imagery when depicting Muhammad’s prophetic office; however, they do speak frequently and freely of the mulk of the prophet and his community (umma) in overwhelmingly positive terms. In the sirā-maghāzī literature, the prophet’s birth portends the future glory and triumph of his community from the very moment of his conception. Hence, the prophet’s father bears a holy light between his eyes that passes on to the prophet’s mother, Amina, when she conceives him; and at his birth Amina witnesses the palaces of Syria (qusur al-sham) fill with that same light, an omen of future conquests. Likewise, as the prophet travels about as a boy, he is recognized as a future king (malik), or as carrying dominion (mulk), by Christian monks, Jewish rabbis, and pagan diviners alike. These narratives frame mulk not in terms of a political office but rather within a panoramic view of human history as laid out by the divine providence. Viewed through this lens, mulk and its vicissitudes appear as a preordained destiny brought by Muhammad to his people, a destiny anticipated and foreshadowed in the narratives that recount the Islamic praeparatio coranica and disclose the architectonics of divine providence on the grandest scale.

Ibn Ishaq again provides us with one of the clearest visions of the prophet’s mulk as signaling a manifest destiny conferred upon his future community in a story of the pre-Islamic, Lakhmid king of Yemen, Rabi’a b. Nasr. Ostensibly, Ibn Ishaq’s tale is about how the king Rabi’a b. Nasr came to abandon his kingdom in Yemen and to make a pact with the Sasanian Shah of Persia in order establish the rule of his dynasty, the so-called Nasrids, in al-Hira in southern Iraq. However, Ibn Ishaq also interweaves this story with vivid portents of Muhammad’s prophetic destiny. The story begins with the Yemeni king Rabi’a awakening to find himself terrified by a dream whose meaning eludes him. He summons masters of divination, magic, astrology, and auguries to his court, but they are at a loss to interpret his dream. Enter the famed diviners Satih and Shiqq, each a renowned diviner (kabīn) far more capable in the interpretation of dreams than the king’s courtiers. By the end of Ibn Ishaq’s account, the two diviners successfully interpret the dream of Rabi’a b. Nasr and provide a dire prophecy of the fate of his dynasty in Yemen. They even foretell future events beyond the end of the king’s rule in Yemen and prophesy the coming of Axumite rule from across the Red Sea, then the Himyarites’ expulsion of Axumite
rule under the leadership of Dhu Yazan, and (finally) the coming of the prophet Muhammad.

Each diviner delivers his message to Rabi’a b. Nasr individually without the aid of one another. The wording of each diviner’s prophecy as it appears in Ibn Ishaq’s account is significant in both form and content. Their utterances are couched in the rhymed, cadenced prose of the Arabian diviners, but they are also clearly infused with the kerygmatic expectations of the coming of Islam and its prophet. When asked who will end the dominion (mulk) of the Dhu Yazan in Yemen, Satih declares:

A prophet pure * to him will come revelation * from on high.

Nabiyyun zakiyy * ya’tihi l-wahiyy * min qibali l’aliyy.\(^77\)

Rabi’a asks Satih who this man shall be, and the diviner answers, ‘a man from the progeny of Ghalib b. Fhir [that is, from Quraysh] … dominion shall reside with his tribe until the end of time’.\(^79\) The theme of the dominion (mulk) of the prophet’s tribe (qaum) appears yet again in the second diviner’s utterances. After Satih has been dismissed, Rabi’a b. Nasr summons Shiqq, the second diviner. Shiqq’s prophecy confirms that of Satih, and when asked when the kingdom of the Dhu Yazan shall end, he declares

It will end by a prophet sent * with truth and justice he comes * from a people of religion and virtue * among his tribe dominion shall remain until the Day of Judgment.

Yanqati’ u bi-rasulin mursali * ya’tu bi-l-haqqi wa-l’adli * bayna ahli l-dini wa-l-fadli * yakunu l-mulku fi qaumihi ila yawmi l-fasli.

Both prophecies that the diviners utter foretell the transferal of dominion, or mulk, from one dynasty and people to another as the wheel of fate turns, yet they also prophesy that the mulk of the coming prophet shall be of an entirely different sort. His mulk shall remain among his tribe (qaum) until the Day of Judgment. The story writes the tribe (qaum) of Muhammad, Mecca’s Quraysh, into eschatological dramas, that in late antique thought had come to be seen as a contest of empires.\(^80\)

That dominion fell to the prophet’s kindred in these accounts was no accident. Rather, it was an extrapolation of Qur’anic themes mobilized in order to articulate a discourse for the legitimacy of caliphal rule by the Quraysh. In the Qur’an, God gave ‘a mighty dominion (mulk ‘azim)’ to Abraham’s descendants (Q. 4:54). God chose the Messenger’s community of believers to follow the religion (milla) of their father Abraham (Q. 22:78). They were a community (umma) raised from Abraham’s true progeny (dhuriyya) and charged with the custodianship of Mecca as a place of prayer and a sign of God’s covenant. God raised up the Messenger from their midst in answer to the prayers of Abraham and Ishmael (Q. 2:25–30). The Abrahamic mulk promised them is, in part, otherworldly and eschatological (Q. 20:20), but it also manifests in this-worldly realities. In the past, the Israelites conquered and inherited the lands of their enemies, as the Qur’anic Moses promised his people, ‘Perhaps your Lord shall destroy your enemies and cause you to inherit the land (yastakhlifakum fi l-ard), so take care how you act’ (Q. 7:128–9). But, cursed by God because of their disobedience, the Israelites and Jews no longer had a share (nasib) in the dominion God
granted them (Q. 4: 52–3). God had warned them before in the Psalms of David, ‘We decreed in the Book Psalms (zabur) – after admonition (min baʿdi l-dhikri) – that my righteous servants shall inherit the earth’ (Q. 21:105, citing Ps. 37:29). That is, the promise was contingent on their righteousness – without righteousness the promise was void, for God’s covenant (ʿahd) excluded the unrighteous (Q. 2:124). Yet, the promise did await the righteous believers who followed the Messenger, those progeny most deserving to lay claim to Abraham’s legacy (Q. 3:68). For the Messenger’s community of righteous believers, Abraham’s dominion was theirs to inherit (Q. 24:55):

God has promised those of you who believe and act righteously that He shall bequeath to them the earth just as He bequeathed it to those before them. He shall make their religion firmly established (la-yastakhlfannahum fi l-ard kama ‘stakhlafa lladhina min qablibhim wa-la-yumakkinana lahum dinahum).

Victories over Jewish opponents mentioned in Qur’an provided a foretaste of this promise, ‘and He caused you to inherit their land, their homes, and their wealth and a land had never stepped foot on before’ (Q. 33:27). Yet, the promise of Q. 24:55 was far grander that these earlier gains. Abu Ja’far al-Tabari (d. 923) reads the ramifications of this verse from Surat al- Nur in an unambiguously triumphalist vein:

God shall cause [the believers] to inherit the lands of pagan Arabs and non-Arabs and make them the kings and managers of those lands (la-yurithannahum Allahu ard al-mushrikin min al-ʿarab wa-ajam fa-yajʿaluhum mulukaha wa-sasataba) … just as He had done with the Israelites before them when they destroyed the tyrants in Syria and made them the kings and inhabitants of those lands (mulukaha wa-sukkanaha)."82

Citations of this Qur’anic theme of the righteous followers of Muhammad inheriting the dominion of Abraham and, therefore, the lands and wealth of sinful nations appear sporadically in the sira-maghazi literature, but it is nearly ubiquitous in the narratives of the early conquests. The triumphalist adaptation of this Qur’anic theme even made its impact on in early Syriac disputational literature in the eighth century: ‘This is the sign that God loves us and is pleased with our religion (tawditan),’ quips a Muslim emir in an eighth-century Syriac text, ‘that He has given us authority (šultana) over all faiths (deblan) and peoples. And behold, they are our slaves and subjects!’ In other words, the hegemony of the Prophet’s community was a sign of their favor in God’s eyes and explained why the spread of their dominion was unstoppable. The early conquest elite of the Islamic polity were a community of Abraham’s progeny made righteous by following the God’s chosen prophet from their midst, a prophet who brought with him the mandate to spread God’s religion and their dominion. The Umayyad-era poet Jarir b. ‘Atiyya draws from the Qur’anic idiom of this claim explicitly in the following verses:

Our father is God’s friend and God is our Lord
We are pleased with what the King gave and ordained
He built God’s qibla by which men are guided
and He bequeathed to us glory and timeless dominion (mulk an muʾammara)."88
With the conquests following Muhammad’s death, the Quraysh soon found themselves as overseers of a vast dominion and atop the commanding heights of a complex machinery of conquest and expansion. How, at the earliest stages, the Quraysh justified their hegemony over this early conquest polity in a coherent discourse of legitimacy is difficult to know precisely, but the importance of the dominion of the Quraysh to the Umayyads, the first of the clans of Quraysh to establish a caliphal dynasty, is clearer and clearer still in the Islamic historiography of the 800s.

A late-eighth-century historian named Sayf b. ʿUmar al-Tamimi imagined how this discourse developed in an intriguing episode that he places during the caliphate of ʿUthman b. ʿAffan. Staunchly pro-ʿUthman and relentlessly anti-Shi’ite, as a historian Sayf nonetheless had a knack for explaining the dynamics of the earliest conquest state. In the famous episode, malcontents from Arab tribesmen who settled in Kufa during the conquest have begun expressing their anger at the third caliph ʿUthman b. ʿAffan and his favoritism for the Quraysh and his Umayyad kinsmen. To put out the flames of what promised to quickly ignite into an inferno of sedition, the Iraqi dissidents are exiled to Syria where they are to be detained. The mouthpiece whom Sayf chooses to counter the discontents of the Kufans is ʿUthman’s governor in Syria and the future Umayyad caliph, Mu‘awiya b. Abi Sufyan. Mu‘awiya’s warning to the Kufan dissidents reads as an elegant manifesto in favor of the hegemony of Quraysh. He rebukes their defiance of Qurashi hegemony as follows:

You are a group of Arabs who possess eloquence and the wisdom of age. Through Islam you have attained a lofty station. You have conquered nations (umam) and come to possess their patrimonies (mawaribahum), but still it has reached me that you wish to take vengeance against Quraysh! ...

Do you know of any Arab or non-Arab people or any dark or light-skinned nation whom fate has not stricken down in their safest refuge (burma) or in their land by some turn of fortune (bi-dawlatin)? All but Quraysh! Any who have plotted against them God has shoved their faces into the dirt! When God willed to deliver those who would honor and follow His religion (din) from misery in this world and damnation in the next, He singled out His best creation [that is to say, Muhammad]. He then chose companions for him – the best of whom were Quraysh. God then erected this dominion with Quraysh as its foundation (bana hadha l-mulkah alayhim) and established the caliphate for Quraysh, for it suits none but them (ja’ala l-khilafa fibim fa-la yaslubu illa labhum). God already protected them in the barbaric age (al-jahiliyya) although they practiced among themselves a religion that was not His. Do you imagine that He will not protect Quraysh from your ilk now that they practice His religion?

Ridwan al-Sayyid has singled out at three key themes embedded within this passage that might shed light on how early Quraysh and, by extension, the Umayyads, articulated a triumphalist discourse of political legitimacy. These themes are: 1) that, of all peoples, God chose the Quraysh of Mecca to be the Prophet’s kin and his strongest allies; 2) through the Prophet and his kinsmen, God chose the Arabs to inherit the wealth and glory of nations past; and 3) God had given Quraysh dominion (mulk) in order to oversee the realization of this inheritance and to preserve it.
In this view, Quraysh were at the epicenter of an ever-expanding circle of dominion inaugurated by the prophethood of Muhammad, their kinsman. The Umayyads saw themselves as the leaders of Quraysh and, therefore, the vanguards of the dominion that the Prophet bequeathed to his community. What is key to keep in mind, however, is that their hegemony was not seen as some sort of pan-Arab mandate to rule. Rather, Quraysh’s mandate to expand their dominion derived from their kinship to the Prophet, their descent from Abraham, and their custodianship of his shrine, the Ka’ba, in Mecca along with its cultic rites. Uthman thus relied on Mu’awiya’s diatribe to mollify any attempts to expand this mandate of Quraysh to any other Arabian tribes.

That this inherited, prophetic dominion is more Abrahamic than Arab, however one conceives of ‘Arabness’, can be seen in the following narrative transmitted by al-Baladhuri (d. c. 892). When a prominent Arab notable from the tribe of Tamim (a ‘northern’ Arab), ‘Ayyash b. al-Zibriqan, comes to visit the caliph ‘Abd al-Malik, the caliph takes advantage of the presence of his advisor, Rawh b. Zinba’ al-Judhami, to engage ‘Ayyash in conversation and to have some fun at Rawh’s expense:

‘Abd al-Malik said, ‘‘Ayyash, what is your view of this Yamani man’ – meaning Rawh – ‘bragging on and on about the kings of Yemen?’

‘Commander of the Faithful,’ ‘Ayyash replied, ‘you and I are the descendants of Ishmael, Abraham’s son, and even the dominion (mulk) of our brethren the Jews, the descendants of Abraham’s son Isaac, is greater than the dominion of kings of Yemen. The dominion of David and Solomon even came with prophecy. We, the descendants of Ishmael, also have prophecy and dominion in our lineage (fa-fina l-nubuwwa wa-l-mulk). Thus is our dominion and the dominion of our brethren the Jews greater than the dominion of the kings of Yemen (fa-mulkuna wa-mulk ikhwatina a’zamu min mulkihim).’

Rawh was a notable of the tribe of Judham, a ‘southern’ Arab tribe claiming Yemeni descendent, and the exclusion of his tribe from the Abrahamic lineage reflects the old view, predating the Abbasid period, that the Yemeni tribes could not boast Ishmaelite descent. Although the genealogical circle of Ishmaelite descent eventually expanded to include the Yemeni tribes, its original remit was narrower and claimed only by ‘northern’ tribes, such as Tamim and Quraysh. Quraysh, however, always remain at the top of this putative hierarchy of Abrahamic lineage insofar as they remained custodians of the Ka’ba, the supreme Abrahamic shrine. Even if power-sharing was a requisite of rule for Quraysh, the prophetic mulk bequeathed to them was theirs alone. An idea also expressed in a prophetic hadith, ‘Dominion (al-mulk) belongs to Quraysh, the judiciary (al-qada’) to the Ansar, the call to prayer to Ethiopians (al-Habasha), speed (al-sur’a) to Yemen … and trusteeship (al-amana) to al-Azd.’

The Umayyads held tenaciously to the mulk of the Quraysh as political hegemons and regarded themselves as its most powerful and rightful custodians. Even other sub-clans of the Quraysh ostensibly lacked their claim. In a letter written to ‘Abd Allah b. ‘Umar b. al-Khattab, Mu’awiya explains his rationale for keeping the leadership of the umma within the grasp of the Umayyads:
Rule (hadha l-amr) fell to the sons of 'Abd Manaf because they are the household of the Messenger of God. When God’s Messenger died, the people conferred rule to Abu Bakr and 'Umar, though they were not from the fount of dominion and caliphate (min ghayr ma dan al-mulk wa-l-khilafa) ... Then dominion returned to the sons of 'Abd Manaf, and there it shall remain until the Day of Resurrection.  

The statement echoes earlier narratives of the succession to Muhammad that viewed the caliphate of Abu Bakr and 'Umar as ill-conceived and that recount how the Umayyads sought to aid 'Ali and 'Uthman to restore leadership of the early community to the clan of 'Abd Manaf. 'Ali rejected the idea of deposing Abu Bakr outright, but the sentiment that Abu Bakr and 'Umar, being from the weaker Qurashi clans of Taym and 'Adi respectively, seized the leadership without the assent of 'Abd Manaf when the Prophet was closer in kinship to them remained salient.  

The ancestor of the Umayyads-Abshamis and Hashimites, 'Abd Manaf b. Qusayy, had been purportedly entrusted with the supervision of the Ka'ba (al-riyasa) and the provision of water to pilgrims (al-siqaya) in pre-Islamic times, and he thus passed his authority passed on to his twin sons Hashim and 'Abd Shams.  

The Umayyads thus saw a continuity between their power over Mecca prior to the advent of Islam and their subsequent ascent to the caliphate and regarded it as a sign of divine favor. 'Lordship was theirs before Islam, and with Islam dominion was theirs as well (lahum al-su'ad fi l-jahiliyya wa-l-mulk fi l-islam)', as the pro-Umayyad poet Abu Sakhr al-Hudhali proclaimed.  

While such literary accounts are, admittedly, fashioned from the pious fictions of historical memory, the themes they convey and the ideologies they display are nevertheless mainstays of late-Umayyad ideology, as attested in both the poetry of Umayyad court and the official epistolography composed by such masterful pioneers of Arabic prose as 'Abd al-Hamid al-Katib. The latter speaks explicitly of the Umayyads as the custodians of the inheritance of Muhammad’s prophethood (mawarith nubuwwatih)  

In late Umayyad ideology, the caliphs were regarded as having collectively inherited the dominion of all prophets in history, an inheritance that granted them a mandate to rule.  

God gave men prophets; the last prophet died; God took things into his hands again; He created a new institution to take care of the affairs of the community of His last prophet and continue to protect His religion; this was the caliphate. Simplified though this schema may seem, it is precisely what the letters [of 'Abd al-Hamid al-Katib] claim for the caliphate. The best proof for this is that the caliphate is actually called there the ‘wilayat 'abd Allah’, the tenure of the mandate (to rule) by God.  

The greatest challenge to this late Umayyad ideology came from the other descendants of 'Abd Manaf, from Muhammad’s clan of Hashim. The ideology of Hashimite legitimacy flourished under the Umayyads and, when wielded as anti-legitimist discourse against the Umayyads, ultimately led to the undoing of their caliphal hegemony. The Umayyads’ fate was thus foretold by the Hashimite Ibn 'Abbás in a literary account of an exchange with Mu'awiyah:
With us [the Hāshimids] the affair opened, and with us it will be sealed. You [Umayyads] have a hastened dominion (mulk muʿajjal) but ours is a deferred (mulk muʾajjal). Though your dominion precedes ours, after our dominion shall be no other.  

In other exchanges, Ibn ʿAbbas predicts to Muʿawiyah the future Hashimite dominion and a Mahdi-Qaʿim (mulk hashimi wa-mahdi qaʿim), an apocalyptic redeemer destined to fill the earth with justice. Such pro-Hashimite discourse was a potent response to Umayyad triumphalism, and a key reason why the Hashimite movement could replace the Umayyads with Abbasid caliphs in 132/750.

CONCLUSION: THE VARIETIES OF MULK

This re-examination of mulk in early Islamic political discourse has sought to redress and to correct the rather flat and colorless treatments of the term that have come to predominate in the secondary literature. Mulk, I contend, cannot merely be seen as the antithesis of an earlier caliphal ideal of al-khilafa ʿala minhaj al-nubuwaa, ‘caliphate on the model of prophecy’. Rather, in the discourse of the Qur’an and early Muslim piety, mulk was a capacious term that embraced ideas such as ‘sovereignty’ and ‘dominion’ in both its human and divine instantiations. The idea of a god-given prophetic mulk, moreover, was key to a religious discourse that articulated a mandate for conquest and legitimized Islamic polity’s hegemonic claims to replace and surpass imperial and regional rivals. Mulk also played in the formation of the political ideology of the Umayyads, both with regard to Umayyad triumphalism and their claim to legitimate rule as the inheritors and vanguards of the prophetic dominion granted to Mecca’s Quraysh. While anti-Umayyad critics did indeed blame the dynasty for a devolution of rulership from the caliphal ideal into an unjust autocracy, this polemic emerged among the hadith-folk who narrowed the capacious meaning of mulk for a particular purpose – namely, to underscore the falsehood of Umayyad legitimism and assert the authority of not merely an idealized caliphal past, but likely also the hadith-folk’s own claim to be the true inheritors and interpreters of the Prophet’s legacy.

NOTES

2 Chrysos 1978; Shahid 1981.
3 Haldon 1990: 73.
4 See Marsham 2018: 25–8 and Papoutsakis 2017: 193–4 et passim for cautious, comparative assessments of late antique and early Islamic conceptions of rulership. The title ‘shadow of God on earth’ is perhaps the Islamic title closest to the Byzantine designation of emperor as etikon theo, ‘the image of God’. Although often regarded as quintessentially Abbasid title (for example, Darling 2014: 424 and al-Azmeh 1997: 181ff.), ’Abd al-Malik already referred to himself as ‘the shadow of God on earth’ according to al-Baladhuri 2001: 362. Moreover, the maxim, ‘The ruler is the shadow of God on earth (al-sultan zill Allah fi l-ard)’, is attributed to Muhammad at quite an early date; for example, see Ibn Zanjawayh 2007: 64 (citing the authority of Kathir b. Murra of Hims, a contemporary of
ʿAbd al-Malik) and Ibn Abi ʿAsim 1980: 492. Sasanid and Persian antecedents for the title 'shadow of God', although often asserted, are non-existent.

5 Kadi and Shahin 2015: 39.
7 Brooks 1904: 71; see also Marsham 2013: 93ff.
8 Crone and Hinds 1986: 120.
12 Ibn Hanbal 2008: 37, 78.
16 Fowden 2004: 171.
17 Donner 2010: xii.
18 Ibn Hanbal 2008: XV, 234, 34, 143.
19 Ibn Wadih 1883: 269; see also Borrut 2011: 217ff.
21 As noted by Marsham 2009: 1–2; see also Azmeh 1997 and Darling 2014.
24 See also More 2012.
25 See also Janowski 2010.
26 It is worth noting, however, that the Qurʾan banishes absolutely 'the kingdom of the Father' (basileia tou patros; Matt 13:43, 26:29) from its scriptural discourse.

27 Although the Queen of Sheba appears in the Qurʾan, the scripture never directly calls her a 'queen' (malika) but rather describes her as 'a woman who rules of them and who has been granted all thing and possesses a mighty throne' (imraʾa tamlikuhum wa-utiyat min kulli shayʾin wa-laha ʿarshun ʿazim) (Q. 27:23).

33 Hoyland 2009.
34 ṬAthamina 1998.
37 Abū ʿUbayda 1991: 118.
38 Al-Mubarrad 1874–92: I, 185, 706.
41 Kister 1979: 2–7.
44 Sizgorich 2009: 207.
45 Crone 2004: 44.
46 See El-Ḥibri 2002.
48 The reference to the pale color (either green or blue) of the Umayyads’ eyes is an insult, as pale-colored eyes in this period were regarded as an ill-omened sign of deceit and blindness.

See Richardson 2014.


50 Al-Jahiz 1964: II, 10–11.


52 Al-Baladhuri 1979: 596.


59 Al-Baladhuri 2001: 117.

60 Al-Baladhuri 2001: 229.

61 Ibn Hanbal 2008: XXXVI, 256.


69 For example, see Tyan 1954: 379–86.


76 See also Toral-Niehoff 2013.

77 On which, see Stewart 2011: 337–8.


80 Shoemaker 2014.


82 Al-Tabari 2001: XVII, 346.


86 Abraham is called the ‘friend’ (Ar. khalil) of God in Q. 4:125.

87 Compare Q. 54:55.


89 Anthony 2012: 100–3; compare Madelung 2009.


94 Webb 2016: 211–15. See also Webb in this volume.

95 Ibn Hanbal 2008: XIV, 368.

96 Ps.-Ibn Qutayba 1990: I, 196.


100 Kadi 1994: 245.


103 Madelung 1989.

104 Ibn ’Abd Rabbih 1953: IV, 83.


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