Theophanes and al-Ṭabarī – a comparison

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Contents

Chapter 1 Introduction

This thesis is about two historians and two cultures – the Byzantine historian Theophanes the Confessor who lived between 760-818, and the Islamic historian al-Ṭabarī who lived between 749-833. My thesis is a work of comparative history, a study of the chronicles of the two ancient writers.

Through the works of Theophanes and al-Ṭabarī this thesis will examine how the rulers they describe exercised power. What kind of power was possible and necessary in the two cultures? Were they the same, or different – and in which ways?

As we shall see, the two chronicles are very different in both length and in how their writers view the world. Still, both works contain detailed descriptions and evaluations of the personalities and actions of the various rulers, which makes it possible to compare the descriptions.

While modern historians have conducted extensive work in the fields of Byzantine and Islamic history, and a good deal of effort has been spent on researching medieval Byzantine and Islamic historians, few comparative studies exist. This may seem strange, as the two cultures shared a common background and were closely intertwined.[1] The historiographical situation probably reflects the compartmentalization that traditionally has existed in academia: Antiquity and its extension into the Byzantine world, has been seen as something separate from the study of the Islamic world.[2] The histories of both civilizations are after all closely interwoven after the spread of Islam from the 7th century onwards, till the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks in 1453. One could argue that the two civilizations have an even longer common history, as the Romans and Arabs interacted long before the spread of Islam.[3] In the period under study here, they certainly were in close contact.

I have chosen to focus on the rulers in the eight and in the early ninth century. One reason is that a lot has been written on Byzantine history in the tenth to eleventh centuries, less on the eighth century. It thus seemed more worthwhile to explore this period of Byzantine history. The situation is not the same in Islamic historiography, the eighth century was the period of the famous ‘Abbasid caliphs, and a lot has been written on this period in Islamic history. Still, there is little comparative work to be found, and this makes it interesting in that perspective.

[1] See Donner 1998 and Jokisch 2008
[2] Donner 1998: pp. 293-296
[3] Shahîd 2006: pp. 11-13

This especially so since both the Byzantine empire and the Islamic caliphate went through great changes in this century. The chronicles and the time period are thus worth exploring.

No matter how many difficulties one might point out when it comes to using Theophanes and al-Ṭabarī, the fact remains that these chronicles are among our most important sources for the period.[4] Without them, we would simply not know much about life in the Byzantine and Islamic worlds in the eighth century.

I am looking for the descriptions of the human beings that held power. And to the degree the historians reflect the attitudes and expectations of their time, what did their respective societies look for in a ruler?

Both works are literary texts – they contain a lot of different information on many different topics. In spite of different lengths, they have much in common in the sense of structure and approach, enough so that they can be used for a comparative study.

Finally, there is simply the human aspect of these works. Both Theophanes and al-Ṭabarī are historians that manage to write across the centuries. The events are interesting enough, but the descriptions of human behavior – their actions, sayings, and faiths – are captivating to a modern reader, and so worth investigating.

In working with this thesis, two thinkers on the theory of history have been especially useful and inspiring. The first is the cultural historian Quentin Skinner. He argues that when we study history, we have to assume that it is possible to relate to the people of the past, even though the past is often a strange landscape. No matter how difficult it may be to understand the beliefs of the people we study, we must assume some "convention of truthfulness" in whatever texts and other utterances they have left behind.[5] This approach seems sensible and necessary to me, and this is what I do when reading the texts of Theophanes and al-Ṭabarī. The second theorist I have made much use of, is the historical sociologist Michael Mann. His theory of the "four sources of social power", and his model of how societies are "constituted of multiple overlapping and intersecting sociospatial networks of power." are used extensively in the following pages.[6]

[4] Mango and Scott 1997: Introduction, p. v, and Kennedy 2006: Foreword, pp. xx-xxi
[5] Skinner 2002: p. 40
[6] Mann 2005: pp. 1-2

Chapter 2 Background

2.1 Research question

This thesis tries to answer the following: What is portrayed as crucial for being a ruler with power in the historical chronicles of Theophanes and al-Ṭabarī? What made these rulers powerful – or weak – in the eyes of the two historians? Are there similarities in what the two writers describe? Are there differences? What can this tell us about the two cultures?

As I stated above, there has not been much comparative research done on Byzantine and Islamic history. This thesis compares the works of two of the most famous ancient historians from each culture. The analysis brings new perspectives on their chronicles, and it shows how Mann's theory is a useful tool in the sorting and categorization of a vast amount of source material.

2.2 Earlier research

2.2.1 Modern views on Byzantine historiography [7]

Let us first look at the writing of history in the Byzantine world, and how modern historians view this activity. The Byzantine historians inherited a tradition that went back to the classical world. It formed an important background for more than a millennium of Byzantine historical writing.[8]

For my purposes it is important to keep in mind that Theophanes wrote at the beginning of the ninth century. He thus predates the great flowering of Byzantine historiographical writing of the eleventh century. I will therefore not say anything about the historians of this later period.

Neville argues that since the early modern period and well up into the twentieth century, scholars have mostly been interested in recovering the biographies of the Byzantine individuals who wrote the various histories of their time, and in reconstructing texts that no longer exists on the basis of those manuscripts that do survive. This changed in the late twentieth century, when intellectual currents changed and the so-called 'the linguistic turn' led to a shift in focus from the reconstruction of individuals to analyzing texts.[9]

[7] Partly based on Frognes 2018, pp. 5-7
[8] Angold and Whitby 2008: p. 838
[9] Neville 2018: p. 1

There were mainly two types of histories in Byzantine historiography, "chronicles" and "classicizing histories".[10] Both of these had ancient roots and in their Byzantine form they existed in the same official milieu.[11]

Earlier Byzantinists have regarded the two genres as separate and with different cultural values. The histories were considered good, the chronicles were not. This categorization can partly be attributed to the nature of the texts, but also to prejudices about medieval writing. According to Neville, these biases that have mostly been abandoned by modern scholars. At the same time, there are good reasons for keeping the distinction between histories and chronicles. There are characteristics of style that make it reasonable to characterize a historical text as belonging to one or the other type of genre.[12]

Angold and Whitby argues that classicizing histories were substantial productions and use Prokopios and Ammianus as examples.[13] Classicizing histories have some common characteristics. Often, they opened with an introduction, where the authors truthfulness is proclaimed. In addition, the authors stated that they were going to write the truth without favoritism. The writers were all from the Byzantine elite, and had a thorough knowledge of classical literature, philosophy, and history.[14] A chief characteristic was the use of classical Attic Greek. The Byzantine historians emulated the language of ancient Athens, even though this was different from their own everyday spoken language. Classicizing histories deal with relatively short periods of time, either about a particular reign or a chronologically narrow series of events. The usual topics were politics and war. They were usually contemporary, or near contemporary histories from the authors' own lifetimes. In this, they were part of a long tradition.[15] Another characteristic was that often one author would pick the narrative thread were a previous historian had stopped. In this way several different histories could make a continuous narrative together.[16] We shall see that Theophanes' text fits with some of these characteristics, even though his work is mainly seen as a chronicle.

The chronicles were characterized by some common features, which separated them from the classicizing histories. They used a simpler style of Greek. The grammar of the chronicles was

[10] Neville 2018: 8
[11] Angold and Whitby 2008: p. 840
[12] Neville 2018: pp. 8-9
[13] Angold and Whitby 2008: p. 839
[14] Neville 2018: 7
[15] Neville 2018: 11
[16] Neville 2018: 11-12

not like the spoken language of the time, but more like the *koine* Greek of the New Testament. The use of less-classicizing Greek has been seen as evidence of a lack of education, but it could just as well have been a deliberate choice by the authors: to write in a lower registry could make the text clearer, it could signal humility and Christian virtue, and it would fit the style of the genre.[17] Another characteristic of the chronicles is that they deal with larger time spans than the classicizing histories do. Often, they start with the creation of the world, and end in the time of the author.[18] Chronicles also continued a tradition from the classical world, with collections of brief historical information, along with lists of annual magistrates or priests.[19]

As for who the audience of the Greek writers were, this is uncertain, but a fair assumption is that they belonged to the upper class in Byzantine society.[20] Neville argues that the chronicles have a format, both in the sense of composition and type of language, that makes them well suited to oral performances and so a wider audience. At the same time the classicizing histories may also have been read aloud, even though the audiences in all probability were smaller, aristocratic milieus.[21]

2.2.2 Modern views on Islamic historiography [22]

We now move on to the writing of history in the Islamic world. Whereas Byzantine historians could emulate their Greek forbears in both form and content, the situation was different for the Islamic writers. Around 700, Islamic historiography was in its beginnings. It was still in the service of Muslim religion and law, but it "absorbed Byzantine and, perhaps, Iranian influences and strove, with partial success, quickly to become a worldly political and educational subject."[23] Jokisch discusses this at length and points out that the question of which traditions the Islamic historians drew on is a controversial subject.[24] He argues that a cultural a transmission took place in Baghdad during the ninth to tenth centuries, where the Islamic world absorbed the classical heritage from the Graeco-Roman world, but also impulses from the contemporary Byzantine world. The cultural melting pot that was Baghdad

[17] Neville 2018: 13
[18] Neville 2018: 13
[19] Angold and Whitby 2008: p. 840
[20] Angold and Whitby 2008: 844
[21] Neville 2018: 17
[22] Partly based on Frognes 2018, pp. 7-8
[23] Rosenthal 1968: p. 194
[24] See Jokisch 2007 for a lengthy discussion on this question

in the eight to tenth centuries also included elements of Persian and Jewish cultures. In addition, there seem to have been influences from India and China as well.

The Arabic term for history, *ta'rīkh* (history, i.e. verbal representation of events) appears in the Arabic sources for the first time at the end of the eighth century. The etymology of the term *ta'rīkh* is uncertain, but the similarity with the Greek term for *Dating* or alternatively, *History*, makes it fairly certain that the meaning of the Arabic term comes from Greek. This coincides with the emerging Islamic humanism and the systematic translation and exploration of Greek works in the Islamic world. However, it is mostly the structure of the genre and reports concerning non-Islamic history that are similar to Greek.[25] Rosenthal, in his work on Islamic historiography, states that the origins of Islamic historiographic writing are "shrouded in darkness". As the emerging Islamic society developed politically and culturally, this situation changed, as we have seen above. Rosenthal identifies three large groups of historical works as particularly important after the obscure, initial phase of historical writing. They are World histories, local or regional histories, and contemporary histories and memoirs.[26] Al-Ṭabarī combined all of these in his *History*.

In Muslim education, the writing of history was not a discipline that held an important place. It did not often enable its practitioners to earn a living as historians, who usually earned their keep as philologists and genealogists. Al-Ṭabarī was more famous as a theologian to his contemporaries than as a historian.[27]

Even though both Theophanes and al-Ṭabarī's works are defined as chronicles, they defy the standard definition given above. The works contain much more than simple summaries of each year described, they contain narratives that allow for a much richer understanding and interpretation of the historians' worlds. Particularly al-Ṭabarī writes in detail about the personalities of the various caliphs and other historical persons. Even Theophanes' often terse give the reader insight into the psychology of the actors in the historical scenes he describes. My analysis of power is made possible because Theophanes and al-Ṭabarī give these detailed descriptions – descriptions that allow for an understanding of not only the actions but also the

[25] Jokisch 2007: pp. 433-434
[26] Rosenthal 1968: 129
[27] Rosenthal 1969: 54

thoughts of the various rulers. The limited horizon of the typical chronicle is thus transcended. That makes our historians so interesting and valuable to study.

2.3 Sources

2.3.1 The life of Theophanes the Confessor

There are two principal sources for the life of Theophanes. The first is a panegyric by St Theodore the Studite. It was probably delivered in 822, when Theophanes' body was deposed in his monastery. The second source is a description of Theophanes' life, written before 832 by Methodios, the future patriarch of Constantinople (843-847). Other biographical material on Theophanes exists but is not considered to have much independent value.[28]

These two sources are not completely consistent in how they portray Theophanes, but the following is a summary of the most important facts that can be collated from them. Theophanes was born in Constantinople, probably in 760 or late in 759.[29] His parents were high-ranking members of the Byzantine society: his father served in the upper echelons of the military in the time of emperor Constantine V. Theophanes' father died early, and the emperor himself became the young Theophanes' guardian.[30] Theophanes in described as easygoing and a good host, he is represented as a grand seigneur, addicted to sports in his youth, handsome and somewhat overweight. Theophanes briefly married, but both he and his wife soon embraced the vocations of monastic life. Theophanes founded his own monastery, Megas Agros on the southern shore of the Sea of Marmara. As the monastery's abbot, he participated in the Second Council of Nicaea in 787. This is one of the episodes from his chronicle that will be analyzed below, and it interesting to note that he experienced this important event himself. The council restored the veneration of icons, and from Theophanes' text it is obvious that he supported this theological position. The emperor Leo V (813-820) revived iconoclasm, and as a supporter for the veneration of icons, Theophanes was jailed and exiled to the island of Samothrace. He died there in 818. It is the persecution Theophanes suffered as an iconophile under the iconoclast Leo, that led to him being called the Confessor. He is recognized as a saint by the Orthodox Church.[31] Theophanes is not portrayed as a scholar, so if his identity had not been stated in the title and corroborated by later testimony, it

[28] Mango and Scott 1997: Introduction, p. xliv
[29] Mango and Scott 1997: Introduction, p. l
[30] Neville 2018: p. 63
[31] Neville 2018: p. 63

would have been hard to believe that he, and not another Confessor, was the author of the chronicle.[32] As it is, 'our' Theophanes must be taken to be the author, but as we will see shortly, there has been some debate as to how much of the chronicle is his work, and how much of it is based on the notes of another Byzantine historian, George Synkellos.

2.3.2 The Chronicle of Theophanes the Confessor

Before presenting Theophanes' work, a few remarks on the context of his chronicle are necessary. The chronicle bears the name *Theophanes Confessor*, and it deals with the period from the accession of the Roman emperor Diocletian in 284 up until the accession of the Byzantine emperor Leo V in 813. In Mango and Scott's modern translation it constitutes 688 pages. It represents the continuation of another chronicle, that of George Synkellos. George's work *The Chronography of George Synkellos* covers the period from the creation of the world to Diocletian's accession. Not much is known about George, except that he was a monk and that he for some time resided in a monastery in Palestine before serving as synkellos under the patriarch of Constantiople in the years 784-806. George probably died no later than 814. I will have more to say about the relationship between the works George and Theophanes shortly.[33] Another work that needs mentioning is a text aptly named *Theophanes Continuator*. This is a composite text that continues where Theophanes stops, with four independent sections which together span the period 813-961. The first part is written by an anonymous author, who considered himself as a continuator of Theophanes' work, hence the name of the whole work.[34] This last work need not concern us, it was written after Theophanes' death and did not have an impact on his Chronicle. To the degree it may have influenced later perceptions of Theophanes, I have not found that relevant for the present analysis.

As we have seen, The Chronicle of Theophanes covers the years 284-813. It purports to be a continuation of George Synkellos. According to Theophanes he had been tasked by George with finishing the work started by the older man. Theophanes writes the following in the opening of his work:

> Since, however, he was overtaken by the end of his life and was unable to bring his plan to completion, but, as I have said, had carried his composition down to Diocletian when

[32] Mango and Scott 1997: Introduction, pp. l-lii
[33] Mango and Scott 1997: Introduction, pp. xliii-xliv
[34] Kazdhan 1991: pp. 2061-2062

> he left this earthly life and migrated unto the Lord (being in the Orthodox faith), he both bequeathed to me, who was his close friend, the book he had written and provided materials with a view to completing what was missing.[35]

It has been a matter of scholarly debate how far we can take Theophanes' word for him being the author of the work that carries his name. Cyril Mango has argued that it was George who collected the material for both the earlier and the later part of the work, while Igor Čičurov has argued that Theophanes is the actual author of the text.[36]

This debate need not concern us here, but two comments can be made. First, Theophanes himself states in the above citation that George provided him with materials for completing the work. It is of course impossible to infer how extensive this material was, but it shows that Theophanes got *something*. Secondly, no matter the form or size of the material, Theophanes has written a different work than George. Whereas George is concerned with establishing chronologies and dynastic lists, Theophanes' text is more narrative in form. This may in part be because he deals with a time period that is closer to his own, but Theophanes' work has its own distinct authorial voice, and he bridges the divide between chronicle and classicizing histories that I pointed out earlier.

Still, just like George Synkellos, Theophanes too enumerates each year and lists events for each year. Not many Byzantine texts do this consistently, and Theophanes' text is true to the genre of a chronicle. The entry for each year starts with "a listing the year of the world, the year since the Incarnation, the regnal year of the Roman Emperor, the Persian Emperor, and the bishops of Rome, Constantinople, Jerusalem, Alexandria, and Antioch. After the conquest of the Persian Empire, it uses the years of the rulers of the Arabs in place of the Persian Emperors."[37]

For all his personal and religious biases, Theophanes describes many events where it is possible to discern a more complex 'reality' than the writer may have wanted to convey. If Theophanes wanted to distort historical facts to suit his own worldview completely, he would have glossed over much of what he describes and he would have left out much altogether.

[35] Theophanes 1997: p. 1
[36] See reference to this debate in Neville 2018: 61
[37] Neville 2018: 61

That he does not do this, makes his chronicle an important historical document. I will come back to this in my analysis.

Theophanes is not just an interpreter, of history, he is also important as a source. As he states himself:

> I did not set down anything of my own composition, but have made a selection from the ancient historians and prose-writers and have consigned to their proper places the events of every year, arranged without confusion. In this manner the readers may be able to know in which year of each emperor what event took place, be it military or ecclesiastical or civic or popular or of any other kind; for I believe that one who reads the actions of the ancients derives no small benefit from so doing.[38]

Especially for the time period 602 to 813 Theophanes is a primary source in the sense that he utilized writings that later have been almost entirely lost.[39]

In my thesis I have looked Theophanes' descriptions of the eight emperors that ruled the Byzantine empire between 717 and 813.

A few remarks must be made on the theological question of Iconoclasm since this is of crucial importance for Theophanes in his work. Neville writes that Theophanes does not significantly insert his own authorial voice into the text before his narrative reaches the reign of the emperor Leo III (717-41). Then Theophanes becomes "emotionally invested in telling a markedly moralizing story"[40] So what was this movement that upset him so? Iconoclasm was a major religious movement in the Byzantine world of the eighth and ninth centuries, even though its origins were much older.[41] It denied the holiness of icons and it rejected the veneration of icons.[42] Iconoclasm was not accepted by either the Western church or by the various Eastern churches as well, and so the dispute was only relevant in the Byzantine empire.[43] Theophanes was an iconodule, and in his text he clearly abhors the iconoclast emperors. As we shall see, this makes all the other characteristics of a ruler less relevant for

[38] Theophanes 1997: 2
[39] Mango and Scott 1997: Introduction, p. v
[40] Neville 2018: p. 62
[41] Hussey 2012: pp. 30ff
[42] Kazdhan 1991: p. 975
[43] We will see more on this below, where I analyze Empress Irene's convening of the Second Council of Nicaea.

him. Still, to give the old historian credit, in his reports on rulers he clearly disapproves of, he can still give them credit for actions well performed. As already mentioned, this gives his text credibility in spite of all his invective.

2.3.3 The life of al-Ṭabarī

Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī was born in Tabaristan, the northern part of modern Iran, in 839.[44] He came from a land-owning family, but it is unclear whether they were settlers of Arab origin from before Tabaristan came under Muslim control, or whether they were non-Arabs who converted early to Islam. Al-Ṭabarī himself seems to have avoided discussing his ancestry.[45] At the age of twelve, al-Ṭabarī moved to Ray to study, and later to Baghdad. He also spent some years in Syria and Egypt, attending lectures by famous *hadīth*-scholars. Around 870 al-Ṭabarī had established himself as a teacher and writer in Baghdad. Although he seems to never have been in close contact with official circles in the 'Abbasid caliphate, his family were connected to the powerful Tāhirids.[46] The Tāhirid family played an important role in the politics of the caliphate over several generations. The family originated in Khurasan, on the modern Iranian-Afghan frontier, and as with the family of al-Ṭabarī, they were early converts to Islam.[47] Both the Tāhirids and the family of al-Ṭabarī spoke Persian as their native language, but they used Arabic on public occasion and always wrote in Arabic. The Tāhirids seem to have kept a protective hand over al-Ṭabarī for much of his life.[48]

Al-Ṭabarī enjoyed a modest financial independence due to income from his family's estates in Tabaristan, and this gave him freedom to pursue his intellectual interests.[49] It was in Baghdad that al-Ṭabarī became famous as a scholar. He was a polymath, with a wide range of interests.[50] He belonged to the traditionalist school of thought which set the cultural tone of the ninth century[51], and he excelled particularly in the disciplines of legal history, Qur'anic studies, and history.[52]

[44] Josephson 2007: p. 59
[45] Josephson 2007: Footnote 6, pp. 59-60
[46] Josephson 2007: pp. 59-60
[47] Kennedy 2006: p. 91
[48] Josephson 2007: p. 59
[49] Al-Ṭabarī 1989: Vol. 1, General Introduction, p. 14
[50] Khalidi 2008: p. 2
[51] Josephson 2007: p. 60
[52] Rydving 2007: p. 11

Al-Ṭabarī is traditionally most famous for his *Commentary* on the Qur'an, but his large historical chronicle *Tarikh al-Rusul wa al-Muluk* (915), known as *History of the Messengers and Kings*, alternatively *History of Prophets and Kings*, was also widely read. His historical works have had an enormous influence on later historians and his works have functioned a model for how history should be written.[53] Already in his own time Al-Ṭabarī was deeply respected, and this status continued in the intellectual circles of orthodox Islam.

A modern historian has described al-Ṭabarī in the following way: He "brought to his work the scrupulousness and indefatigable longwindedness of the theologian, the accuracy and love of order of the scholarly jurist, and the insight into political affairs of the practicing lawyer-politician."[54]

Al-Ṭabarī seems never to have married.[55] He died in Baghdad in 923.[56]

2.3.4 The Chronicle of al-Ṭabarī

In the *History of the Messengers and Kings*, al-Ṭabarī combines the history of Creation and prophecy with the history of ancient nations, the Arabic conquests, and a history of the Islamic community up to Ṭabarī's own time. The modern translation of this work, edited by Ehsan Yar-Shater, takes up 40 volumes, each of them between 300-500 pages in length. Donner calls the overarching structure of al-Ṭabarī's chronicle a "story-line", or a master narrative. From a Muslim perspective it narrates key episodes in the history of the human race; the relationship of humanity to God is traced, along with the evolution of the Muslim community. This narrative affirmed the Islamic community as the one of the true faith and it explained how that community had come to be what it was in al-Ṭabarī's day.[57]

According to Rosenthal, the composition of the History changes through the work. Pre-Islamic history is told from the perspective of an Islamized Biblical history, Arab history, and Persian history. Annalistic presentation is used when the narrative reaches the time of the Prophet Muhammad. Individual years are presented with indications of sources and chains of

[53] Rosenthal 1968: p. 135
[54] Rosenthal 1968: 135
[55] Al-Ṭabarī 1989: Vol. 1, General Introduction, p. 33
[56] Al-Ṭabarī 1989: Vol. 1, General Introduction, p. 78
[57] Donner 1998: 129

transmitters. When al-Ṭabarī reaches his own time, his worldview becomes that of an intellectual living in Baghdad under ‘Abbasid rule.[58]

As for contemporary political issues, Rosenthal claims that al-Ṭabarī avoids unfavorable details about the ruling ‘Abbasids.[59] Donner, on the other hand, does not agree to this last point, and states to the contrary that al-Ṭabarī does not gloss over the sharp division between the Hāshimite family – the ‘Alids – and the ‘Abbasid government. Equally it is not clear whether he considered the ‘Abbasids an improvement over the Umayyads.[60]

Al-Ṭabarī lived in a time of transition, and even though he worked within a literate society, it was one where orality was still present as a living tradition.[61] The rich oral traditions from the Arabian peninsula had begun to be written down only in the late seventh and early eight centuries, and in Al-Ṭabarī’s time, they still impacted the form and organization of material. Al-Ṭabarī’s method consisted of presenting a consciously created literary imitation of older oral traditions. Even though his sources in the main were written works, he reworked them into shorter accounts and provided each of them with a chain of transmitters, thus keeping up the appearance of oral transmission.[62]

This collation of previous texts and oral stories raises the question of how accurate he was in his quoting. Since most of his sources are not preserved, the question cannot be satisfactorily answered. Even where a source is independently preserved, the possibility exists that Al-Ṭabarī used another version or recension. Thus small changes in wording, omissions, or a deliberate failure to include all available sources, could seriously alter the narrative. Yet, in general, modern historians credit al-Ṭabarī with being a scholar who reported and commented on his sources honestly.[63]

In this thesis I look at al-Ṭabarī’s descriptions of the seven caliphs that ruled between 749 and 833.

[58] Rosenthal 1968: p. 135
[59] Rosenthal 1968: p. 135
[60] Donner 1998: 132
[61] Josephson 2007: p. 61
[62] Josephson 2007: p. 61
[63] Al-Ṭabarī 1989: Vol. 1, Introduction, p. 54

2.4 Theory

As stated above, I have made use of two theorists of history in writing this thesis, Quentin Skinner and Micael Mann.

Skinner writes about the study of history and how a modern historian must approach human beings of past societies:

> […] our only evidence of their beliefs will normally be contained in whatever texts and other utterances they may happen to have left behind. It is of course likely that some of these may be pervasively marked by hidden codes such as irony. But we have no option but to assume that, in general, they can be treated as relatively straightforward expressions of beliefs. Unless we can assume some such convention of truthfulness, we cannot hope to make any headway with the project of explaining what they believed.[64]

Skinner goes on to say that the historian identifies the beliefs of his historical subjects, and then follows the logical subsequent task of explaining or commenting on them. "[…] it will generally be fatal to revise the terms in which they are explained."[65] Historical texts, the historians' sources, have been written in a specific place and time.[66] "We need, in short, to be ready to take as our province nothing less than the whole of […] the social imaginary, the complete range of inherited symbols and representations that constitute the subjectivity of an age."[67] This is indeed highly ambitious, and even if I do not aspire to be able to grasp the works of Theophanes and al-Ṭabarī in such an all-encompassing sense, I agree with Skinner's statements, and they make up the underlying basis for the present study: I approach the texts of both Theophanes and al-Ṭabarī with the assumption that the two medieval historians wrote as honestly as they could about the events they describe. If we had available wildly divergent alternative histories, or suspected Theophanes or al-Ṭabarī for massive distortion of historical facts, the matter would be different. However, Theophanes and al-Ṭabarī are acknowledged by modern historians as scrupulous and reliable as far as can be ascertained.

Michael Mann's use of sociological methods in analyzing historical phenomena has been of more practical value for the present study. Mann has worked extensively with analyzing

[64] Skinner 2002: p. 40
[65] Skinner 2002: p. 51
[66] Skinner 2002: p. 57
[67] Skinner 2002: p. 102

power relations in human societies. In "The Sources of Social Power", Mann develops a theory of how is power exercised in human societies.[68]

Initially, though, when I started working on this thesis, I was not sure if his approach and methods could be applied to my work. My first ambition was to identify how Theophanes and al-Ṭabarī describe the *legitimacy* of the various rulers – what makes a ruler legitimate or not. This turned out to be a fruitless search since the question soon evolved into: Legitimate to whom? Theophanes was deeply religious man, and in his text, the fundamental basis for legitimacy is the right faith. To Theophanes it is only the iconodule emperors and empress Irene that are legitimate. But as we will see below, the rulers Theophanes describes certainly have power, or not, independent of their theological positions. Even Theophanes' descriptions reveal this. So legitimacy turned out to be of little use as a basis for analyzing Theophanes.

Al-Ṭabarī is more nuanced, but here too the question of legitimacy is of less relevance. Al-Ṭabarī work reflects the basic Islamic premise that a legitimate ruler needed genealogical affiliation to the Prophet's family as a basic requirement for rulership. Legitimacy was thus limited to different branches of the same extended family, but internally in the family, the question of actual power remained in practice separate from theoretical legitimacy.

It turned out that this line of investigation was not very fruitful. What seemed much more worthwhile, was to look at how Theophanes and al-Ṭabarī describe the actual power of the various rulers. In this Mann turned out to be a great clarifier:

> This means that one conceptual distinction between power and authority (i.e., power considered legitimate by all affected by it) will not figure much in this book. It is rare to find power that is either largely legitimate or largely illegitimate because its exercise is normally so double-edged.[69]

Working through the sources, I found exactly that, legitimacy was a shifty entity; actual power turned out to be a much more relevant aspect of how Theophanes and al-Ṭabarī describe their rulers. I thus changed my focus to the study of how Theophanes and al-Ṭabarī depict the power of rulers, and the more I read of Theophanes and al-Ṭabarī, and the more my

[68] See Mann Vol. 1 2005, Vol. 2 2003, Vol. 3 2012, and Vol. 4 2013. I have used only volume 1 for the present study. It is in this volume Mann explains his theories and methods, and it is here that he applies them to history from the "beginning to A.D. 1760".
[69] Mann 2005: p. 7

own categorization evolved, I came to see that Mann's views would help me in "framing" my findings – he gives general categories that help considerably for analyzing sources on a micro-level. Mann has written as a general remark on the study of history that "There are more social and historical data than we can digest".[70] This certainly applies to the works of Theophanes and al-Ṭabarī. Mann' solution to the general problem is to develop a balance between theory and historical research. In examining the works of Theophanes and al-Ṭabarī, I have found Mann's theories extremely useful and applicable in handling the vast amount of information in the two texts. Mann emphasizes how a strong sense of theory makes it possible to decide which facts might be the most important, and what might be central and what might be marginal in understanding how a particular society works.[71] In the following paragraphs I sketch out Mann's main arguments and his theory of the study of power.

Mann conceives of societies to be constituted of "multiple overlapping and intersecting sociospatial networks of power". He then identifies social power in any given society as control over the following four resources: ideological, political, military, and economic. In Mann's view, the interrelations of these four types of social power give the best basis for a general account of societies, their structure, and their history. [72] The networks are according to Mann, "not dimensions, levels, or factors of a single totality", but also "organizations, institutional means of attaining human goals". It is not the strength of human desires for ideological, economic, military, or political satisfaction that makes for the primacy of these four sources of power, but how each of them possess a particular organizational means to attain human goals.[73]

Mann concedes that this division into four fundamental types of power is a deviation from orthodoxy, where traditionally a political category has included control over military forces. Mann wants to separate political and military power, into on the one hand the "central polity", including the state apparatus and if existing, the political parties; physical or military force is something else according to Mann, and thus a separate category.[74] For the present study, this is a relevant division. In Theophanes and al-Ṭabarī we see that both the Byzantine emperors and the Islamic caliphs exemplify this concept: both could hold political power in the center,

[70] Mann 2005: Foreword, p. vii
[71] Mann 2005: Foreword, p. vii
[72] Mann 2005: pp. 1-2 and p. 522
[73] Mann 2005: p. 2
[74] Mann 2005: pp. 10-11

but in the provinces autonomous generals exercised alternative power. Especially in the Islamic empire this constituted an immense challenge to the caliphs.

Mann criticizes what he calls the conventional way of writing about power relations, and how this is done in an abstract language. Mann operates at what he claims to be a more concrete, sociospatial and organizational level of analysis. For him the central problems concern the capacity to organize and control people, materials, and territories through organization, control, logistics, communication, and how this capacity has developed throughout history.[75] He defines power in the most general sense to be the ability "to pursue and attain goals through mastery of one's environment".[76] Social power entails two more specific senses. One is mastery exercised over other people. This definition restricts power to its 'distributive aspect', A's power over B. In this perspective there is a fixed amount of power – a zero-sum game – where power is distributed among the participants. The second aspect of power is 'collective', where people can cooperate and thus enhance their collective power over third parties. These two aspects of power, distributive and collective, operate simultaneously and intertwined in most social relations.[77]

Mann further elaborates his argument: when people enter into cooperative, collective power relations with one another, their implementation of collective goals entails social organization and division of labor. This in turn leads to social stratification – those at the top have immense organizational superiority over the rest of society. "The few at the top can keep the masses at the bottom compliant, provided their control is institutionalized in the laws and the norms of the social group in which both operate."[78] This ensures that the masses comply, since they lack the collective organization to oppose those who control the distributive and collective power organizations in any given society – "They are *organizationally outflanked*".[79] As I stated above, Mann points out that the question of whether power is considered legitimate by those affected by it, does not figure much in his theory.[80]

This last point is probably where my findings are most out of tune with Mann, because both Theophanes and al-Ṭabarī are very much concerned with legitimacy. At the same time,

[75] Mann 2005: pp. 2-3
[76] Mann 2005: p. 6
[77] Mann 2005: p. 6
[78] Mann 2005: pp. 6-7
[79] Mann 2005: p. 7
[80] Mann 2005: p. 7

however, in both their works it is obvious that the conceptual distinction between power and authority in many instances is a moot point: whoever controls the power organizations in the Byzantine or the Islamic societies, are the ones who prevail, regardless of legitimacy. In that sense, Mann is right in placing little emphasis on it. Yet, as we will see below, in Theophanes and al-Ṭabarī's conceptions of what make a powerful ruler, the question of legitimacy is important.

Mann's next elaboration is the concept of four ideal-typical forms of organizational reach: extensive, intensive, authoritative, and diffused power. 'Extensive power' "refers to the ability to organize large numbers of people over far-flung territories in order to engage in minimally stable cooperation." And then 'intensive power', which "refers to the ability to organize tightly and command a high level of mobilization or commitment from the participants, whether the area and numbers covered are great or small".[81] He then writes that this talk of power as organizations may convey a misleading impression, "as if societies were merely collections of large, authoritative power organizations".[82] This they are not, power can be less organized, in market exchange, for example, in which people through exchange achieve separate goals. Even though it embodies distributive power, it may possess little authoritative organization to enforce this power. It is a form of human power, but with little authoritative organization. Having said this, Mann distinguishes his two next types of power: 'Authoritative power', which is "actually willed by groups and institutions. It comprises definite commands and conscious obedience." And lastly, 'diffused power', which "spreads in a more spontaneous, unconscious, decentered way throughout a population, resulting in similar social practices that embody power relations but are not explicitly commanded". Diffused power does not comprise command and obedience, but "an understanding that these practices are natural or moral or result from self-evident common interest".[83]

Additionally, Mann points out that most theorists prefer abstract notions of social structure, ignoring geographical and sociospatial aspects of societies.[84] This aspect of power will be relevant for my analysis below, where we will see that the situation for the rulers in Byzantium was different than for the rulers of the vast Islamic empire.

[81] Mann 2005: p. 7
[82] Mann 2005: p. 8
[83] Mann 2005: p. 8
[84] Mann 2005: p. 9

Mann's nuances cannot be further described here. What remains is to give a short overview of his main classificatory principle: four sources of social power:

Ideological: Mann defines ideological power through two distinct means. The first is a "transcendent vision" of social authority, where human beings are united through the claim that they possess "ultimately meaningful, often divinely granted, common qualities". These qualities are claimed to be the essence of humanity, divided though it may be by other "secular" organizations of economic, military, and political power. This transcendence has often taken a divine form: igniting common humanity is a spark that comes from God.[85]

Mann's second means of ideological power is "immanence", where the strengthening of the internal morale of some existing social group gives it a sense of ultimate significance and meaning in the cosmos. This reinforces the group's normative solidarity and gives it common ritual and aesthetic practices.[86]

Political: In Mann's view, political power consists of two means. The first is "territorial centralization", where dominant social groups, in pursuit of their goals, "require social regulation over a confined, bounded territory".[87] This is highly relevant for studying the differences between Theophanes and al-Ṭabarī. A second means of political power is "geopolitical diplomacy". Since no known state has been able to control all relations crossing its boundaries, much social power has remained "transnational", making possible "the diffusion of both transnational class relations and transcendent ideologies".[88]

Military: The means of military power, according to Mann, are "concentrated coercion". Both in battle, obviously, but also from its uses in peacetime. Mann argues that in peacetime use the "compulsory cooperation" that military force ensures, is a means "of controlling societies and of increasing their collective powers by intensifying the exploitation of concentrated pockets of labor".[89] Mann also writes that most historic states have not possessed a monopoly of organized military force, and that conquest may be undertaken by military states that are independent of their home states, a third point to note is that military

[85] Mann 2005: p. 519
[86] Mann 2005: p. 519
[87] Mann 2005: p. 521
[88] Mann 2005: p. 522
[89] Mann 2005: pp. 520-521

organization, even if under state control, is usually institutionally separate from other state agencies.[90]

While the first means of military power is clearly relevant for the present analysis, using Mann's second perspective, is very useful in highlighting the differences between Theophanes and al-Ţabarī. As for Mann's other perspectives on military power, we will see that here too, they are relevant in identifying differences.

Economic: Mann terms the means of economic power "circuits of praxis". Arguing that economic power distinctly integrates two spheres of activity, he elaborates: The first sphere is "the active intervention of human beings through labor". The second is how "goods taken from nature are circulated and exchanged for transformation and ultimately for consumption". Economic power gives access to both the activities of the mass of the people, and to the communications circuits of society. Mann describes it as a "formidable and essential part of any stable power structure".[91]

Mann's four categories constitutes a classificatory system, but that does not mean that the four categories have been of equal importance at all times. In various times and places, they have each of them offered "enhanced capacity for organization that has enabled the form of its organization to dictate for a time the form of societies at large".[92] On the contrary, as Mann points out, the various historical societies he bases his research on, show distinct differences in this regard. Power in one society may be based on ideology and politics more than on economic and military might, or vice versa. As we shall see below, this emphasis on the different capacities for organization will be important in analyzing Theophanes and al-Ţabarī. Both describe certain capacities as much more important than others.

As I read through the works of Theophanes and al-Ṭabarī, it became more and more clear that this aspect of Mann's theory – the difference in categorical emphasis – could be seen in both works. Even though the various descriptions of Theophanes and al-Ṭabarī can be placed in all of Mann's general four categories, it is clear that the majority of them fits in the *ideology* category. This will be reflected in my analysis below. As I have found many more descriptions of ideological power in both writers, they constitute a larger part of the analysis

[90] Mann 2005: p. 11
[91] Mann 2005: p. 520
[92] Mann 2005: p. 3

than the other three. One simple observation can explain why: in my reading and sifting of the texts, there gradually emerged a set of sub-categories under the general category for ideology. Whereas the other three main categories continued to be sufficient as categories to place descriptions in, the ideological category needed a more comprehensive way of detailing descriptions. In the following chapter this is what I hope to demonstrate.

Chapter 3 A quantitative analysis

To assess the two chronicles on a quantitative level, I have searched through the descriptions of all the rulers one by one, to find the relevant passages which describe various aspects of the rulers' power according to Theophanes and al-Ṭabarī. The scope of this thesis does not allow for including these passages in full. However, what I do in this chapter, is to give a synthesis of the characteristics that emerge for each ruler. Due to the length of the sources, the summary I made to arrive at my list of categories is itself too long to include here. It is therefore to be found in appendices A and B, for Theophanes and al-Ṭabarī respectively.

So what do I find when looking for descriptions of power? Initially when one reads the two sources, the vast number of events and people described is overwhelming. However, after a while, a repeating pattern emerges. I have already written something on this in the general descriptions of the two chronicles. Although Theophanes and al-Ṭabarī describe a wide variety of events and the succession of many rulers, there are some recurring tropes and themes in both their descriptions of power. What emerges is a finite number of concepts that are similar in both authors, and this makes categorization and comparison possible.

At the same time, the study reveals that the contents of a category may be slightly different in each author, even though the general characteristics of the category may be the same. This is exactly what I want to study closer, and what we will look at below.

Since the two works are so different in length, it is not possible to compare the *number* of instances a category is used. Rather, I have looked at the emphasis each historian has put on the various categories – how often, relative to the other categories, a particular category has been used. Even this is not possible to enumerate exactly, but certain tendencies can be discerned.

I first turn to Theophanes.

3.1 Summary of relevant source material in Theophanes' Chronicle

So, how does Theophanes write about each ruler's power? The following is an overview over the most important characteristics given by Theophanes. The historical accuracy of these descriptions is not relevant here. What matters is how Theophanes portrays events. In some instances, I point out if Theophanes is wildly inaccurate according to contemporary views. Whether he did this consciously, to obscure the facts and enhance his own view of things, or whether he himself believed what he wrote, is of course impossible to ascertain. The point here is to convey Theophanes' view of the various rulers. Before looking at each ruler, it is useful to start with an overview of which rulers will be studied.

List of Byzantine rulers:

Reigns:	Rulers:
717-741	Leo III (the Isaurian)
741-775	Constantine V
741-743	Artabasdos (rival emperor at Constantinople)
775-780	Leo IV the Khazar
780-790	Constantine VI the Blinded and his mother Irene the Athenian (regent)
791-797	Constantine VI (formally alone but with Irene)
797-802	Irene alone
802-811	Nikephoros I
811-811	Staurakios
811-813	Michael I Rangabe

Now, let us look more closely at the individual rulers and how Theophanes describe their different means of power.

717-741 Leo III (the Isaurian)

Breaks his promise/Iconoclast – Bad omens/religious failing – Legitimate succession – Breaks his promise/Iconoclast – Political/diplomatic failure, Political failure – Political/military success – Religious failure/Iconoclast – Religious failure/Iconoclast – Diplomatic failure – Military failure – Avarice – General condemnation of Leo' rule

741-743 Artabasdos (rival emperor in Constantinople)

Orthodox/Iconodule – Military and political failure

741-775 Constantine V

Religious failure/Iconoclast – Military and political challenge – Religious failure/Iconoclast – Military and political success – Brutal – Bad omen/Religious failure/ Disfavored by God – Legitimate succession – Religious failure/Iconoclast – Conscious (good) ruler – Military failure – Military success – Religious failure/bad omens – Brutal/religious persecution – Conscious (good) ruler – Brutal/religious persecution – Avarice – Immoral/depraved – Avarice – Popular/Generous – Legitimate succession – Brutal/religious persecution – Military success – Military failure/inept

775-780 Leo IV the Khazar

Popular/Generous – Iconophile/Orthodox: (for a while) – Popular/Legitimate succession: written declarations on the holy table/crowns his son in the Hippodrome – Military success – Avarice/dies from wounds inflicted by wearing the crown

780-790 Irene the Athenian (regent)

Orthodox/Iconophile – Political control – Legitimate – Brutal – Orthodox – Good omens – Political/diplomatic success – Military success – Military failure – Military success – Orthodox/religious/political leader (Nicaea) – Diplomatic/military/political/(personal) failure – Political failure

791-797 Constantine VI alone

Political success/deposes his mother – Weak rule/proclaims Irene co-emperor – Military failure/political unrest – Brutal – Theological failure – Military failure – Weak/deposed by his mother

797-802 Irene alone

Popular – Diplomatic failure – Military failure – Political/diplomatic success – Generous – Politically weak – Dethroned

802-811 Nikephoros I

Illegitimate succession – Bad omens – Treacherous – Succession, but Staurakios is "unsuitable" – Weak religious/political control – Military failure – Military failure – Avarice – Brutal/depraved – Religious/political failure – Military failure – Religious failure/liar – Unpopular – Brutal/not to be trusted – Brutal/avarice – Bad omen – Heretic – Heretic/brutal – Greedy/unjust – Military loss – Humiliated – Negative characteristics

811-811 Staurakios

Unlucky – Political failure – Forced to abdicate

811-813 Michael I Rangabe

Makes promises – Legitimate – Generous – Orthodox – Diplomatic success – Legitimate – Succession – Generous – Theological dispute (Iconophile, but there is a call for a return to Iconoclasm) – Military failure – Political and theological conflict – Military failure/abdication

3.2 Categories in Theophanes

We thus have many different types of descriptions of the rulers. The following is my attempt to categorize the relevant descriptions of various types of power. The features of each category are a synthesis of the various opinions, perceptions, events, places, objects and so on, that we find in Theophanes. A great many details are thus lost in my summary, but we will look at some of these specifics when we analyze a sample of relevant sources below, in

Chapter 4. In my reading of Theophanes I have found the following set of categories that describe the power of the emperors:

- **Orthodox**
- **Omens**
- **Legitimate**
- **Pious**
- **Personal**
- **Political**
- **Diplomatic**
- **Military**
- **Economic**

The following is a short summary of the contents of each category:

Orthodox (Iconoclast or Iconodule: Does the ruler uphold the correct faith? Control over various religious institutions, including synods and 'schools'; 'Ritual' ability: holder of speeches/sermons; God's representative on Earth: 'The good ruler'- an inspiration to the people.)

Omens (Omens related to the ruler's person/behavior; The empire's prospects based on the ruler's person/behavior)

Legitimate (Genealogy/proximity to a legitimate ancestor; Acclamation/oath of allegiance; Letters concerning allegiance or refutation; Symbols - regalia)

Pious (Personal behavior; Favored/disfavored by God; Does the ruler live up to moral standards? Does the ruler have moral rectitude?)

Personality (Strong/weak; Brutal/lenient; Avaricious/generous; Keeps promises; Stable mood; Trustworthy; Wise; Lucky; Dutiful; Conscientious; Popular)

Political (Control over the military; the bureaucracy; the elite)

Diplomatic (Control over diplomatic relations)

Military (Control over the military; Ability as a strategic and tactical commander; Responsibility for military success/failure)

Economic (Control over economic policy, taxes, payment to military forces, donations to the religious institutions and gifts to people)

3.3 Summary of relevant source material in al-Ṭabarī's chronicle

I now move on to how al-Ṭabarī describe how the Islamic rulers wielded power. As with Theophanes, I first list an overview of the relevant rulers, before listing the summaries for the individual rulers. Finally, I list the common categories that I find.

List of Islamic rulers

The Islamic rulers I study, are the first seven ʻAbbasid caliphs.

Reigns:	Rulers:
749-754	Abū al-ʿAbbās al-Saffāh
754-775	Abū Jaʿfar al-Manṣūr
775-785	Al-Mahdī
785-786	Mūsā al-Hādī
786-809	Hārūn al-Rashīd
809-813	Muḥammad al-Amīn
813-833	ʻAbdallāh b. Hārūn al-Maʾmūn

749-754 Abū al-ʿAbbās al-Saffāh

Legitimate: Genealogy – Controlling wealth – Pious – Brutal – Orthodox – Weak ruler – No war leader

754-775 Abū Jaʿfar al-Manṣūr

Legitimate: Genealogy – Personal weakness/military weakness – Brave, but not a military leader – Political weakness – Political/military weakness – Benevolent/pious – Piety – Entertainment was never seen in al-Mansur's house – Humble/self-reflection – Magnanimous – Cunning – Angry – Shifting appearances/personality – Magic – Use of astrologer – Impious – Avoiding a sworn contract – Debatable legitimacy – Stinginess – Building Baghdad – Devious/evil – Wise – Lacking religious authority – Asserting religious authority

775-785 Al-Mahdī Volume 29

Insignia of royalty: The staff of the Prophet and the Prophet's mantle, and the seal of the caliphate – His bad Arabic – Generous – Weak, and easily influenced by his wife – Conflict over legitimacy – Pious – Dissolute and licentious

785-786 Mūsā al-Hādī

Politically weak – Politically weak – Personally weak – Political/personal weakness – Negligent of duties – Shifting personality – Harelip

786-809 Hārūn al-Rashīd

Insignia of royalty: The Prophet's cloak, the sword, and the parasol, the seal ring, and scepter – Succession: documents signed at Mecca and deposited in the Ka'bah – Military: initially a joke/then successful – Politically weak: initially – Immature/weak – Generous – Improves in stature – Generous – Pious – Has God's favor – Lacks political control – Dynastic control – Needs legal backing in formal decisions/needs a judge – Weak – Donations, poetry, literature, religious law

809-813 Muḥammad al-Amīn

Religious failure: tears up his father's letters in Mecca – Too young – Hailed as nobly born – Asserting control – Weak: cannot assert control over his brother – Insignia of royalty: seal, scepter, and the mantle of the Prophet – Weak – Politically weak: Authority contested –

Generous – Heedless of signs: astrologer and the Moon (brave?) – Not too evil – Loses authority – Resented – Bad omens – Frivolous – Ignominious death

813-833 ʻAbdallāh b. Hārūn al-Maʾmūn

Succession – strong – Weak/small economic control – Economic control – Politically weak – Political failure – Religious/political failure – Religious/political failure – Religious failure – Politically weak – Politically weak – Controlling succession – Controlling succession – Controlling succession – Not controlling succession – Not controlling succession – Succession/economy – weak – Succession/political – weak – Succession/political – weak – Succession/political - weak – Succession/political control – Economic control – Economic ideal – Economic control – Geography (Andalusia outside of the caliph's control) – Economic control – Theological control – Military control – Military control – Political control – Military/political/diplomatic control – Theological control/losing control

3.4 Categories in al-Ţabarī

As we saw with Theophanes, there are many different types of descriptions of the rulers in al-Ţabarī as well. Again I have categorized the relevant descriptions of various types of power. Here too the features of each category are a synthesis of the various opinions, perceptions, events, places, objects and so on, that I find, this time in al-Ţabarī. In al-Ţabarī I find the following set of categories that describe the power of the caliphs:

- **Orthodox**
- **Omens**
- **Legitimate**
- **Pious**
- **Personal**
- **Political**
- **Diplomatic**
- **Military**
- **Economic**

An initial point is that I find the same set of categories in both Theophanes and al-Ţabarī. I will come back to that important point below. Let us first look at a short summary of the contents of each category from al-Ţabarī's work:

Orthodox (Sunni or Shia ('Alid): does the ruler uphold the correct faith? Control over various religious institutions, including who leads the annual Pilgrimage to Mecca; 'Ritual' ability: holder of speeches/sermons; God's representative on Earth: 'The good ruler'- an inspiration to the people.)

Omens (Omens related to the ruler's person/behavior; The empire's prospects based on the ruler's person/behavior)

Legitimate (Genealogy/proximity to a legitimate ancestor; Acclamation/oath of allegiance; Letters concerning allegiance or refutation; Symbols - regalia)

Pious (Personal behavior; Favored/disfavored by God; Does the ruler live up to moral standards? Does the ruler have moral rectitude?)

Personality (Strong/weak; Brutal/lenient; Avaricious/generous; Keeps promises; Stable mood; Trustworthy; Wise; Lucky; Dutiful; Conscientious; Popular)

Political (Control over the military; the bureaucracy; the elite)

Diplomatic (Control over diplomatic relations)

Military (Control over the military; Ability as a strategic and tactical commander; Responsibility for military success/failure)

Economic (Control over economic policy, taxes, payment to military forces, donations to the religious institutions and gifts to people)

3.5 Counting categories

The summaries of how Theophanes and al-Ţabarī describe the power of the emperors and the caliphs can now be compared. As I mentioned above, I find the same set of categories in both Theophanes and al-Ţabarī. They are the following:

- **Orthodox**
- **Omens**

- **Legitimate**
- **Pious**
- **Personal**
- **Political**
- **Diplomatic**
- **Military**
- **Economic**

The list of categories above can be grouped into Mann's broad categorization, his four main divisions, *Ideological*, *Political*, *Military*, and *Economic* power. As I have shown above, the *Ideological* category needs to be further divided into the following sub-categories Orthodox, Omens, Legitimate, Pious – they are all related to ideological power; the main category of *political* power is also sub-divided, into Political and Diplomatic categories. Finally the categories Military and Economic are similar to Mann's *military* and *economic* power.

This in is an interesting result. Now, it could be that my listing is biased, that I wanted to "get" this result, and so shaped the listing to get it. But I will argue that this is not so. In reading both Theophanes and al-Ṭabarī these are the themes that recur again and again in both writers. Does that mean that Theophanes and al-Ṭabarī describe the same kind of societies? The fact that the categories are basically identical, serves to confirm this, and in a broad sense this is true – both the Byzantine and the Islamic empires were agrarian, pre-industrial societies. However, it is when we go into the details that interesting similarities and differences manifest themselves. The investigation of these similarities and differences are the essence of my thesis, and I will analyze relevant details in Chapter 4 below. For now, it is the quantitative aspects of the categories that will be discussed.

To repeat: even though the summaries show some differences, they are also to a large degree similar. This fact confirms Mann's categorization. His work, after all, is based on a meta-analysis of extensive research on pre-industrial societies from a diverse geographical range and large timespans, including those of Theophanes and al-Ṭabarī. The task in this thesis is to scrutinize these general tendencies and see how they manifest themselves in Theophanes and al-Ṭabarī.

An important point that emerges from this is that Mann's categories are not equally important in Theophanes and al-Ţabarī. We see how Mann's principle of emphasis becomes important, the importance of any on category differs in time and place. The descriptions given in Theophanes and al-Ṭabarī reveal emphasis on the ideological category in particular.

The ideological aspect of power is obviously important to both Theophanes and al-Ţabarī. Whether this reflects the actual historical realities, is not of major importance for my purposes. I register what Theophanes and al-Ţabarī find to be important. Still, I want to point out what Mann says about this time period: he argues that the role of extensive ideological movements like Christianity and Islam has been historically confined to the time period from about 200 B.C. to about A.D. 1200. The reorganizing powers of salvationist religions were particularly strong in this period, according to Mann. Before this period, it was not possible due to a lack of infrastructural inventions like diffused literacy and the emergence of trading networks interstitial to contemporary empires. Later the European, secular multistate system made the reorganizing role of ideological power less important in that part of the world. Mann does not mention later development in the Islamic world, but it is not of relevance in this thesis.[93] The important thing is to note that ideological power is important to Theophanes and al-Ţabarī, which fits well with Mann's analysis.

A final point is that Theophanes and al-Ţabarī may use the same categories, but due to the very different lengths of their respective texts, it not possible to compare the two numerically; I will therefore study the relative frequency of categories in the two works.

With the above proviso, I will argue that the categories are sufficiently equal to warrant a comparison. Let us thus take a closer look at what emerges when I list the categories schematically. The minus symbol signifies a negative side to the ruler in the relevant category; a plus sign means a positive description.

[93] Mann 2005: p. 526

Table 1: A quantitative list of rulers and descriptions in Theophanes:

	Orthodox	Omens	Succession	Pious	Personal	Political	Diplomatic	Military	Economic
Leo III	- - - - -	-	+	-		- - - +	- -	+ -	-
Artabasdos	+					-		-	
Constantine V	- - - - - - - -	- - -	+ +	-	+ + + - - -	- +		- + - + + -	-
Leo IV	+ -		+		+ +			+	+ -
Irene	+ + + +	+	+		+ -	+ - - -	+ - - +	+ - + - -	
Constantine VI	+ -		+		-	+ - - -		- -	
Nikephoros I	- - - -	- -	- -	- -	- - - -	- -		- - - -	- - -
Staurakios			-			_			
Michael I	+ + -		+ + + -				+	-	+

Table 2: A quantitative list of rulers and descriptions in al-Ṭabarī

	Orthodox	Omens	Succession	Pious	Personal	Political	Diplomatic	Military	Economic
Abū al-ʿAbbās al-Saffāh	+		+	+	+	-		+	+
Abū Jaʿfar al-Manṣūr	- +	+ +	+ -	+ + + - -	- - - - - + +	-		- -	-
Al-Mahdī	+		+ -	+ -	- -	-			+
Mūsā al-Hādī	+				- - -	- - - -			
Hārūn al-Rashīd	+ - +		+ +	+	- + -	- + -		- +	+ +
Muḥammad al-Amīn	- +	- -	- - +	-	+ - -	- -		-	
Abdallāh b. Hārūn al-Maʾmūn	- - - + + -		+ + + + - - +			- - - - - + + +		+ + + +	- + + + + +

Whether positive or negative, we see that the majority of the descriptions fall in the *ideology* category. As for the various sub-categories in *ideology*, the differences are not large, except for orthodoxy. This sub-category is more prevalent in Theophanes than al-Ţabarī, and Theophanes uses more negative characteristics. Both results are to be expected given Theophanes' theological position.

The military category is more prevalent in Theophanes, which must be because Theophanes describes the various emperors and their campaigns, whereas the rulers in al-Ţabarī do not often participate in campaigns personally.

The economic category is deceptive in that Theophanes has fewer listings than al-Ţabarī, but the descriptions in Theophanes' work are more detailed (with one exception, as we shall see below).

As these short comments show, simple numerical listings are deceptive: they do not allow for a proper evaluation of the differences in the descriptions. What is useful, though, is how this type of listing clarifies the relative weighting of the various categories.

To conclude this chapter on the quantitative aspect of the sources: On the surface it seems that Theophanes and al-Ţabarī find the same aspects of a ruler relevant for his/her power. The differences emerge when we look at the details. The following chapter do just that: for each category a selection of passages from both historians will be compared.

Chapter 4 A qualitative analysis

Before analyzing extracts from the sources in detail a few preliminary remarks are in order. Firstly, I use what I consider to be relevant examples from each of the sources, those that best exemplify the essence of each of Mann's four categories. They will not necessarily be the same number from Theophanes and al-Ţabarī – it depends more on relevance than numerical parity.

Secondly, the situations and events I have chosen are typical – systemic – not just anecdotal. They exemplify the structural phenomena which are possible to extract from Theophanes and al-Ţabarī. They write repeatedly about phenomena occurring again and again, such as religious and political rituals, military events, and some economic topics. I show this for each of Mann's main categories through a main example plus references to relevant and/or similar situations.

Finally, there is the challenge of how to differentiate between the four categories when choosing examples. As we will see, it is in particular the separation between ideological and political aspects that can be difficult.

4.1 Ideological

This section analyses two important events in the Byzantine Empire and in the ‘Abbasid caliphate, respectively. The first event is the Byzantine emperor Leo IV’s effort to secure the succession of his son, the future Constantine VI, in the year 775. The second event is the Caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd actions, in the year 802, to secure the successions of three of his sons, and the order in which they should succeed each other.

Leo IV's arrangements

We look at the Byzantine example first. The year 775 was the first in the reign of Leo.[94] His father, Constantine V had died the year before, from an unknown disease while on campaign against the Bulgarians.[95] According to Theophanes, Leo is initially popular among the people and the notables. Leo appears to be pious, orthodox, an iconophile and a friend to the “holy Mother of God and of the monks”.[96] Theophanes was an iconophile and so initially in his descriptions he is content with Leo.

To improve his ability to control internal events in the empire, Leo increases the number of military contingents in each of the *themata*, the military divisions (and territorial units) of the empire, each administered by a governor, the *strategos*, who combined both military and civil power.[97] Leo also increases the *tagmata*, the contingents of the professional army under the direct command of the emperor.[98] All this, writes Theophanes, makes the emperor very popular and results in the commanders of the themata entering Constantinople with a great throng of men, to request that Leo’s son, Constantine, be made emperor.[99] It is not obvious that the rich *strategoi* – members of the leading Byzantine families – should support an emperor. Sometimes there were serious conflicts between the powerful strategoi and the

[94] Theophanes 1997: p. 620
[95] Theophanes 1997: p. 619
[96] Theophanes 1997: p. 620
[97] Kazdhan 1991: p. 2034
[98] Kazdhan 1991: p. 2007
[99] Theophanes 1997: p. 620

emperors. The creation of a professional army of tagmata by Constantine V was to be a counterweight to the power of the strategoi.[100]

That the strategoi now want Leo's son as emperor, shows how popular he must have been. The event takes place during Easter, which was an important religious festival for the Byzantines. Theophanes does not say so explicitly, but it is probably not a coincidence that the matter of succession to the imperial throne was dealt with during such a symbol-laden period in the Christian calendar. As the unfolding of events show, it is also obvious that it was carefully planned. As Theophanes describes it, Leo replies to the strategoi and other nobles, "[…] according to imperial custom: 'My son is an only child and I am afraid of doing so lest I suffer the fate of all men and, while he is an infant, you put him to death and appoint another.'" The men assure Leo under oath that they will not be ruled by anyone other than Leo's son, should Leo die.[101] Leo's hesitancy may reflect genuine concern, or it may be a more ritualistic modesty. It is hard to tell from Theophanes' text which it is, but a set of ceremonies now take place in Constantinople: "From Palm Sunday until Holy Thursday the people importuned him and gathered in the Hippodrome to make this request, and on Holy Friday he ordered them to take the oath."[102] Theophanes goes on to describe how all the people, those of the themata, the members of the Senate, the City tagmata and "all the citizens and artisans swore on the holy and life-giving Cross not to accept an emperor other than Leo and Constantine and their descendants, and they set down their oath in signed documents".[103] That this collective oath-taking takes place in the Hippodrome is no coincidence, the large horse-racing arena was at the center of Constantinople's public life. Theophanes describes its use over the centuries: it is a place for different types of public entertainment, not only horse races; it is a place for the emperor to meet the population of Constantinople, and by extension, the empire, both as a political and a religious figure; it is a place for public executions and for public shaming; it is also a place for victorious emperors and generals to celebrate triumphs after victory in war against the empire's enemies.

Theophanes then goes on to describe what happens on the next day, Holy Saturday: Leo goes to the Great Palace, and the Tribunal of the Nineteen Couches. Together with other male

[100] Treadgold 1997: pp. 381-83
[101] Theophanes 1997: p. 620
[102] Theophanes 1997: p. 621
[103] Theophanes 1997: p. 621

family members and the young Constantine, Leo then proceeds to the "Great Church" – Hagia Sophia – where Constantine is confirmed as emperor:

> […] and, after changing the altar-cloth according to imperial custom, he mounted the ambo with his son and the patriarch. All the people entered the church and deposited their written declarations on the holy table. The emperor addressed them as follows: 'Behold, brethren, I am fulfilling your request and granting you my son as emperor. Behold, you are receiving him from the Church and from Christ's hand.'[104]

Here we see the emperor changing the altar-cloth, which was the tradition on Holy Saturday.[105] He mounts the ambo with his son and the patriarch – this is an important symbolic act: the ambo was one of the two liturgical focal points of the church (the other being the altar). It was from the ambo liturgy usually opened and closed, and in Hagia Sophia the choir sang from beneath it. Other important liturgical rituals also took place on the ambo or on its stairs.[106] On this occasion, after Leo has mounted the ambo, "all the people entered the church and deposited their written declarations on the holy table".[107] The holy table is the altar.[108] Located in the sanctuary behind the templon, the screen separating the nave from the sanctuary[109], the altar in Byzantine commentaries is interpreted simultaneously as Jesus' tomb, the table of the Last Supper, Golgotha, the heavenly altar, and the throne of God. The altar was a dread symbol of God's dwelling, and the rites of access to the altar in Eucharist and ordination rites reflect this.[110] Thus, to deposit the declarations here was no trivial matter. Then follows Leo's address to the people: "'Behold, brethren, I am fulfilling your request and granting you my son as emperor. Behold, you are receiving him from the Church and from Christ's hand.'" The people "cried out in a loud voice, saying: 'Be our surety, O Son of God, that we are receiving the lord Constantine as our emperor from Thy hand that we may guard him and die for his sake!'"[111]

The next day, Easter Sunday, Leo crowns his son in the Hippodrome. At daybreak, the emperor goes to the Hippodrome, together with the patriarch. A portable altar is brought, and

[104] Theophanes 1997: p. 621
[105] Theophanes 1997: Footnote 4, p. 622
[106] Kazdhan 1991: p. 76
[107] Theophanes 1997: p. 621
[108] Kazdhan 1991: p. 71
[109] Kazdhan 1991: p. 2023
[110] Kazdhan 1991: p. 71
[111] Theophanes 1997: p. 621

the patriarch recites the prayer "in the presence of all the people and the emperor crowned his son". Then the two emperors "processed to the Great Church together with the two Caesars and the three *nobilissimi*".[112]

This event serves to highlight a crucial component of the Byzantine – and perhaps even more accurately, the Constantinopolitan – ideological power system, namely the rites concerning the imperial succession. The Imperial City was crucial in the succession rituals. The various steps in the process exemplifies rituals that recur again and again at the center of the Byzantine Empire, in Constantinople. It is even more limited: the events take place in a few major areas and buildings in Constantinople. This pattern repeats itself through most of the Byzantine Empire's existence.[113] The tenth century Byzantine text *The Book of Ceremonies* describes many of these rituals in detail. The descriptions are an amalgam of sources, some dating back to the sixth century. [114] Combined with what Theophanes writes, we get a vivid impression of how important the imperial rituals in Constantinople were for the ideology of the empire.

Leo IV's arrangements are therefore in their physical expressions typical of a ritual that enhances and confirms the ideological power of the emperor. This whole series of events are illuminating, they show the complexity in the power relations between an emperor on the one hand, and the Byzantine elite and the people on the other.

Fifteen years later it turns out that Leo was correct in fearing for his son. As Theophanes tells it, the men that gave the oath to the infant Constantine, are the same men who later flagrantly betrays Constantine: "For the same men who fifteen years earlier had sworn that terrible oath and made signed declarations which they deposited in the holy sanctuary, then swore to Irene that they would not be ruled by her son as long as she was alive." [115] It turns out that an oath is not to be trusted after all, and this shows the difficulties an emperor had in securing his children's succession. No matter how legitimate an heir was, he would have to be able to actually keep himself in power when the time came to ascend the imperial throne.

The status of a Byzantine emperor was not based on genealogy, even less primogeniture. The history of Byzantium can be described as a series of dynasties which tried to establish

[112] Theophanes 1997: p. 621
[113] Dagron 2003: p. 5
[114] See Constantine Porphyrogennetos 2012 for further descriptions of these rituals
[115] Theophanes 1997: p. 641

themselves but where none of these families managed to last beyond three or four generations.[116] The concept "[…] offended against an old 'republican' sensibility, the dual conviction that power was received by delegation (from the people or from God) and that it was exercised in the context of a *res publica* or state".[117] The Byzantines had a state, as the peoples in the former western part of the Roman empire did not anymore. Where the Pope in Rome came to represent an autonomous religious power, the status of the Byzantine emperors was more complex: they were not priests nor were they simply worldly kings. Their status revolved endlessly "round the insoluble problem of the king-priest, but rarely tackled it head on".[118] As the eastern part of the Roman empire evolved into the Byzantine empire, the role of the emperor developed in tandem with that of the Byzantine church and the monastic orders. The notion of royal priesthood existed in a few texts or rituals, but the balance of power between the emperor and the ecclesiastical hierarchy settled over the centuries into a difficult equilibrium.[119] In addition, the empire as an ideological and political entity had an existence independent of the emperors and the various families trying to establish dynasties. Three aspects should be pointed out. The first is the vast administrative and juridical construction that constituted the Byzantine state; even if the emperors in part controlled it, they never entirely identified with it. The second aspect is the conception of the existence that was to be found in the Old and New Testaments – here the divine choice passed from the Jewish people to Rome – and it could not be coincidence, in the eyes of the Byzantines, that the Incarnation of Christ corresponded to the accession of Augustus.[120] In the Byzantine understanding, the last emperor of Constantinople would voluntarily abdicate on the Day of Judgement, when Christ returned. The third aspect is the half Hellenistic, half Christian symbolic form of the human kingdom on Earth as a reflection of the celestial kingdom of God: the sovereign down below was only the delegate of the one on high.[121] Especially the time of succession was difficult. The transitional period when an emperor died and a new one took the reins of power, was a moment of great instability for the society. As Dagron writes:

[116] Dagron 2003: p. 14
[117] Dagron 2003: p. 21
[118] Dagron 2004: p. 4
[119] Dagron 2004: p. 4
[120] We must keep in mind that the Byzantines considered themselves Roman; the emperor Augustus was their first emperor
[121] Dagron 2003: pp. 21-22

> […] there were no institutional criteria to test its legitimacy, only historical and moral references, accumulated examples which eventually came to constitute a rule of the game, with innumerable variations, and tacitly to define transgression in the absence of a procedure. Each new emperor had to observe these rules if he wanted to achieve legitimacy.[122]

A complex situation, indeed. Theophanes' descriptions of what happened in Constantiople during the Easter celebrations of 775, confirms this.

For Theophanes a legitimate ruler must first and foremost be an upholder of the orthodox faith, but Theophanes cannot escape the fact that other factors decided who occupied the throne, so it is not legitimacy as such, but "imperial power" – that amalgam of different ideological factors I have pointed out above – that decided. Despite his bias, Theophanes cannot wholly distort what seems to have been both accepted and approved behavior in a ruler.

As another example of how imperial power could be said to be 'external to" the actual person being emperor, I want to use Theophanes' description of the fate of the emperor Michael I Rangabe in 813. Michael sets out with an army to defeat the Bulgarians. He has already failed once in the previous year.[123] The campaign in 813 is an even worse disaster, Michael is bested by the Bulgarians and has to flee back to Constantinople. "As for the emperor, he was making his homeward escape, cursing the army and its commanders and swearing he would abdicate the Empire. […][124] The emperor wants to abdicate! This is a very different role than the image of a powerful ruler on the imperial throne. The patriarch in Constantinople initially prevents Michael from abdicating, but then: "When the strategoi and the army had learnt that the emperor had fled to the City, they despaired of being ruled by him any longer and, having taken counsel among themselves, implored (the patrician) Leo, strategos of the Anatolics, to help the common cause and protect the Christian state."[125] Now that the strategos Leo consents to becoming emperor, Michael can abdicate: "On being informed of his proclamation, Michael, together with Prokopia and their children, sought refuge in the chapel of the Pharos, where they cut off their hair and donned monastic garb […]." The Bulgarians

[122] Dagron 2003: p. 21
[123] Theophanes 1997: p. 679
[124] Theophanes 1997: pp. 685-86
[125] Theophanes 1997: p. 685

invade all the way to Constantinople and plunder the suburbs, before returning home.[126] The consequences for Constantinople are severe, even though the city itself remains undefeated. It is the city itself that ensures the survival of the Byzantine empire. The impregnable walls protect the crucial kernel of the state – the central imperial administration and church bureaucracy. The chaos at the top of the Byzantine state hierarchy does not cause the empire to collapse, but this is not because of the emperor, but in spite of him.

We thus see that status of emperor is not too closely linked to the actual person, but the abilities he can bring to the execution of role: there needs to be an emperor, but it is the position as head of the state that is vital, not necessarily *who* occupies that position.

The succession arrangements of the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd

In the Islamic world, the question of caliphal succession was of great symbolic and practical meaning. Al-Ţabarī's work is full of detailed descriptions of the various conflicts that arose over this question. One of the most famous occurred in the year 802. According to al-Ţabarī, in this year the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd leads the Pilgrimage to Mecca, with a complicated plan for the succession of his two sons, Muḥammad al-Amīn and ʻAbdallāh b. Hārūn al-Maʾmūn. Both are his designated heirs, and they accompany Hārūn on the Pilgrimage. In Medina and Mecca Hārūn gives large sums of money to the people on behalf of himself and the two heirs.[127] Then, in Mecca, Hārūn places two letters in "the Holy House", the Kaʻbah. Religious lawyers and judges have expended great intellectual efforts on the composition of these letters, according to Al-Ţabarī. The first letter stipulates the succession arrangements between Hārūn's two sons. The second letter documents an oath of allegiance which the caliph has extracted from the nobles and commoners alike, in addition to the written obligations due to al-Maʾmūn and incumbent upon both al-Amīn and those nobles and commoners. In the Kaʻbah, the ritual of "the act of witness" to the two documents is enacted, in the presence of "God, His angels […], the rest of his [the caliph's] children, his family, his mawlās, his military commanders, his ministers, his secretaries, and so forth".[128] These are significant people in the Islamic society, and the event literally takes place in the holiest of

[126] Theophanes 1997: p. 686
[127] Al-Ţabarī 1989: Vol. 30, p. 183
[128] Al-Ţabarī 1989: Vol. 30, pp. 183-184

Islamic sanctuaries, so the ritual is a momentous happening in the Islamic society. For Hārūn it is a means to ensure the ordered transition of power.

Especially the document concerning the succession is of importance to al-Ţabarī. He spends many pages reporting the text in full and in reporting that both al-Amīn and al-Maʾmūn agree to what it stipulates. The main point in the document is that al-Amīn is the designated successor to the Caliphate, to be followed by al-Maʾmūn in due time. In addition, while al-Amīn is Caliph, al-Maʾmūn will rule Khurasan, the eastern part of the Islamic empire. Another important point is that in the case of the death of both al-Amīn and al-Maʾmūn, a third son of Hārūn, al-Qāsim, is to inherit the caliphal title. A final point is that neither of the two first brothers may appoint a son before the next brother in the succession line as agreed to in the document.[129] Hārūn's arrangements thus put severe restrictions on the brothers. That al-Amīn and al-Maʾmūn agree to these terms, seems to be more the result of Hārūn's will than any genuine agreement between them. And according to al-Ţabarī's description of what happens with the succession document does not bode well for Hārūn's wishes:

> Then he thought it fitting to hang up the document in the Ka'bah, but when it was lifted up in order to attach it for suspension, it fell down, and people commented that this arrangement would speedily be dissolved before it could be carried through completely.[130]

And rightly so they commented – when Hārūn dies in 809, civil war soon breaks out between al-Amīn and al-Maʾmūn, with al-Maʾmūn as the victor in 813.[131]

There are several important ideological elements in this event: lineage, the swearing of oaths and written documents. I will now look at these in turn, but first it is necessary to say something about the role of the caliph in the Islamic world. Marsham has argued that much of Islamic political thought on the notion of 'kingship' has put emphasis on its mere earthly power. This is in contrast to the legitimate authority of the caliphate, which is derived from God and in all probability was a continuation between caliphal authority and that of ancient Near Eastern monarchy. It is very likely that in the first centuries of Islam the caliph was held to be God's representative on earth, with greater sacerdotal status and legislative power than

[129] Al-Ţabarī 1989: Vol. 30, pp. 185-191
[130] Al-Ţabarī 1989: Vol. 30, p. 184
[131] See Al-Ţabarī 1989: Vol. 31, for a narrative of the war

what the later Islamic traditions would allow.[132] Even though al-Ṭabarī wrote around 900, it is probably these older notions of sacred kingship that he – perhaps unwittingly – reveals through his descriptions. The strongest indication of this is the many descriptions of symbols of power: One of them includes *the staff of the Prophet* and *the seal of the caliphate*.[133] Another *the Prophet's cloak, the sword,* and *the parasol* and then *the seal ring* and *sceptre*.[134] These are insignia of royalty, and the way al-Ṭabarī include the descriptions without any emphasis or interest, makes a modern reader suspicious: these aspect of caliphal power were outmoded in al-Ṭabarī's time, but his sources have kept them, and so does he.

But even though the caliphs' role as mediator between God and man was on the wane, there are enough of other, worldly concerns to deal with in al-Ṭabarī. I now turn to them.

Ties of kinship was a basic determinant of an individual's social standing in the Islamic world. Belonging to the "right" family defined more than anything one's claim to privilege and special status.[135] Al-Ṭabarī shows how the 'Abbasid rebellion was morally and theologically founded on the premise that the 'Abbasids were rightful descendants of the Prophet Muhammad; theirs was to be a return to rightful rule after the people had been wronged by the Umayyads.[136] Thus the matter of succession is of great ideological significance in al-Ṭabarī.

The evolution of Arabic-Islamic culture in the eighth and ninth centuries, first at the Umayyad and then the Abbasid court, led to both old and new ideological elements being important for a ruler's power. Inheritance and bloodline were generally important in Near Eastern culture, and in particular in Arabian tribal culture. This evolved into the idea of the kin-group of the Prophet having a particular claim to the leadership of the Muslim community.[137] It was not given that this would be so, the early Islamic community slowly developed the idea that the caliph must come from the tribe of Quraysh, the Prophet's lineage. The construction of comprehensive Arab genealogies seems to have been the result of the tension in the early Islamic empire between the dominant Arab conquerors and the ethnic-linguistic groups of the subject peoples. The Arabs were regarded as "primitive" by the often much more cultural

[132] Marsham 2009: pp. 1-2
[133] Al-Ṭabarī 1990: Vol. 29, p. 165
[134] Al-Ṭabarī 1995: Vol. 30, Footnote 12, p. 5
[135] Donner 1998: p. 104
[136] Al-Ṭabarī 1985: Vol. 27, p. 147
[137] Marsham 2009: p. 11

refined subject peoples they had conquered, and so the Arabs needed to assert their claim to legitimate rule. They did this by arguing that they were the people to whom the Prophet had been sent, and that it was in the Arab language the Qur'an had been revealed.[138]

What complicated the question of who could claim the caliphal title, was the tradition of agnatic succession, brother could inherit brother, not just a son a father. And so the caliphs' sons had to deal with uncles and uncles had to deal with nephews. We see this in Al-Ţabarī's descriptions of various caliphal successions. As if this is not enough, Al-Ţabarī describes how it matters who the mothers of the various pretenders to the caliphal title are. Even if many of the mothers were slaves or concubines, this did not disqualify the son; what mattered the most was the father. Yet, to have a mother with royal lineage was advantageous. We see this in al-Ţabarī's descriptions of the events related to Hārūn's succession arrangements. The mother of Muḥammad al-Amīn was Zubaydah. She one of the four free wives of Hārūn, and the granddaughter of the Caliph Abū Jaʿfar al-Manṣūr.[139] She was thus of royal lineage. This is probably why Hārūn designated al-Amīn his first heir. 'Abdallāh b. Hārūn al-Maʾmūn's mother was the slave concubine, Marājil,[140] and even though she seems to have been the daughter of a Persian nobleman from Khurasan, she was not an Arab.[141] The mother of the third brother, al-Qāsim al-Muʾtaman, was a slave concubine called Qaṣif.[142]

That the lineage of the mother was important to Abbasid ideology is confirmed in other parts of al-Ţabarī, for example in the letters between the caliph al-Manṣūr (754-775) and Muḥammad b. ʿAbdallāh, debating legitimacy. Muḥammad and his family are the descendants of Fatima, the Prophet's daughter, but the caliph does not recognize Muḥammad's kinship with the Prophet through a woman.[143]

In addition to heredity, the Arab tribal customs of acclamation and election by the 'people' through the oath of allegiance were necessary.[144] The caliph was not appointed by divine decision, but the ruler and subjects were connected to each other by a promise of loyalty.[145] A development that was new to the developing Islamic empire, was the articulation of caliphal

[138] Donner 1998: pp. 108-109
[139] Al-Ţabarī 1989: Vol. 30, pp. 326-327
[140] Al-Ţabarī 1989: Vol. 30, p. 327
[141] Kennedy 2004: p. 69 and p. 172
[142] Al-Ţabarī 1989: Vol. 30, p. 327
[143] Al-Ṭabarī 1985: Vol. 28, pp. 166-176
[144] Marsham 2009: p. 11 and p. 187
[145] Van Ess 2017: Vol. 1, p. 99

power through literacy, managed by a bureaucracy of ideologues and jurists. Through the cultural fusion with both the Roman and the Persian worlds they had conquered, the Arabs' tribal customs evolved into a fully imperial ceremonial in the 8th and 9th centuries.[146]

Hārūn's efforts in 802 was not the first time that a caliph tried to ensure the succession by oaths and written documents. Al-Ţabarī describes how the first 'Abbasid caliph, al-Saffāh has the oath taken to his brother, al-Manṣūr. Another brother, ʿĪsā b. Mūsā, gets it as al-Manṣūr's successor, and then: "The Caliph recorded the deed of these appointments in a document, placed it in a container, sealed it with his own seal and the seals of his family, and entrusted it to 'Isa b. Musa."[147] At the same time, the status of documents was not absolute.

Al-Ţabarī relates in great detail the political and military events of the conflict, but of particular interest is where he describes how al-Amīn tears up the signed letters that his father deposited in Mecca.[148] This leads the Governor of Mecca to be displeased by al-Amīn's actions and to denounce him.[149] This is only the beginning, and is an important reason why al-Amīn loses the caliphate: "[…] the flagrant breach of a sworn oath had tarnished his caliphate irrevocably."[150]

Al-Amīn tore up the letters that his father had placed in Mecca, and this ruined his ideological power, according to al-Ţabarī. However, there are other instances in al-Ţabarī where documents are not so revered, as the following two examples show: In 762, a legal scholar is asked by one of the opponents of caliph Abū Jaʿfar-al-Manṣūr about the oath sworn to the caliph. The scholar answers: "You gave the oath of allegiance only under compulsion. A sworn contract is not incumbent upon anyone who has been coerced."[151] Which of course leads to the question of what coercion means in a given situation – in al-Ţabarī there are many events where the dominant factor is physical power, and where the weaker part really has no choice but to appear loyal. On the other hand, the scholar's answer opens up the possibility that anyone who can claim coercion was involved, can withdraw their oath later. The second example of the uncertain role of oaths comes from the reign of the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (786-809). During a conflict with Yaḥyā b. 'Abdallāh al-'Alawī, a member of the 'Alid

[146] Marsham 2009: p. 11
[147] Al-Ṭabarī 1985: Vol. 27, p. 212
[148] Al-Ţabarī 1992: Vol. 31, p. 27
[149] Al-Ţabarī 1989: Vol. 31, pp. 124 ff.
[150] Kennedy 2004: p. 95
[151] Al-Ṭabarī 1985: Vol. 28, p. 156

family, the caliph has given a written guarantee of safe conduct to Yaḥyā, but now he wants to repudiate it. He asks two scholars in turn about whether the guarantee is legally valid. The first one, a religious lawyer, confirms the legality of the guarantee. The caliph is furious, and asks the second scholar, a judge, for his opinion. The answer: "This is invalid on such-and-such counts", pleases the caliph who replies: "You are the supreme judge [*qāḍī al-quḍāt*], and you are the person most knowledgeable about that". The caliph then tears up the guarantee and the judge spits on it.

This at least shows that there were different conceptions of written agreements. We see that even legal documents regarding succession which were placed in Mecca, were not in the end respected.[152] The episode is also very interesting in that it shows the emerging role of the Islamic scholars; that the caliph asks for their advice is illuminating: who has supreme authority in this situation? The scholars or the caliph?

There has been debate over what the realities were behind the succession arrangements of Hārūn that al-Ṭabarī describes here. It may be that the caliph simply designated a line of two successors, and never set up the territorial division where Khurasan would be controlled by al-Maʾmūn. According to this view, it was first after the defeat of al-Amīn that al-Maʾmūn's propaganda altered the document.[153] Whatever the specific realities were, the matter of genealogy was crucial in the Islamic society, and we see how this is reflected in al-Ṭabarī.

The fact that the oaths were confirmed in Mecca, and that both the witness ceremony and the placing of documents took place in the Kaʻbah, shows how Hārūn used symbols associated with the Islamic faith to reinforce the ideology of the caliph. The event in Mecca in 802 that al-Ṭabarī describes is therefore heavily laden with ideological power, both religious and secular.

Ideology must be organized in concrete forms to be relevant to the life of a community. Mann calls this *ideological organization* and argues that it comes in two main types: one that confirms the cohesion, the confidence, and the power of an already established social group. Mann calls this *immanent ideology*: it confirms and strengthens whatever exists.[154] The other type is what Mann calls sociospatially *transcendent*. This second type transcends already

[152] Al-Ṭabarī 1989: Vol. 30, p. 125
[153] El-Hibri 1992: pp. 461-462
[154] Mann 2005: p. 24

existing power structures and generates what Mann terms a 'sacred' form of authority. It is important in causing societal change.[155]

The descriptions that I have analyzed above, show this in practice, and reveal differences between Theophanes and Al-Ţabarī.

Ideological power is well established in the Byzantine world Theophanes portrays; it is new and in the process of becoming established in al-Ţabarī's text. Let us see how.

The Byzantine world was a culture with ancient roots and well-established traditions in Theophanes' time. We see this reflected in his descriptions of ceremonies and their use of particular physical spaces. This is Mann's *immanent ideology.* It confirms and strengthens the empire. The capitol is *the* prime example: Constantiople was an ancient city by Theophanes' time. It had been the capitol of the Byzantine empire for centuries. Its nexus of the Imperial Palace, the Hippodrome, and the various churches, in particular Hagia Sophia is where everything of ideological importance finds a very expressive focus. In addition, the city walls function literally as a protecting framework around the empire's kernel of ritual, state symbolism and glory.[156] The ruler who controls all this, controls the Byzantine empire's ideological power.

Al-Ţabarī's descriptions reveal a different situation in the Islamic empire. Here important ideological events take place in the rulers' tents, in palaces outside of cities, in two different capitols, first Damascus and then Baghdad. Below, in the section on political power, we will see how the city of Kūfah also mattered. In addition there is the importance of Medina and Mecca. We see this in Hārūn's effort to use these two cities and "the Holy House", the Ka'bah, as a basis for securing the succession he wants. The problem for the caliphs is twofold: the vastness and newness of the Islamic empire. It is simply too large to control in the same way the emperors control their territory and the capitol of Constantinople. The caliphs do not have the same control. What the caliphs do have, on the other hand, is a religion that brings something new to the ancient regions they conquer. Al-Ţabarī's text is full of conflicts over theological and dynastic questions, but it is also clear from his descriptions that he regards the ideological power of the caliphs as crucial for their ability to rule. The

[155] Mann 2005: pp. 23-24

[156] These walls saved the empire from annihilation many times, until the Ottoman conquerors finally breached the ancient walls in 1453.

sermons, swearing of oaths, and the writing and signing of documents, all this is to establish ideological power. It is possible to see the important role of the new faith in this: It can be seen as an example of Mann's *immanent ideology*: How Islam reinforced the Arabic culture. And once established, this reinforcement gathered in force. I will argue that it is a developed phase of this *immanence* we see reflected in al-Ţabarī, but not fully: the ideological power he describes has not found a final form; maybe it never did, considering the divisions in the Islamic world that still exist.

To sum up: the ideological category contains many of the important aspects of power that a Byzantine or Islamic ruler could wield. Perhaps the most crucial one was the relationship between the divine and the temporal kingship. This was a perennial problem for the earthly rulers in the Abrahamic cultures. See Crone, Marsham and Rizvi for general discussions on this subject.[157] We see this reflected in Theophanes and al-Ţabarī, both describe the rather disappointing situations in this world, where supposedly divine power vested in emperors or caliphs manifests itself in one squalid and sordid situation after another. This is a far cry from what Mann calls a "transcendent vision" of social authority, and where human beings are united through the claim that they possess "ultimately meaningful, often divinely granted, common qualities".[158] Mann thus highlights the tension in the ideological worldviews of Theophanes and al-Ţabarī.

4.2 Political

In this section I look at the political power of empress Irene, and the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd, respectively. The events are of different types – in the case of Irene, her arranging the Second Council of Nicaea; in Abū al-ʿAbbās al-Saffāh's case, his speech to the people in Kūfah, where he puts forward the 'Abbasid claim of being the rightful heirs to the Prophet Muhammad and thus the Caliphate.

Both events have important religious aspects, but they are of political significance as well. I will use them as examples of political power in the present analysis, although they could also be used to highlight theological/ideological power. I will sometimes point out where the two

[157] Crone 2005, Marsham 2009 and Rizvi 1981
[158] See above, and Mann 2005: p. 519

types of aspects conflate and diverge, but mainly what follows is an analysis of the political aspects of the events.

Irene and the Second Council of Nicaea:

In the year 780 Irene "together with her son Constantine were miraculously entrusted by God with the Empire", according to Theophanes.[159] Irene's husband Leo IV had been a staunch iconoclast, whereas Irene was an iconophile.[160] As Constantine is a young boy, Irene reigns on his behalf. She quickly allows the worship of icons to take place in the empire:

> From that time on the pious began to speak freely. God's word spread about, those who sought salvation were able to renounce the world without hindrance, God's praises rose up to heaven, the monasteries recovered, and all good things were manifested.[161]

After spending some time consolidating her power,[162] Irene announces the need for an ecumenical council. She sets this in motion through the patriarch Paul, who has so far belonged to the iconoclast faction. Now he has fallen ill, and taken refuge in a monastery, without informing Irene. She goes to see him and reproofs him. Paul replies with tears and says, "Would that I had not sat at all on the throne of priesthood while God's Church was suffering oppression, separated as she was from the other catholic thrones and subject to anathema.".[163] This statement is interesting not only from a theological perspective, but even more from a political one: the ban on images was particular for the Byzantine church, it was not accepted in the Western church, nor in the various Eastern churches in the territories under Muslim control. Since the time of Constantine the Great, theological disputes between the various churches in the Roman empire had made political unity increasingly difficult. The problem was made worse after the collapse of the western part of the Roman empire. Then the Arab conquests in the seventh century made the already weak relations between Constantinople and the various Eastern churches even more tenuous.[164] In Theophanes' text it may be that Paul speaks like he does because he knows that Irene is looking for a

[159] Theophanes 1997: p. 626
[160] See Theophanes 1997: p. 625, for a description of the tension between Irene and Leo on the issue.
[161] Theophanes 1997: p. 627
[162] Theophanes 1997: pp. 626-631
[163] Theophanes 1997: p. 631
[164] See Hussey 2010: p. 174 and Treadgold 1997: p. 99 and pp. 119ff

reconciliation with the other churches: it is not unlikely that she had ambitions to create a greater unity between West and East. At least between the Latin West and the Byzantine empire. How much she or the other Byzantine emperors believed in a reconquest of the former Byzantine regions under Muslim control, is hard to know. Unfortunately, it is not possible to ascertain whether Theophanes is concerned with the political aspects of the events he describes here. As we see in so many instances in his chronicle, one may infer that Theophanes was aware of political matters, but on the surface, it is the theological perspectives that dominate.

After speaking to Paul, Irene summons the patricians and the chief men of the Senate to hear Paul's words. He repeats his anger and says that "Unless an ecumenical council takes place and the error that is in your midst is corrected, you will not find salvation".[165] Paul dies, and Irene names a new patriarch. All the details of this need not concern us here, but when Theophanes writes about the new patriarch's theological qualms in accepting the position it is hard to escape the feeling that this is mere posturing. In the end both the patriarch and a host of prominent people that Irene has gathered in the Great Palace in Constantinople all agree that a synod should be held.[166] The new patriarch sends his synodic letter and his declaration of faith to Rome, for recognition by the Pope. Irene sends word to the Pope "asking him to dispatch letters and emissaries to be present at the synod".[167]

In August of 786, the synod begins in the Church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople. The proceedings are interrupted by army units and bishops opposed to Irene's policies. The synod is dissolved.[168] Irene has seemingly lost control, even in the Imperial city.

The next month, Irene manages, in concert with loyal military units, to take control over Constantinople. She forces the hostile parts of the army to deliver up their arms, and then she exiles them from the City; she bids them to go back to their native land. She then forms "her own army" with officers obedient to her. Then she convenes the synod again, this time in the city of Nicaea, in 787. It is now held successfully, with representatives from Rome and the East present. A good omen reinforces the success: "[…] a considerable eclipse of the sun took place at the 5th hour of the day while holy liturgy was being performed".[169] Then the synod is

[165] Theophanes 1997: p. 631
[166] Theophanes 1997: pp. 632-633
[167] Theophanes 1997: p. 634
[168] Theophanes 1997: p. 635
[169] Theophanes 1997: p. 636

ended in Constantinople itself, with "everyone" present in the Imperial Palace, where the decree is read out and signed by Constantine VI and his mother. "And so God's Church found peace, even though the Enemy does not cease from sowing his tares among his own workmen; but God's Church when she is under attack always proves victorious." [170] Irene thus seems to have won over her political enemies in Constantinople and the empire.

Irene's position in relation to the West, the Pope in Rome and Charlemagne as a Western emperor, however, is more troubled. For modern historians, the Byzantine emperors' relationship with the West in general is difficult to ascertain. Were the two ancient parts of the Roman empire two different political bodies or were they still two parts of the same political body?[171] In Theophanes' descriptions it seems that a practical division was well established, but Irene's (and other emperors') formal overtures to the Pope and Charlemagne indicate a more complex relationship. What is certain is that after the "Treaty"[172] of Achen in 812, the Byzantine court at least half-heartedly recognized Charlemagne as 'imperator et basileus'.[173] It is also interesting to note that before this period, the Byzantine emperors in their official correspondence used the term 'from the emperor of Christendom'. After Charlemagne's coronation as Western Roman Emperor, the Byzantine emperors almost always added the term 'romaion' to the title "emperor'. Even though the Byzantine emperors had always considered themselves 'the Emperor of the Romans' it seems that the need to affirm the title became acute after 812.[174] Further elaboration of this point is beyond the scope of this thesis, but it highlights the difficult relationship between the Byzantine emperors and the West. Theophanes writes without commenting on this complex state of affairs, and one is left to wonder why. Did he consider the West still a part of the Roman empire, or does his text reflect a notion that the West already constituted a separate political entity? What is clear from his depiction of Irene's dealings with the Pope and with Charlemagne, is that her political/diplomatic power is limited.

[170] Theophanes 1997: p. 637
[171] Ančić 2020: pp. 25-26
[172] The term is contested, but at least a formal agreement of sorts was adopted between the Byzantines and Charlemagne. See Ančić 2020: pp. 25-42 for a discussion.
[173] Ančić 2020: p. 25
[174] Shboul 1979: p. 250

A final point can underline the argument for considering the council as an important political event: When Iconoclasm was finally reversed as official theology by the empress Theodora in 843, she did this not by convening another council of bishops in a church. Instead she arranged an assembly of selected officials and clerics in the private house of the postal logothete Theocistus, and in this house Iconoclasm was condemned simply by accepting the Second Council of Nicaea.[175] For all that Theocistus was a close advisor to the empress and a high official at the Byzantine court, this way of dealing with a theological question seems mundane. As a way of solving a political problem it is more appropriate.

The sermon of Abū al-ʿAbbās al-Saffāh

Al-Saffāh was the first ‘Abbasid Caliph. With him, a new dynasty ruled the Islamic world, and that it turned out so, was foretold by the Prophet himself, according to al-Ṭabarī[176]. On the day the people of Kūfah swore allegiance to him, al-Saffāh held a sermon in the city’s mosque. There he claimed that the Prophet Muhammad’s uncle, al-ʿAbbās b. ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib, had been informed by Muhammad that he would pass the caliphate to al-Abbas’ descendants. Al-Saffāh claims to be this descendant, and he claims the caliphate on behalf of the ‘Abbasid branch of the Prophet’s family. A dynastic claim is here put forward in a religious setting, and thus merges the two roles of the caliph: religious and secular ruler. The claim itself is religiously based: descendance from the Prophet’s family, al-Saffāh is a descendant of the Prophet’s uncle. Still, as we see below, the religious setting cannot hide the political aspect of the event.

Al-Saffāh asserts this claim from the minbar/mosque in Kūfah. Al-Ṭabarī reports the sermon in full, using several pages to do so.[177] After an initial praising of God, al-Saffāh goes on to say:

> He created us from the ancestors of the Prophet, causing us to grow from his tree, and be derived thereby from common origins, making him one of us, causing what distresses us to weigh heavy on him, and making him watchful over us, for with the faithful He is gentle, compassionate.[178]

[175] Treadgold 1997: p. 446
[176] Al-Ṭabarī 1985: Vol. 27, p. 147
[177] Al-Ṭabarī 1985: Vol. 27, pp. 152-157
[178] Al-Ṭabarī 1985: Vol. 27, p. 152

The ‘Abbasid rebellion is thus a return to rightful rule; the Muslim community has been wronged by the Umayyads.[179] Especially the people of Kūfah have been aware of this:

> People of Kūfah, you are the halting-place of our love, the lodging of our affections. You it is who remained steadfast, you who were not deflected from our love by the injustice of the people of tyranny against you until you reached our epoch and God brought you our revolution.[180]

Now, this praise of the people of Kūfah is clearly political. The ‘Abbasid claim to the caliphate was not obvious as is clear from al-Ţabarī. The ‘Abbasids were partly allied with the ‘Alids, the proto-Shiites. A political interpretation is confirmed by the next part of the sermon, where al-Saffāh shows his generosity to the people of Kūfah:

> You of all mankind are most fortunate in us and most worthy of our generosity. We have increased your allowances to a hundred dirhams. Make ready, then; for I am the manifest Spiller (*Saffāh*), the desolating Avenger.[181]

It is good to have divine approval, but some hard cash seems to have been necessary as well to ensure the audience’s loyalty. The sobriquet *Saffāh* can mean either spiller of wealth or spiller of blood[182]: so either a generous ruler or an implacable one. Whether the statement was meant as a promise or a threat is hard to tell, possibly it was both. Al-Saffāh is by now exhausted with fever, and his uncle, Dāwud b. ‘Alī takes over the sermon, standing modestly below al-Saffāh on the minbar. Dāwud continues, denigrating the Umayyads while praising the people of Kūfah. In addition Dāwud mentions ‘our cousins’: “What made us rebel was the shame of their taking away our rights, our anger for our cousins, our grief for your affairs and the burden that oppressed us for your sakes.”[183] The ‘cousins’ are the ‘Alids, but this professing to avenge the wrongs committed against kinsmen is a hollow claim; in reality the

[179] Al-Ṭabarī 1985: Vol. 27, pp. 153-154
[180] Al-Ṭabarī 1985: Vol. 27, p. 154
[181] Al-Ṭabarī 1985: Vol. 27, p. 154
[182] Al-Ṭabarī 1985, footnote: Vol. 27, p. 154
[183] Al-Ṭabarī 1985: Vol. 27, p. 155

'Abbasids denied the 'Alids any prior right to rule.[184] That the 'Abbasids had no intention to support the 'Alids is confirmed at the end of the sermon, when Dāwud states: "So know that the authority is with us, and shall not depart from us until we surrender it to Jesus the son of Mary."[185] This is politics veiled in religious language: in Dāwud's telling, the 'Abbasids' reign is to last until the Messianic age which will precede the end of the world. A Sunni hadith says that "There will be no Mahdī but Jesus". Dāwud thus excludes the 'Alid sects and their hadiths which state that a Mahdī of the line of Ali will fulfill the Messianic rule of justice. In reality Dāwud here rejects the 'Alid claim and suggests that it is the 'Abbasids who will usher in a second messianic age and the second coming of Jesus.[186] When the sermon is over, Al-Saffāh receives "the handclasp of allegiance" from the people, and this marks the beginning of his role as caliph.[187]

As is his method, Al-Ṭabarī describes this event from other sources as well. Another version is more prosaic: Al-Saffāh enters the mosque from the governor's palace and goes up into the minbar. He then praises God and the excellence of the Prophet before tracing authority to rule and the succession to the Prophet down to himself. He promises the people good times to come and then he stops talking.[188] Dāwud, who is three steps lower in the minbar, continues on al-Saffāh's behalf. In this version, al-Ṭabarī reports the following:

> He praised God and glorified Him and spoke benedictions on the Prophet. Then he said, "Ye people, truly there has been no Caliph after God's Messenger save 'Alī b. Abī Tālib and this Commander of the Faithful who now sits behind me." Abū al-'Abbās then came down and left.[189]

This version is more prosaic but contains the same core elements. Al-Ṭabarī describes an important political event, taking place in a religious setting and being expressed in a religious language. This was usual for Islamic sermons; they had an official character: "They contained exhortations, not theoretical teachings; the *khaṭīb* was an orator, not a theologian."[190]

[184] See footnote, Al-Ṭabarī 1985: Vol. 27, p. 155
[185] Al-Ṭabarī 1985: Vol. 27, p. 157
[186] See footnote, Al-Ṭabarī 1985: Vol. 27, p. 157
[187] Al-Ṭabarī 1985: Vol. 27, p. 157
[188] Al-Ṭabarī 1985: Vol. 27, p. 161
[189] Al-Ṭabarī 1985: Vol. 27, p. 161
[190] Van Ess 2017: Vol. 1, p. 54

Al-Ṭabarī's work reflects this – again and again he describes various sermons and speeches of this kind; often he includes the actual words.

We saw above that Mann defines political power to consist of two means. The first is "territorial centralization", where dominant social groups, in pursuit of their goals, "require social regulation over a confined, bounded territory".[191] This the Byzantines managed to do, but only after the huge territorial losses in the seventh century. After this consolidation of their geographical control, the Byzantine rulers seem to have exercised a fair deal of 'social regulation' in the Byzantine state. This is reflected in Theophanes. The caliphs, on the other hand, struggle much more with this social regulation of their state. The Muslim conquests of much of the Roman empire and all of the Iranian empire, was crucial for the formation of Islamic political culture. The origins of Islamic political culture lay on the remote margins of the late antique Roman and Persian cultures, but its development took place at the center of these two older cultures.[192] This development was not without problems, the caliphs struggled with developing control over the vast territories that the Islamic empire spanned. We see this reflected in al-Ṭabarī, where the caliphs repeatedly strive to control the many factions and areas that their empire contain.

This difference can also be seen in Mann's second means of political power, "geopolitical diplomacy". This is closely related to my diplomatic sub-category and is relevant to how Theophanes and al-Ṭabarī describe diplomatic affairs. In this, the two writers portray different situations for the rulers' wielding of diplomatic power. Theophanes describes many different situations where the emperors engage in diplomatic relations with the Pope in Rome, various kings in the Latin west, the Bulgar khans, and the various Islamic caliphs. Al-Ṭabarī does not describe diplomatic relations in the same manner. There are descriptions of contact between the caliphs and the Byzantine emperors, and between the caliphs and potentates in the eastern parts of the Caliphate. However, al-Ṭabarī is also concerned with "diplomatic" relations between the various factions and regions *inside* the Islamic empire. It plays out just like relations between independent polities, even though the participants are nominally part of the same political entity. This aspect of political power reflects the vastness of the Islamic empire and its tenuous coherence.

[191] Mann 2005: p. 521
[192] Marsham 2009: p. 3

4.3 Military

In the following I have used several of Theophanes' descriptions of Byzantine military activity, not one in particular. I do the same with Al-Ṭabarī's descriptions of the caliphs' military power. There are multitudes to pick from, and the ones below are typical examples.

The emperors at war

In February 811, the emperor Nikephoros attacks the Bulgarians. The campaign is disastrous, there is animosity and division between the emperor and large parts of his army, and it all ends horribly for the Byzantines: in July the army is wiped out.[193] Theophanes writes: "Before day-break the barbarians fell on the tent of Nikephoros and those of his commanders and slew him miserably." Then all the other high dignitaries in the Byzantine army are killed. It is a day "for which no lamentation is adequate".[194] The Bulgarian leader, Kroummos cuts off the head of Nikephoros and hangs it on a pole for exhibition. Later Kroummos uses the skull as a drinking vessel, and he forces the other chieftains of the "Sklavinians" to drink from it.[195]

This is a brutal episode in Byzantine military history, but it is one of many that Theophanes describes in the centuries he deals with. Yet in spite of all the many losses, and some victories, the empire managed to survive. This seems to have been not because of the military proficiency of the emperors, but more due to the resilience of the Byzantine state system.

As a result of the Avar and Slavic conquests in the Balkans and the Arab conquests in the Africa, Egypt, and Syria during the seventh and eighth centuries, the Byzantine Empire was considerably reduced in territory, people, and wealth by the turn of the eighth century. With the massive loss of territory followed a new situation with regards to territorial boundaries. The old frontiers had been clearly established, in spite of continuous conflicts with both the Slavic tribes in the Balkans and the Persians in Mesopotamia. The new frontiers were different – less defined and without possible allied frontier troops, the *limitanei*. The Byzantine army had to defend borders much closer to the capitol, Constantinople, and with far fewer resources. That they often managed to do this, speaks for the strength of the Byzantine state, in spite of all the setbacks. By the early eighth century the worst perils of the empire were past. The Arab siege of Constantinople in 718 had failed, and the empire was no longer fighting for its life. Internally the ending of the revolt of Artabasdos in 743, initiated a

[193] Theophanes 1997: pp. 672-673
[194] Theophanes 1997: p. 673
[195] Theophanes 1997: pp. 673-674

measure of political stability. The Roman army had been reorganized in the seventh century. This resulted in an improvement of the army, and it was by this time able to defeat the Bulgar army about half the time and even the Arab armies from time to time.[196]

The role of the emperors in military affairs varies in Theophanes' text. Some participate actively on campaigns; others leave more to their generals. We have seen above how Nikephoros loses both his life and an army. How could it go so badly? Theophanes' other descriptions of Nikephoros highlight what military power an emperor could exercise.

In 811 Nikephoros had been emperor for nine years. He ousted the popular empress Irene to achieve the throne, and Theophanes is thus no admirer: "All the populace of the City gathered together and everyone was displeased by what was happening and cursed both him who was crowning and him who was being crowned and those who approved of these actions."[197] So it all starts badly, and Nikephoros' military activities in these years that follow do not improve his status. In 806 Nikephoros loses to the Arabs: he is frightened, perplexed and he despairs; he must accept a peace and he must pay tribute. Then Nikephoros breaks the treaty, with the result that Arab forces attacks again and wreak havoc on the Byzantines.[198]

The next year, the emperor makes a military expedition against the Bulgars that achieves nothing. Nikephoros returns in haste to Constantinople to avert a revolt by parts of the army and imperial officials: "When he had come to Adrianople, he became aware that a revolt against him was being planned by imperial officials and by the *tagmata*". He punishes his opponents with scourging, exile, and confiscation.[199] Theophanes does not state the reasons for the revolt, but from the descriptions of Nikephoros' general unpopularity, it can be inferred that powerful men want the emperor gone or dead. In 809 Nikephoros fails yet again in a military campaign against the Bulgars. A part of the army is massacred, but the emperor refuses a promise of immunity (from allegations of neglect of duty) to officers who escaped the massacre. The officers then flee to the Bulgarians.[200] Here it sounds like the emperor is too harsh, but it could be that he has his grounds. It would not be the first time a ruler was betrayed from inside.[201] As if this situation is not bad enough, Nikephoros swears a sacred

[196] Treadgold 1997: pp. 370-375
[197] Theophanes 1997: p. 655
[198] Theophanes 1997: pp. 661-662
[199] Theophanes 1997: p. 663
[200] Theophanes 1997: pp. 665-666
[201] Theophanes 1997: p. 648. During a campaign against the Arabs, Constantine VI's army is betrayed by some of its own officers, and the emperor has to return "emptyhanded" to Constantinople.

oath to the nobles at court in Constantinople to the effect that he has celebrated Easter in the court of the Bulgarian leader Kroummos – supposedly meaning that he has conquered the Bulgars.[202]

Theophanes has more to say on the emperor, but by now it is clear that Nikephoros in Theophanes' estimate is a morally flawed person, a liar, and a cheat. He is also militarily incompetent, with disastrous results because of it.

It may be that Theophanes' portrait of the emperor is unjust, because of Nikephoros' iconoclastic views, but if we compare with Theophanes' descriptions of Constantine V, it is apparent that it is not the theological views that determine the military success of an emperor. Constantine is successful against his domestic opponents, the Bulgars and the Arabs; not all the time, but enough to secure the empire's borders. How successful he is considered, becomes clear from Theophanes' description of the emperor Michael I Rangabe, who succeeded Nikephoros in 811. Michael is an iconophile, and should be blessed, according to Theophanes' theology. But along with the imperial throne, Michael also inherited the Bulgarian Kroummos as an enemy and fares no better against him than Nikephoros did. In Constantinople opponents of Michael, take up arms to "subvert the orthodox faith". They call for Iconoclasm, as in the days of Constantine V: he at least, was successful against the Bulgarians, they say, so perhaps Iconoclasm isn't so bad after all? they ask. Michael manages to quell this revolt, but even though the insurgents are arrested, the admiration for Constantine V and Iconoclasm is a large problem for Michael.[203] As I have stated above, this frank reporting of events that clearly contradicts his religious beliefs, makes Theophanes a better historian.

We have seen what happens to an emperor who loses battles, he faces unpopularity or revolt at home, and death abroad. But what about successful emperors? How are they received in the Byzantine society, apart from general popularity? As with the acclamation and crowning ceremonies that we have already looked at, the celebration of military victory had its own ritual. Theophanes describes both Constantine V, Leo IV, and Irene's successes.

[202] Theophanes 1997: p. 666
[203] Theophanes 1997: pp.681-685

Constantine V goes to war against the Bulgarians again, and this time he wins a great victory; he celebrates "a triumph in the City".[204]

Leo IV leads a successful campaign against the Arabs. Celebrates a triumph in Constantinople.[205]

Irene's forces under the patrician and logothete Staurakios beat the Sklavininan tribes in Thessalonica and Hellas and the Peloponnese. In January, a victory is celebrated for Staurakios during the Hippodrome games. In May Irene herself, with Constantine, leads a military expedition to Thrace; she orders the city of Beroia rebuilt and renames it Eirenoupolis.[206]

The various rituals in Constantinople that are enacted after a military victory, follow many of the same patterns we saw in relation with succession and crowning. There is the parading in the streets, ceremonies in the Imperial Palace, in the Hippodrome, and in Hagia Sophia. This points to an affirmation of imperial ideology through the celebration of military power.

The caliphs at war

In spite of the impressive military successes of the Islamic armies, none of the caliphs seem to have been great generals. A striking feature of al-Ṭabarī's history is how much of the military leadership in the Islamic state is conducted by generals, not sovereigns. The caliphs participate in military campaigns, but their role in military affairs seems to have been more delegative and strategic than direct and tactical.

Al-Saffāh, the founder of the Abbasid caliphate, developed a strained relationship with his most successful general Abū Muslim. The growing conflict between al-Saffāh and Abū Muslim is a good example of how weak a caliph actually could be in military affairs.[207] The next caliph, al-Manṣūr, has Abū Muslim killed covertly, and even then, or precisely because of the murder, the caliph's position is not secure – he is afraid of what the people loyal to Abū Muslim would do. This event shows how weak al-Manṣūr's position is – he has to hide the dead body in a carpet and throw it in the Tigris river![208] At the same time, al-Manṣūr is later

[204] Theophanes 1997: p. 599
[205] Theophanes 1997: p. 623
[206] Theophanes 1997: p. 631
[207] Al-Ǧabarī 1990: Vol. 27, p. 210
[208] Al-Ǧabarī 1995: Vol. 28, pp. 30-39

described as a "lion" in battle.[209] His personal bravery is not questioned by al-Ṭabarī, it is the generalship that is lacking.

Still, military matters and leadership was of great importance to the caliphs. In addition to being "supreme commanders", the caliphs made sure to groom heirs and close family members for military participation in control of the empire. Princes and members of the 'Abbasid family were often sent to the provinces on military campaigns, either as commanders of armies or as officers. This gave them military experience and gave them the chance to get to know important military commanders.[210] In addition, accompanying the armies were administrators from the court, often future high officials. It was thus a way to make political friendships and to build political networks. The 'Abbasid princes could also acquire a more general knowledge of the different parts of the Islamic empire and the populace. Military life could therefore be important for a young man in the 'Abbasid family, whether he was destined for the caliphate itself, or a high position in the empire.

In Al-Ţabarī's descriptions of the military events in 780, we see several of these characteristics. First, the caliph al-Hādī orders all the armies of the people of Khurāsān and others to furnish troops for the "summer expedition". He spends two months drawing up the army, preparing and paying the troops. The members of his family who set out with him, receive gifts.[211] More detailed descriptions follow, but the whole campaign seems ritualistic in Al-Ţabarī's version. In addition to his own campaign in the east, the caliph appoints his son, Hārūn al-Rashīd, the heir apparent, to lead a summer expedition against the Byzantines. Al-Hādī sends Yaḥyā b. Khālid b. Barmak with Hārūn: "He sent with him al-Ḥasan and Sulaymān, sons of Barmak, and he sent Yaḥyā b. Khālid with him in charge of the administration of the army, his expenses, his secretariat, and the managing of his affairs, and all Hārūn's business was in his hands. Al-Rabīʿ the Chamberlain was appointed with Hārūn to go on the raid on behalf of al-Mahdī, and (the differences) between al-Rabīʿ and Yaḥyā were on account of that."[212] Through al-Ţabarī's words we get a glimpse of the personal relations between the 'Abbasids and their various advisors – it is a very human portrait, not one of great military deeds. Al-Ţabarī even includes an episode that occurs at the start of the Byzantine campaign. Here the young Hārūn is out playing polo and is laughed derisively at by

[209] Al-Ţabarī 1995: Vol. 28, p. 62
[210] Kennedy 2006: p. 55
[211] Al-Ţabarī 1990: Vol. 29, p. 210
[212] Al-Ţabarī 1990: Vol. 29, pp. 212-213

two of his followers. So much for respect for "the son of the Commander of the Faithful"![213] The campaign itself is described briefly, a few weeks of campaigning and then the army returns: "Hārūn returned safely with the Muslims, except those who had been killed or wounded there."[214]

Al-Ţabarī describes many battles in the east in much greater detail than against the Byzantines in the west[215], but what is interesting for my analysis is the fact that the caliphs are not portrayed by al-Ţabarī as great military leaders. Why is that? After all, the pursuit of holy war was an important sign of leadership in the Muslim community.[216] Particularly the border between the Byzantine empire and the Islamic empire under the Umayyads took on a particular role in the Muslim understanding of war. The Greeks were the ancient foe and to wage war against them was the classic *Jihād* – war against the infidels. The Prophet himself had sent expeditions against them. The leadership of these campaigns was thus a sign of sovereignty, equal to the leadership of the Pilgrimage to Mecca.[217] Under the Umayyads, this border was also a means to personal salvation – the volunteer soldiers fighting here had a special status. Regular soldiers served, but volunteers that engaged in *jihād* added to warfare devotional exercises and ascetic practises. Holy War in this area was "the monasticism of Islam".[218] With the coming of the 'Abbasids, interest in persons seeking salvation on the border waned,[219] but the ritualistic warfare against the Byzantines continued almost every year under the 'Abbasids. Hārūn used the perpetual warfare consciously to develop his role as leader of the Muslim community.[220] Al-Ţabarī writes: "He adopted a cap [*qalansuwah*] on which was written the words "Warrior for the faith, Pilgrim", and used to wear this." [221]

And yet, in spite of the pervasive theme of military affairs, great military leadership is not something that al-Ţabarī conveys. Instead, we are left with the impression of an empire partly outside the caliph's control. Enormous distances, political factions, regional autonomy, and cultural differences seem to intrude on the military power of every one of the caliphs that al-

[213] Al-Ţabarī 1990: Vol. 29, p. 212
[214] Al-Ţabarī 1990: Vol. 29, p. 215
[215] Kennedy 2002: Introduction, p. xiv
[216] Kennedy 2006: p. 65
[217] Kennedy 2006: p. 55
[218] Van Ess 2017: p. 79
[219] Van Ess 2017: p. 135
[220] Kennedy 2006: p. 79
[221] Al-Ţabarī 1995: Vol. 30, pp. 262-263

Ţabarī writes about. The caliphs of al-Ţabarī were human beings at the centre of a vast social-political construct that in a sense diminished the military role of one single commander.

In reading Theophanes and al-Ţabarī, a modern reader might wonder at what they do not include on military matters. There are no real descriptions of the following: tactics and strategy; weapons and military equipment; the organizing and equipping of the army and navy. Nor is there much on military ideology, apart from the ambition of winning.

That the Byzantines did think about these matters is clear from the many treatises on military affairs that were written during the Byzantine period.[222] Theophanes includes little of this in his work, and so the reader is left with his general remarks. The Arab sources are not very accommodating in this regard either, the early Islamic historians are "more interested in individuals than in institutions",[223] and al-Ţabarī is no different in this regard.

The descriptions of the rulers as leaders in war differ slightly in Theophanes and al-Ţabarī – in that the Greek text is short and does not say much about the details of the rulers nor of their generals, whereas the Arabic text goes into great detail in describing the minutiae of battle and the thoughts of both caliphs and generals during battle. So we do not get much information about specifics – but both Theophanes and al-Ţabarī seem to expect the same from a ruler in matters related to military conflict: the ruler must be successful in war, he must be popular with the troops, and he has to have their trust, and finally he must be an honorable person in the sense that he cannot betray his own people or lie to them. These are means for success in war that are fairly generic to most of human history.

Another aspect of the rulers' war power is perhaps the most important issue of all: the justification for war – why does society go to war – but it is not discussed except that it is God's will. Theophanes invokes God throughout his work, and this seems to be his justification for the Byzantines' war. This is perhaps not so strange, as the large territorial losses in the seventh century, the East Roman empire became increasingly threatened and beleaguered. Its struggle for survival became a battle between Christianity and its enemies – good versus evil. In a sense, all wars were now holy wars – the Chosen People of the Christian God was under threat.[224] Theophanes' religious language infuses his whole work,

[222] See Haldon 2003: p. 5 for an overview
[223] Kennedy 2002: A note on the use of Arabic sources, p. xi
[224] Haldon 2003: p. 21

and so fits well with this perspective. In al-Ţabarī the religious justification is equally important, but there are no further reflections.

To sum up the use of Mann's military category on the Byzantine rulers: The role of the emperor seems to be crucial for military expansion and success; the state can shore up the failure of a weak emperor – the state organization is resilient enough to withstand severe losses. And in the end, the massive walls of the capitol, Constantinople, saves the empire's kernel again and again.

The control of military power is more varied in the Islamic context than the Byzantine. None of the caliphs led an army in the field in a large-scale campaign, their military control was instead conducted through various generals. To a certain degree this was the case in the Byzantine empire, but here the emperors at least followed the armies in the field, and in Theophanes' descriptions they definitively come across as actual military leaders in many instances. Still, I have used the same categorization for military control in the tables below – both emperors and caliphs were in the end the wielders of military powers in their respective domains. To the extent that generals and other commanders rebelled, this was a similar problem for both emperor and caliph.

The caliphs ruled over a vast empire. Minor or large revolts seem to have been prevalent. The large battles that the Islamic armies fought in Khurasan, and further east are described in great detail by al-Ţabarī, but the caliphs do not participate much. With some exceptions direct military leadership is not what the emperors or caliphs do: they are not generals. At most they accompany the army in the field.

The emperor seems to have been more important as a military leader than the caliph: the successful emperors could reconquer and expand; the caliphate owed its military successes more to competent generals than caliphs.

4.4 Economic

In reading Theophanes and al-Ţabarī it is not easy to find any reflections on economy or economic policy. They do write about resources, money, and taxes, but this is more in the vein of reporting on this or that event, and particularly from a moral perspective rather than from any concern with fiscal policy.

Theophanes writes with moral indignation on the taxes the various emperors introduce. He seems oblivious to the idea that there might be real need for the taxes, and that there is a rationale behind fiscal policy beyond the emperors' personal greed. That the bureaucrats, military commanders, and the emperor needed to finance the army and navy to ensure the survival of the state, seems not to have crossed his mind.

Al-Ţabarī is not so morally indignant, but his most interesting section regarding public economy is still on how a young, newly appointed governor should behave with regards to taxes: what is the reasonable level of taxation on the local population? And the answer is just as moral as it is financially utilitarian.

Imperial economics

In 731 the emperor Leo III, who is furious with the Pope for "the secession of Rome and Italy", sends a great fleet against Rome and Italy, "under the command of Manes, strategos of *Kibyraiots*": it is wrecked in a storm. This failure makes Leo even more furious: he imposes a capitation tax on one third of the population of Sicily and Calabria; he orders a tax formerly paid to the churches to be paid to the Public Treasury.[225] Here Theophanes does not reflect on whether there could be more calculated reasons than anger for this tax. It is probable that this was not a new tax, but that Leo took direct control with taxes that up until then had been collected by the Church in Rome.[226] Considering the strained relation between Constantinople and Italy, this is a more plausible reason than the one Theophanes offers.

The emperor Constantine V is described by Theophanes as merciless toward monks and monasteries: "As for monasteries built to the glory of God and as a refuge to those seeking salvation, he turned them into common barracks for the soldiers who shared his opinions. […] as well as other holy habitations of monks and virgins he completely demolished:"[227] In this case, Theophanes may be closer to the truth. Constantine V ruled as an iconoclast, and opposition to Iconoclasm meant opposition to Constantine. The emperor used the persecutions of iconophiles to bend the episcopate and bureaucracy to his will, and to confiscate ecclesiastical property, especially monastic property. He thus gained both politically and economically by this.[228] What most motivated the emperor is of course difficult to say for a

[225] Theophanes 1997: p. 568
[226] Theophanes 1997: Footnote, p. 568
[227] Theophanes 1997: 610-611
[228] Treadgold 1997: p. 388

modern reader, but Theophanes is in no doubt: from the number of invectives that he employs in the accompanying descriptions of Constantine's character, the reason is pure evil and godlessness.

Constantine may have had rational motives when dealing with the monasteries and churches: Since these institutions were legal personalities of their own, they could belong to no man.[229] This legal status made it possible for wealthy Byzantines to embed their economic interests and those of their heirs and descendants in the foundation document of monasteries and other private religious institutions. In this way Byzantine testators were able to circumvent a four-generational limit that Justinian had placed on wills. Under cover of a pious donation the rich could harness the legal personality of the monastery or church, and make sure of the future prosperity of their household and kin. It was the Roman-Byzantine version of a "trust fund."[230] To stop this way of avoiding taxes may well have been the reason for the attacks on religious institutions described by Theophanes, in addition to theological disputes.

But Constantine's avarice does not stop there, according to our chronicler. The emperor "also at this time made commodities cheap in the City. For, like a new Midas, he stored away the gold and denuded the peasants who, because of the exaction of taxes, were forced to sell God's bounty at a low price."[231] In ordering the payment of base taxes in cash, Constantine got ready money[232], but farmers became desperate for cash to pay their taxes, and so flooded the market with agricultural products and prices plummeted.[233] It may have been a harsh means to finance the army and navy, but at least Constantine's legacy was that he succeeded in protecting the empire from its enemies. Again, Theophanes does not reflect on this.

Theophanes is happier when Constantine during a ceremony at Hagia Sophia, throws gold coins to the crowd outside the church.[234]

It seems that Theophanes only approves of the lowering of taxes – he writes about how empress Irene is unpopular after her coup against her own son, and her effort to become more popular by lowering taxes on all imported merchandise: "In March of the 9th indiction the

[229] Sarris 2016: p. 18
[230] Sarris 2016: p. 20
[231] Theophanes 1997: p. 611
[232] Treadgold 1997: p. 365
[233] Laiou and Morrison 2007: 231
[234] Theophanes 1997: p. 613

pious Irene remitted the civic taxes for the inhabitants of Byzantium and cancelled the so-called *komerkia* of Abydos and Hieron. She was greatly thanked for these and many other liberalities."[235] But then the emperor Nikephoros I restores the taxes eight years later, together with a series of taxes which affect the whole empire. Theophanes describes these actions: "[…] in order to indicate this man's inventiveness in all manner of greed. […] In this year Nikephoros extended his designs against the Christians by way of an ungodly control over the purchase of all kinds of animals, cattle and produce, the unjust confiscations and fines imposed upon prominent persons, and the exaction of interest on ships (he who issued laws against usury!) and a thousand other evil inventions. To describe all of them in detail would appear tedious to those who seek to learn events in a succinct form."[236]

In reading Theophanes descriptions of the emperors' economic arrangements – taxation, confiscations, forcible removing of peoples, etc. – one might be left with the impression of Byzantium as a command economy, a *dirigiste* state where the imperial government controlled all economic activity. This is far from the truth, as modern historians see it. Sources such as *The Book of the Eparch*, reveal an active commercial economy. The complex Romano-Byzantine commercial law, which regulated trade and commerce for many centuries, reveal a sophisticated commercial economy in the Byzantine world.[237] During the seventh and eight centuries the Byzantine state seems to have control over its fiscal base and the empire's resources in general.[238]

We should therefore question whether Theophanes was aware of the reasons for the various reforms he so forcefully condemns or whether he understood them at all. On the other hand, he was a high-ranking official in the church in Constantinople, and in close contact with the court, so he could not have been unaware of the state of affairs. Perhaps his religious inclinations got the better of him. If so, he would not be the first or last servant of God to judge worldly affairs in a divine light.

We can get an idea of the attitudes on financial matters from a sixth century treatise on military affairs, The Anonymous Byzantine Treatise on Strategy. It was probably written by a retired army engineer, a man with a good knowledge of both the administrative and the

[235] Theophanes 1997: p. 653
[236] Theophanes 1997: pp. 667-668
[237] Sarris 2016: p. 18
[238] Haldon 2003: p. 11

practical aspects of military life. His treatise starts with "the science of government"[239] – descriptions of how the civil state works, or in his opinion, should work, before he moves on to specific military affairs. He uses the following headings in the three first sections on the civil state: "Statecraft and Its Divisions", "The Reasons for the Various Classes in the State" and "Officials". Under "Officials" he writes the following: "Coming now to the officials assigned to financial matters, those who assess the taxes must be just in the ways they go about it; they should have some knowledge of surveying, of agricultural methods, and of accounting."[240] He then continues, describing how these officials must be able to estimate "[…] the effects of climate and topography, the proximity of cities, of navigable rivers, and of the sea".[241] The officials collecting taxes should examine these and other relevant factors in assessing the taxes. The anonymous writer emphasizes that these officials should be men of the highest repute. They must be "[…] genuine lovers of truth, be respected for this, and place their hopes of being honored in the truth. They shall be skillful in investing and interpreting facts and be good administrators, so that the public treasury will not suffer and no injustice will be done to the landowners".[242] There is more advice of the same kind, but the point should be clear: these are down-to-earth practical attitudes on how to treat the collecting of taxes. It shows a concern for both the state's interests and the landowners' interests. What we have here is at least an ideal of how public officials should behave, and in spite of being written earlier than Theophanes' time, it probably reflects attitudes that stayed consistent over the centuries. And who would say that these are not ideals to hope for in public officials in our own time too! What is shows, is that the Byzantine state had a good understanding of many aspects of financial matters. If we collate this with what we have seen in the reforms of various emperors, we see a sophisticated understanding of economic policy. But if we can say this for the Byzantine bureaucracy and the emperor, it seems that Theophanes did not understand much of this, or at least in his chronicle he does not.

Advice to a young man – a lesson in self-improvement and how to succeed in the world

In 822 a young man, ʻAbdallāh b. Ṭāhir, was appointed governor of Raqqah by the caliph al-Maʾmūn. The new official was the son of al-Maʾmūn's famous general, Ṭāhir b. al-Ḥusayn.

[239] The Anonymous Byzantine Treatise on Strategy 1985: p. 19
[240] The Anonymous Byzantine Treatise on Strategy 1985: p. 15
[241] The Anonymous Byzantine Treatise on Strategy 1985: p. 17
[242] The Anonymous Byzantine Treatise on Strategy 1985: p. 17

The young man's reputation is stellar, according to Al-Ţabarī. The caliph has heard good things about the general's son, but in a meeting with him, the caliph is impressed "[…] but I have noted that you are actually better than your father's description of you".[243]

When his son departs for Raqqah, Ṭāhir sends him an epistle, containing advice on how to rule.[244] The opening lines are typical: "Let there be in you the fear of God, He who is one and without associate. Hold Him in awe and reverence and avert his wrath. Look after the interests of your subjects."[245] What follows in the many pages that al-Ţabarī cites in full is more original. In the text the older general gives advice on how to conduct oneself in a ruling position. Abdallāh is now God's shepherd over many people, and he must maintain order through punishment but also protect ordinary people, preserve them from bloodshed, keep the roads safe for them and create peaceful conditions for their daily work.[246] Them follows some interesting passages on economic affairs:

> Know that wealth which is accumulated and then stored away in treasuries bears no fruit; but when it is expended on the improvement of the conditions of subjects, on the provision of their just dues and on removing burdens from them, it thrives and multiplies. As a result, the common people derive benefit from it, the governors bask in reflected glory from it, the whole age is made bright by it, and strength and defensive power are consolidated through it. Consequently, let the accumulated wealth of your treasuries be expended on making the world of Islam and its populace more prosperous.[247]

This seems to be taken out of modern Keynesian economics – let state money circulate and society will prosper. Ṭāhir goes on to the moral – and with a modern expression: social psychological – aspects of dealing with public financial affairs:

> For know that if you are avaricious, you will want to grab everything and give nothing. If you behave thus, your rule will not go right for very long. Your subjects will only have confidence in your benevolence in as much as you refrain from arbitrary exactions on their wealth and avoid tyrannizing over them, and your subordinates will only remain

[243] Al-Ţabarī 1987: Vol. 32, p. 109
[244] Al-Ţabarī 1987: Vol. 32, pp. 110-128
[245] Al-Ţabarī 1987: Vol. 32, p. 110
[246] Al-Ţabarī 1987: Vol. 32, p. 111
[247] Al-Ţabarī 1987: Vol. 32, p. 117

> sincerely devoted to your interests as long as you give them adequate allowances and good pay.[248]

Another passage that has attracted much attention deals with the land tax that was an important means of income for the Islamic state system:

> Look carefully into this matter of the land-tax, which the subjects have the obligation to pay. God has made this a source of strength and might for Islam, and a means of support and protection for His people; but He has made it a source of chagrin and vexation for His enemies and the enemies of the Muslims, and for the unbelievers in treaty relationship with the Muslims a source of abasement and humiliation.[249]

The "unbelievers in treaty relationship" are the "protected peoples" or Dhimmīs – the Jewish and Christian peoples of the lands conquered by the Muslims.[250] There were degrees of tax levels in the Islamic state, where Muslims were taxed lighter than other groups, the "people of the Book" – Jews and Christians – paid more, but were regarded as closer to the Islamic faith than other subjects who did not adhere the Abrahamic religions; these people were taxed the harshest.

Still, according to Ṭāhir, it is important to "[…] Impose taxation on all the people in an equitable manner, for that is more likely to attach them to your interests and more certain to make the masses contented."[251] A few pages further out in the text of Ṭāhir's epistle, he emphasizes the importance of taking care of the poor and destitute of society. There follows a series of arguments on this topic, and it has been described as a "welfare-aspect" to the duties of the ruler.[252]

All in all, Ṭāhir's text is an impressive list of the ideals a ruler should aspire to. That it resonated with sentiments of the time, is apparent from how it was received by contemporaries. When the caliph al-Maʾmūn read it, he exclaimed:

> […] has not mentioned anything of the matters concerning the faith, the present world, the conduct of public affairs, judgment, statecraft, the improvement of the realm and of

[248] Al-Ţabarī 1987: Vol. 32, p. 119
[249] Al-Ţabarī 1987: Vol. 32, p. 121
[250] Al-Ţabarī 1987: Vol. 32, Footnote, p. 121
[251] Al-Ţabarī 1987: Vol. 32, p. 122
[252] Kennedy 2006: p. 204

> the subjects, the safeguarding of the Muslim community, obedience to the Caliphs and maintenance of the caliphate, without in fact dealing with them thoroughly, making recommendations about them and giving instructions [for their execution].[253]

The caliph then orders that the epistle should be copied out and sent to all the governors in the various districts.[254]

The ruler is here shown to be a benevolent despot. "[…] a strong but gentle tyranny brings benefits to ruler and subject alike."[255] What the text fails to reveal is that a large part of the population ruled over by the caliphs was Christian. The ideals are mostly about how a Muslim ruler should behave towards his Muslim subjects, and no mention is made for any need to convert non-Muslims to Islam. Ṭāhir's text has been called "aspirational" – in it the Muslim community is imagined to be at peace both with itself and its neighbors, which was far from actual reality.[256]

Modern historians point out that the Arab wars of conquest "had created an enormous economic space in which long-distance commerce could unfold."[257] Even if it was not necessarily a strategic aim of the Arabs, the Islamic empire's geographical location was ideal for intercontinental trade. Byzantine and Persian trading zones were now joined in a single commercial area. The Muslims were culturally and religiously well disposed towards commerce; the pre-Islamic society in the Arabian peninsula and areas bordering on the Byzantine and Persian empires had long benefited from extracting tariffs on trade caravans passing through their territories. [258] The chances for personal initiative were good, but it was not the Arabs in general who did this. They were content with living off the booty taken and later from state pensions. It was people in the conquered areas in the Islamic empire who took advantage of the new opportunities to make fortunes in trade and commerce.[259]

These modern conceptions must be inferred in al-Ţabarī, he does not write about them explicitly. As we have seen, we get some indications of what economic ideals look like in al-

[253] Al-Ţabarī 1987: Vol. 32, pp. 128-129
[254] Al-Ţabarī 1987: Vol. 32, p. 129
[255] Kennedy 2006: p. 205
[256] Kennedy 2006: p. 206
[257] Van Ess 2017: Vol. 1, pp. 46-47
[258] Bennison 2009: p. 137
[259] Van Ess 2017: Vol. 1, pp. 46-47

Ţabarī's world. And yet it is hard to find more than anecdotal episodes that illuminates what economic power meant. Al-Ţabarī is more interested in individuals that institutions. [260] There are anecdotes about how rulers receive or hand out large amounts of money, who controls monies and valuables, but little else. The following episodes in Al-Ţabarī can illustrate the general principle in his text.

We have already seen the caliph al-Saffāh holding a sermon to the people of Kūfah, where he claims the caliphate on behalf of the 'Abbasid family. In addition to the dynastic claim, he puts forward a series of statements on the Abbasid's position in the Islamic society. The 'Abbasids are specified as kin of God's Messenger.[261] This gives them the right to "Whatever spoils God has given His Messenger from the people of the towns is for God and for the Messenger, and the near kinsman, and orphans."[262] This line of arguments continues: "[…] he has bestowed upon us our share of the booty and the spoils in kindness toward us an in favor to us. God is the Lord of mighty favor".[263]

This claim made in Kūfah legitimizes the 'Abbasid rule in a religious sense; at the same time, it establishes their right to whatever booty and spoils that derive from the Muslim conquests. In this way, the right to control and distribute the wealth of the Muslim empire rests with the 'Abbasids. A very material basis for popularity indeed: one would do well to stay on the 'Abbasids' good side, because the Caliphs' control over the material resources in the Muslim empire. This way of organizing wealth is an important aspect of the Islamic world. The spoils of conquest were controlled from the top of the social strata: Muslim leaders did not distribute land to their fellow Arabs conquerors. Instead, taxes were collected by centrally appointed governors, and then distributed to the military forces.[264] Stipends to soldiers and officers were thus of crucial importance, since this was what paid for the upkeep of the soldiers. The Islamic military leadership did not have estates to fall back on, as the military aristocracy of western Europe did.[265] But such control was a double-edged sword. Al-Ţabarī's work is full of tales of how failure to pay the army could lead to either desertion or rebellion, perhaps both. Since the army thus depended directly on the state for its subsistence, the military had to

[260] Kennedy 2002: Foreword, p. xi
[261] Al-Ṭabarī 1985: Vol. 27, p. 152
[262] Al-Ṭabarī 1985: Vol. 27, p. 153
[263] Al-Ṭabarī 1985: Vol. 27, p. 153
[264] Kennedy 2002: p. 59
[265] Kennedy 2002: pp. 59-61

control the state apparatus to make sure it operated in their interest. In the first three centuries of Islam many of the political disputes originated in disputes over who should control military status.[266] Caliphal economic power was in this way inextricably linked with control over the military resources of the empire.

In using Mann's economic category we see that there are descriptions of matters related to the economic affairs of the state, but not many reflections on economic policy. Theophanes religiously based condemnations and al-Ṭabarī's short comments on monies handed out, and his long text on advice all point to the importance of the ruler for economic matters, but the comments are merely moral. Modern historians have to infer the realities behind these descriptions.

Chapter 5 Conclusion: comparative similarities and differences

From the above analysis, it should be clear that I have found both similarities and differences in how Theophanes and al-Ţabarī describe the power of various rulers.

The use of Michael Mann's theory of the four categories of social power has proved useful in the analysis of Theophanes and al-Ţabarī. The four categories can be used in systemizing the descriptions in both chronicles; at the same time we see that the ideological category is the dominant one. This too fits well with Mann's concept of shifting emphasis between the categories over time and in different cultures. He also argues that ideology mattered the most during the period in which Theophanes and al-Ţabarī lived and wrote.

Let me sum up what I found in light of the different main categories.

In the Ideological category we have seen how Mann's two means of ideological power, his "transcendent vision" of social authority and his "immanence" which reinforces a group's normative solidarity and gives it common ritual and aesthetic practices. Both are relevant in Theophanes and al-Ţabarī. In my analysis we saw the failure of both emperor and caliph to secure the succession of their heirs, in spite of making heavy use of ideological power. No matter how meticulous the arrangements of ideological ritual, the harsh realities of real-life politics could overthrow an unpopular or incompetent emperor or caliph. At the same time, the fact that ideology is so important to both Theophanes and al-Ţabarī, shows that it mattered a great deal to their world-view. But even if ideology is crucial in both societies, the

[266] Kennedy 2002: p. 59

Byzantine empire could draw on its centuries of traditions and the role of the capital Constantinople as a focal point for imperial ideology; the caliphs came later to the scene, and al-Ţabarī's descriptions reveal a polity that struggled with defining a new ideology based on older traditions. The Islamic rulers also struggled with a different geographical situation, their ideological strong points were spread out over a large area, not concentrated in one place like Constantinople. We saw that well demonstrated in the next category, the political.

In the Political category Mann's view of political power consisting of two means is confirmed. Both his "territorial centralization" and his "geopolitical diplomacy" has proved to be useful terms. They define an important distinction between the Byzantine and the Islamic empires: the geographical differences of the two states. When so much ideological and political power in the Byzantine empire was concentrated in Constantinople, "everything" happened there. In addition to what the Byzantine elite thought about an emperor, the opinions of the ordinary citizens could also play an important role in the empire's power struggles. The confines of the capital, one city, and its buildings and spaces provided a physical boundary to the political struggles. Both Theophanes and other Byzantine writers repeatedly report on the ideological and political role of the Great Palaca, the Hippodrome, and the Hagia Sophia. Especially the Hippodrome provided an important meeting point for emperor and populace. In the caliphate the situation was very different: the ideological foci points were spread out: from Damascus to Baghdad, from Khurasan to Kūfah and on to Mecca and Medina. Even if the elite and military leaders in the caliphate could, and did move over these vast distances, ordinary people seldom did. Whereas Theophanes again and again describe how the populace of Constantinople reacts to a rulers' actions and behavior, in al-Ţabarī it is only the siege of Baghdad in 812-13 that ordinary people play a role, and even in these descriptions they play a minor role compared to the military events.

These differences in Theophanes and al-Ţabarī can perhaps confirmed by the long-term developments in the worlds they described. In the Byzantine example, extreme concentration in one city; in the Islamic example a wide dispersion of power in different geographical areas. The Byzantine empire shrank until only Constantinople remained in 1453, and finally gave in to the cannons of the Ottoman sultan Mehmed II.[267] The caliphate fragmented into the many Islamic polities that have constituted the Muslim world since the ninth century. It was the last

[267] Treadgold 1997: pp. 798-803

polity to use the resources of Mesopotamia as basis for an empire, but after its demise, the real power in the Muslim world were based in Egypt, Iran, and later, Turkey.[268]

In the Military category is important in Theophanes and al-Ţabarī. Both our historians report on military affairs. Theophanes in short descriptions, al-Ţabarī often in long passages with detailed scenes of various battles. Still, neither of them reflects much on tactical and strategic matters. The differences in them are caused more by the differences in length of the texts, and the temperaments of the authors. Whereas the short texts of Theophanes shows a disinterest in the minutiae of physical battle, al-Ţabarī sometimes reads like an action movie: he revels in descriptions of physical combat, yet it is hard to get any specific information that is interesting to a modern historian. Many of his scenes could be a description of ancient Greek battles or marauding Vikings. The overall impression is that power in war was crucial for a ruler – otherwise he would be toppled or killed. In that sense Mann's category is important, but as we have seen, the details are lacking and have to be found in other sources than Theophanes and al-Ţabarī.

In the Economic category we have seen how both Theophanes and al-Ţabarī write little on economic matters. In both their works the moral aspect of the rulers' fiscal policy is what strikes a modern reader. As I have stated above, Theophanes' text reflects that the emperors and their administrators did enact fiscal policy, but Theophanes is silent on this: it is his moral perspective that decides whether he condemns or praises. Al-Ţabarī is less judgmental, but he too reports from a moral perspective. This category of Mann's is useful, but as the information is so scant, other sources than Theophanes and al-Ţabarī must be used to flesh out research on economic topics in the Byzantine and Islamic worlds of the time.

As should be clear from this thesis, there were many similarities but also differences between the worlds of Theophanes and al-Ţabarī. Seen from a modern reader's view, though, the similarities are obvious. Speros Vryonis points out that there were striking similarities between the Byzantine and Islamic civilizations in the period A.D. 500-1500. In spite of religious and linguistic differences, political enmity and almost a millennium of fierce combat, the two cultures shared much too: "[…] the relations of the citizen to God, to the state, to his fellow citizen, to the exploitation of the soil and the sea, and even in those highly particular manifestations of man's soul and mind which we usually describe as cultural or

[268] Kennedy 2006: p. 296

intellectual endeavor", in all these areas of human life the similarities are obvious. The common culture and history that were provided by Hellenism after the time of Alexander the Great's conquests, based on a fusion of Graeco-Roman, Iranian, Semitic, and Egyptian traditions, led to societies that on the surface may seem different, but which in reality shared much.[269] Theophanes and al-Ṭabarī are valuable sources in showing these common traits.

This thesis has shown that Mann's theory can be applied to a more fine-masked categorization of sources such as Theophanes and al-Ṭabarī. Possibly these more detailed categories can be applied to other primary sources in the future.

Appendix A

Theophanes – extracts

717-741 Leo III (the Isaurian)

Breaks his promises: Leo III succeeds Theodosius III through an agreement that is arranged by the patriarch Germanus. Leo promises immunity to the emperor Theodosius, who resigns; Theodosius and his son become clergymen and spend the remainder of their lives in peace. Leo also promises to preserve the Church undisturbed (ref. the theological dispute over Iconoclasm in the Byzantine empire), but a becomes clear below, this is a promise he breaks.[270]

Bad omens/religious failing: Leo's infant son, the future emperor Constantine V is baptized in Hagia Sophia, and defecates in the baptismal font.[271] The patriarch Germanus declares prophetically that this sign denotes that a great evil will befall the Christians and the Church on account of Constantine.[272]

Legitimate succession: 554 Leo crowns Constantine, and so enhances his son claim to the throne.[273]

[269] Vryonis IX 1971: p. 205
[270] Theophanes 1997: p. 540
[271] Constantine will be known by the nickname *Kopronymos*: "Name of Dung". Treadgold 1997: p. 366
[272] Theophanes 1997: p. 551
[273] Theophanes 1997: p. 554

Breaks his promise: Leo initiates Iconoclasm, the ban on the veneration of icons, thus breaking his promise as referred to above.[274]

Political/diplomatic failure: Iconoclasm is not accepted by the Pope in Rome, and the Pope reacts in two ways: he withholds the taxes of Italy, and he writes a doctrinal letter, which effectively curbs Leo's influence on both secular and religious affairs in Italy.[275]

Political failure: In Constantinople, the population is distressed over the ban on icons. There are violent protests against Leo's pronouncements. The protests are met with "mutilation, lashes, banishment and fines, especially those who were prominent by birth and culture". This leads schools and "pious" education to suffer.[276]

Political/military success: The inhabitants of Hellas and the Cyclades revolt and appoint another emperor. Leo's forces defeat the rebels outside Constantinople.[277]

Iconoclast/Religious failure: In addition to forbidding icons, Leo criticizes the intercession of the "all-pure Theotokos"[278] and all the saints: "[…] and he abominated their relics like his mentors, the Arabs".[279]

Iconoclast/Religious failure: The patriarch Germanus accuses Leo of reneging on his promise of not undermining the Church with respect to "her apostolic and God-given rites". Leo is called the Antichrist. Leo plans on deposing the patriarch. The patriarch's pupil and synkellos, Anastasios, supports Leo. Later, Anastasios will change theological views and support a rebellion against Constantine. This is prophesied, including Constantine's later punishment of Anastasios.[280]

Diplomatic failure: The Pope in Rome now "severed Rome and all of Italy from Leo's dominion".[281] Leo convenes an illegitimate *silentium* against the icons. The patriarch refuses

[274] Theophanes 1997: pp. 558-9
[275] Theophanes 1997: p. 558
[276] Theophanes 1997: pp. 559-60
[277] Theophanes 1997: p. 560
[278] Mary, the mother of God.
[279] Theophanes 1997: p. 561
[280] Theophanes 1997: p. 564
[281] This is not historically correct: "Both Gregory II and Gregory III remained, on the whole, faithful to Byzantium". Theophanes 1997: Footnote 5, p. 566

to sign a condemnation of the icons and resigns. Leo appoints a "false" patriarch of Constantinople. The appointment is condemned by the Pope in Rome.[282]

Military failure: Leo sends a great fleet against Rome and Italy, "under the command of Manes, strategos of *Kibyraiots*": it is wrecked in a storm. [283]

Economic avarice: This failure makes Leo even more furious: he imposes a capitation tax on one third of the population of Sicily and Calabria; he orders a tax formerly paid to the churches to be paid to the Public Treasury.[284]

General condemnation of Leo' rule: Theophanes condemns Leo for all his faults. These have serious consequences: "The evils that befell the Christians at the time of the impious Leo both as regards the orthodox faith and civil administration, the latter in Sicily, Calabria, and Crete for reasons of dishonest gain and avarice; furthermore, the secession of Italy because of his evil doctrine, the earthquakes, famines, pestilences, and foreign insurrections." Then follows a general and long condemnation of Leo's son, the future Constantine V. All this then explains why many then take up the cause of Constantine's brother-in-law, Artabasdos, who also lays claim to the throne: Artabasdos is orthodox.[285]

741-743 Artabasdos (rival emperor at Constantinople)

Orthodox: Iconodule

Military and political failure: Fails in taking the throne – loses militarily to Constantine.

741-775 Constantine V

Iconoclast/Religious failure: Theophanes has already described Constantine, and here he continues the negative characterizations: "[…] Constantine became emperor by God's judgement on account of the multitude of our sins".[286]

[282] Theophanes 1997: pp. 564-5
[283] Theophanes 1997: p. 568
[284] Theophanes 1997: pp. 572-3
[285] Theophanes 1997: p. 573
[286] Theophanes 1997: p. 575

Military and political challenge: Constantine's brother-in-law, Artabasdos, rebels and takes Constantinople; he has the support of a lot of the people in the city. Constantine is initially unable to reconquer the capital and bides his time nearby. The Arabs use the civil war to plunder Byzantine areas.[287]

Iconoclast/Religious failure: The patriarch, Anastasios, has switched sides. He now supports Artabasdos. The patriarch declares publicly that Constantine holds the wrong theological views. This makes the people curse Constantine.[288]

Military and political challenge: "ln this year Oualid, Isam's son, became ruler of the Arabs. Both Constantine and Artabasdos sought his alliance by dispatching to him, the former the *spatharios* Andrew, the latter the logothete Gregory."[289]

Military and political success: Constantine retakes Constantinople; blinds Artabasdos and his two sons. **Brutal**: Constantine beheads, blinds, cuts of arms and legs of his enemies. He then scourges Anastasios and humiliates him in the Hippodrome.[290] This way of punishing and humiliating opponents is repeated later: Constantine scourges and kills the monk Andrew in the Hippodrome; the body is saved from being thrown the Bosphorus by Andrew's sister.[291]

Bad omen/Religious failure/ Disfavored by God: A pestilence spreads in the Byzantine empire, and Theophanes blames the impious Constantine.[292]

Legitimate succession: Constantine crowns his son, the future Leo IV 'the Kazar'.[293]

Iconoclast/Religious failure: Constantine convenes an illegal assembly, "against the icons", of bishops; none of the universal sees are represented.[294]

[287] Theophanes 1997: pp. 575-6
[288] Theophanes 1997: pp. 575-6
[289] Theophanes 1997: p. 577
[290] Theophanes 1997: pp. 580-81
[291] Theophanes 1997: p. 598
[292] Theophanes 1997: p. 585
[293] Theophanes 1997: pp. 588-9
[294] Theophanes 1997: pp. 591-2

Conscious ruler/economy: Because of the plague, Constantinople is depopulated; Constantine "brought families from the islands, Hellas, and the southern parts and made them dwell in the City so as to increase the population".[295]

Military failure: The Arabs invade "the Roman country" and take many prisoners. Constantine invades Bulgaria but is defeated in battle. He returns "ingloriously".[296]

Military success: Constantine goes to war against the Bulgarians again, and this time he wins a great victory; he celebrates "a triumph in the City".[297]

Bad omens/Religious failure: The winter is very cold, and thick ice covers both rivers and seas. When it breaks up, large icebergs fill the Bosporus and Theophanes describes how he as a boy played on one of them, and how a large iceberg struck the city walls with great force. Stars are seen falling from the heaven all at once, and observers believe it is the end of the world; a great drought sets in. The emperor summons the patriarch and asks: "'What harm is there if we call the Mother of God Mother of Christ?'" This is met by horror by the patriarch: "The other embraced him and said: 'Have mercy, O lord! May not this statement come even to your mind. Don't you see how much Nestorios is held up to public scorn and anathematized by the whole Church?' The emperor replied: 'I have asked you for my own information. Keep it to yourself.'"[298]

Brutal/religious persecution: Constantine commands that Stephen, a recluse at St. Auxentios, should be dragged in the street. He is then "broken apart"; his remains thrown in a ditch for executed criminals. The reason for this punishment is that Stephen has "[…] admonished many people to enter the monastic life and had persuaded them to scorn imperial dignities and moneys". Constantine inflicts various "punishments and cruel tortures" on officers and soldiers who worship icons. Constantine forces the patriarch to mount the ambo and forswear the veneration of icons; he forces the patriarch to assume clerical tonsure and eat meat and put up with cither music at the imperial table. Constantine dishonors monks and nuns in the Hippodrome. He kills many dignitaries and whips others.[299]

[295] Theophanes 1997: p. 593
[296] Theophanes 1997: p. 596
[297] Theophanes 1997: p. 599
[298] Theophanes 1997: p. 601
[299] Theophanes 1997: pp. 604-5

Constantine is described as worse against Christians than the caliph; the relic of "the all-praised" martyr Euphemia and her cask is thrown into the sea Theophanes writes that it will reappear under the reign of the future, orthodox, empress Irene and her son, the future emperor Constantine VI. But Constantine (V) is not content with getting rid of the martyr's remains and casket, he also turns her church into "an arms-store and a dungheap".[300]

Conscious ruler: Constantine restores the aqueduct of Valentinian: "When the work had thus been completed, water flowed into the City."[301]

Brutal/religious persecution: Constantine humiliates "the false patriarch" Constantine, both in Hagia Sophia and in the Hippodrome; then beheads him and hangs his head at the Milion. Constantine sends men to remove "the celebrated stylite Peter from his rock", he is then dragged alive through Constantinople's main street and then thrown in the pit for executed criminals outside the city. Other opponents of the emperor's views fare no better: "Others he tied up in sacks which he weighted with stones and commanded to be cast in the sea, and he went on blinding, amputating noses, scourging, and inventing every kind of torment for the pious."[302]

Economy/Avarice: Constantine is merciless toward monks and monasteries: "As for monasteries built to the glory of God and as a refuge to those seeking salvation, he turned them into common barracks for the soldiers who shared his opinions. […] as well as other holy habitations of monks and virgins he completely demolished:"[303]

Immoral/Depraved: Constantine himself "delighted in music and banquets and educated his courtiers by means of foul language and dancing". Constantine is supposed to have engaged in homosexual activities: "[…] after he had befriended Strategios, the (brother) of Podopagouros, who was of attractive appearance (for he liked to have such intimates for the sake of his lewdness), but becoming aware that this man was repelled by his illicit homosexuality and was confessing it to the blessed Stephen (the hermit of St Auxentios) and receiving salutary treatment, he branded him as a traitor and killed him along with the hermit as has been said above." [304]

[300] Theophanes 1997: p. 607
[301] Theophanes 1997: p. 608
[302] Theophanes 1997: pp. 609-11
[303] Theophanes 1997: pp. 610-11
[304] Theophanes 1997: pp. 610-11

Economy/Avarice: Constantine "also at this time made commodities cheap in the City. For, like a new Midas, he stored away the gold and denuded the peasants who, because of the exaction of taxes, were forced to sell God's bounty at a low price."[305]

Popular/Generous: During a ceremony at Hagia Sophia, Constantine throws gold coins to the crowd outside the church.[306]

Legitimate succession: Constantine's son Leo is betrothed to Irene; later Irene is crowned empress, and the pair is married.[307] Soon after Irene and Leo have a son, the future Constantine VI.[308]

Brutal/religious persecution: One of the empire's regional officials enacts a terrible treatment of monasteries, monks and nuns: He "sold off all the male and female monasteries, all their holy vessels, books, and animals, and all their other possessions and paid their value to the emperor. Whatever books he found containing stories of monks and fathers of the desert he burnt. And whenever it appeared that anyone had a saint's relic as a phylactery, this, too, was consigned to the fire, while its possessor was punished for impiety. Many monks he killed by scourging, some by the sword, and a numberless multitude he blinded. In the case of some he smeared their chins with liquid wax and set fire to them so that their faces and heads were burnt, while others he subjected to many torments and then exiled. All in all, he did not leave in the whole thema that was under his authority a single man wearing the monastic habit." The emperor approves wholeheartedly of these actions.[309]

Military success and failure: Constantine is victorious against the Bulgars.[310] The next campaign is a disaster. A large fleet is destroyed by a storm; the emperor returns to Constantinople without having gained anything. And then, to make the failure complete, the emperor's own indiscretion reveals the Byzantine spies in the Bulgarian khan's service. The spies are executed by the Bulgarians.[311] Yet another attempt to attack the Bulgaria is initiated,

[305] Theophanes 1997: p. 611
[306] Theophanes 1997: pp. 612-13
[307] Theophanes 1997 p. 613
[308] Theophanes 1997: p. 615
[309] Theophanes 1997: p. 615
[310] Theophanes 1997: pp. 616-17
[311] Theophanes 1997: p. 618

but this time Constantine is struck down by disease during the campaign. He dies trying to get back to Constantinople.[312]

775-780 Leo IV the Khazar

Popular/Generous: He lays his hands on the money left to him by his father and wins favor with the people and the notables.[313]

Iconophile/Orthodox: (for a while) Initially he appears to be pious and a friend to the "holy Mother of God and of the monks".[314]

Popular/Legitimate succession: As a result of this, the commanders of the military districts set out and enters Constantinople "with a great throng of men to request that his son Constantine should be made emperor". Leo expresses concerns that his son is to young, just an infant: "'My son is an only child and I am afraid of doing so lest I suffer the fate of all men and, while he is an infant, you put him to death and appoint another.'" They all swear loyalty to Leo and his son, and soon after this is confirmed in a ceremony taking place in Hagia Sophia during Holy Saturday: "[…] and, after changing the altar-cloth according to imperial custom, he mounted the ambo with his son and the patriarch. All the people **entered the church and deposited their written declarations on the holy table**. The emperor addressed them as follows: "'Behold, brethren, I am fulfilling your request and granting you my son as emperor. Behold, you are receiving him from the Church and from Christ's hand.'" The next day, Easter Sunday, Leo **crowns his son in the Hippodrome**, in front of "all the people". The emperor and his family, with many notables, then proceed to Hagia Sophia.[315]

Military: Leo leads a successful campaign against the Arabs. Celebrates a triumph in Constantinople.[316] The year after, the Arabs tries to attack back, but fail.[317] The year after, the Arabs attack yet again, but nothing comes of this for either of the two sides.[318]

[312] Theophanes 1997: p. 620
[313] Theophanes 1997: p. 620
[314] Theophanes: *anno mundi* 6268/AD 775/6 p. 620
[315] Theophanes: *anno mundi* 6268/AD 775/6 pp. 620-21
[316] Theophanes: *anno mundi* 6270/AD 777/8 p. 623
[317] Theophanes: *anno mundi* 6271/AD 778/9 p. 624
[318] Theophanes: *anno mundi* 6272/AD 779/80 pp. 625-26

Avarice: Leo is inordinately addicted to precious stones and being "enamoured of the crown of the Great Church", he wears the crown so much that he develops carbuncles on his head and dies.[319]

780-790 Constantine VI the Blinded and his mother Irene the Athenian (regent)

791-797 Constantine VI alone

797-802 Irene alone

The total number of pages that concerns Irene and her son, Constantine VI, is 29, which is considerable for Theophanes. As indicated in the list above, their reigns are usually divided into three, but here I consider Theophanes' descriptions together.

Irene: Orthodox/Iconophile: Theophanes praises the succession of the 10-year-old Constantine, with his mother as regent, in 780. Especially important is Irene's reintroduction of the **veneration of icons**. [320]

Irene: Political control: A plot to overthrow Irene is thwarted.[321]

Irene: Legitimate: Irene "went in public imperial procession together with her son and offered to the church the crown that had been removed by her husband, which she had further adorned with pearls."[322]

Irene: Brutal: Irene punishes opponents – scourges, tonsures, banishes and imprisons.[323]

Irene: Orthodox: People can now speak freely.[324]

Irene: Good omens: A coffin is found by the Long Walls of Thrace, bearing the inscription: "'Christ will be born of the Virgin Mary and I believe in Him. O sun, you will see me again in the reign of Constantine and Irene.'"[325]

[319] Theophanes: *anno mundi* 6272/AD 779/80 p. 625
[320] Theophanes 1997: pp. 626-27
[321] Theophanes 1997: p. 627
[322] Theophanes 1997: p. 627
[323] Theophanes 1997: p. 627
[324] Theophanes 1997: p. 627
[325] Theophanes 1997: p. 627

Irene: Political/diplomatic success: Irene proposes to have her son Constantine married to Charlemagne the Great's daughter Erythro. An agreement is reached.[326]

Irene: Military success: She crushes a rebellion in Sicily.[327]

Irene: Military failure: Military conflict with the Arabs result in a stalemate. This is in part because of internal conflicts in the Byzantine army.[328]

Irene: Military success: Irene's forces under the patrician and logothete Staurakios beat the Sklavininan tribes in Thessalonica and Hellas and the Peloponnese. In January, a victory is celebrated for Staurakios during the hippodrome games. In May Irene herself, with Constantine, leads a military expedition to Thrace; she orders the city of Beroia rebuilt and renames it Eirenoupolis.[329]

Irene: Orthodox/religious/political leader: Irene's initiates what will be known as the **second Council of Nicaea**.[330] Irene wishes to bring unity to the Church over the question of icons. She does this in agreement with the Pope in Rome and the patriarchs in Antioch and Alexandria (the peace with the Arabs allowed for this). The council initially convenes in Constantinople but is interrupted by elements of the army who support iconoclasm.[331] This stops the synod, but Irene later proceeds to expel these soldiers from the city, and then: "After forming her own army with officers who were obedient to her, in the month of May she once again sent messages to all parts inviting the bishops to present themselves at the city of Nicaea in Bithynia with a view to holding the synod there. All through the summer everyone gathered at Nicaea. As for the representatives from Rome and the East, she had not dismissed them, but had detained them."[332] The council is then held successfully: "And so God's Church found peace, even though the Enemy does not cease from sowing his tares among his own workmen; but God's Church when she is under attack always proves victorious."[333]

Irene: Diplomatic/military/political/(personal) failure: Irene breaks the contract with the Franks; she marries Constantine to "a girl from the Armeniac parts". Constantine is strongly

[326] Theophanes 1997: p. 628
[327] Theophanes 1997: p. 628
[328] Theophanes 1997: p. 629
[329] Theophanes 1997: p. 631
[330] Theophanes 1997: pp. 631-37
[331] Theophanes 1997: p. 635
[332] Theophanes 1997: p. 635
[333] Theophanes 1997: p. 637

against this but obeys his mother. Later Irene tries to ally with a former king Langobardic against Charlemagne, but this effort fails. In Thrace, the Byzantine army suffers defeat against the Bulgars.[334]

Irene: Political (personal) failure: Irene is deceived by powerful men in Constantinople: Constantine has reached the age of 20, but "the Devil, grudging the emperor's piety, inspired certain evil men to set the mother against her son and the son against his mother. They persuaded her that they had been informed through prophecies to the effect that 'It is ordained by God that your son should not obtain the Empire, for it is yours, given to you by God.' Deceived, like the woman she was, and being also ambitious, she was satisfied that things were indeed so, and did not perceive that those men had offered the above pretext because they wanted to administer the affairs of State." One result of this is that Constantine is distressed: Staurakios, the patrician and logothete, seems to hold power. Constantine fails in trying to overthrow Staurakios. Irene arrests the emperor's men, flogs Constantine and impose an oath on the army: "'As long as you are alive we shall not suffer your son to rule.' Everyone swore those words and no one at all dared to object."[335]

Constantine: political success: Constantine manages to depose his mother; assumes the imperial throne; Irene is confined in the palace of Eleutherios.[336]

Constantine: weak rule: Constantine proclaims Irene co-emperor again.[337]

Constantine: military failure/political unrest: Constantine makes an expedition against the Bulgars. This is a total failure, and he flees back to Constantinople. The disaster has consequences: "When the tagmata had assembled in the City, they decided to bring the former Caesar Nikephoros out of retirement and make him emperor." Constantine reacts violently and he "ordered that all the sons of his grandfather Constantine should be brought to St Mamas: he blinded Nikephoros and cut off the tongues of Christopher, Niketas, Anthimos, and Eudokimos. Along with them he blinded the aforementioned patrician Alexios, having been persuaded by the pleading of his mother and of Staurakios (the said patrician) that if he did not blind him they would elect him emperor." [338]

[334] Theophanes 1997: pp. 637-38
[335] Theophanes 1997: pp. 638-39
[336] Theophanes 1997: pp. 640-41
[337] Theophanes 1997: p. 642
[338] Theophanes 1997: p. 643

Constantine: Brutal: Constantine makes an expedition against the Armeniacs and captures many of them. He puts the leaders to death, others he punishes by fines and confiscation. A thousand men are taken to Constantinople: "He had their faces tattooed in ink with the words, 'Armeniac plotter'. He then dispersed them in Sicily and the other islands."[339]

Theological failure: Constantine forces his wife to become a nun; then "the emperor crowned the cubicularia Theodote as Augusta and betrothed himself to her illegally". This leads to a conflict with the abbot of Sakkoudion and other influential monks. Irene supports the monks, in opposition to her own son.[340]

Military failure: A campaign against the Arabs fail, supposedly because Irene's supporters sabotaged the Byzantine military effort. Constantine returns to Constantinople.[341]

Weak: A coup by Irene deposes Constantine. He is blinded by Irene's supporters and dies from his wounds.[342]

Irene: Diplomatic/political failure: no control in Italy: Pope Leo in Rome flees a rebellion in Rome. He seeks refuge with Charlemagne, king of the Franks, not Irene in Constantinople. Charlemagne restores Leo as pope in Rome. Later, Leo repays Charlemagne by crowning him "emperor of the Romans".[343]

Irene: Military failure: Irene fails in achieving peace with the Arabs: the regions Cappadocia and Galatia are devastated. Another Arab expedition is also successful in ravaging the eastern parts of the Byzantine empire.[344]

Irene: Political/diplomatic success: Irene's contact with the western part of the old empire is depicted as successful. Charlemagne and Pope Leo III send emissaries asking Irene to marry Charlemagne, according to Theophanes. "In this year, on 25 December, indiction 9, Karoulos, king of the Franks, was crowned by Pope Leo. He intended to make a naval expedition against Sicily, but changed his mind and decided instead to marry Irene. To this end he sent ambassadors the following year, indiction 10."[345] This will unite the eastern and the western

[339] Theophanes 1997: p. 644
[340] Theophanes 1997: p. 645
[341] Theophanes1997: p. 648
[342] Theophanes 1997: pp. 648-49
[343] Theophanes 1997: p. 649
[344] Theophanes 1997: pp. 650-51
[345] Theophanes 1997: p. 653

part of the Roman empire. Here Irene is portrayed as successful in diplomatic affairs of great magnitude, and if it had been up to her, she would have accepted the marriage proposal. Unfortunately, the patrician Aëtios has other plans, he is scheming to place his brother on the throne, and according to Theophanes he is able to check Irene in marrying Charlemagne. We see here a depiction of Irene as initially powerful, but in the end unable to establish a reunion of the empire. She is dependent on the patrician and eunuch Aëtius; she is overruled by him in important matters: especially in the marriage proposal from Charlemagne. Aëtius plans to put his own brother on the throne; so does another patrician, Staurakios. Irene is **dethroned** by Nikephoros. The ambassadors from Charlemagne are in the city and observe this.[346]

Theological/role as empress/generous /politically weak: "On the Monday of holy Easter the empress processed from the church of the Holy Apostles, riding in a golden chariot drawn by four white horses and held by four patricians, namely Bardanes, strategos of the Thrakesians, Sisinnios, *strategos* of Thrace, Niketas, domestic of the Schools, and Constantine Boilas, and she distributed largess in abundance. In the month of May the empress fell ill to the point of death and the rivalry between the eunuchs was intensified."[347]

Economy/Generous: "In March of the 9th indiction the pious Irene remitted the civic taxes for the inhabitants of Byzantium and cancelled the so-called *komerkia* of Abydos and Hieron. She was greatly thanked for these and many other liberalities."[348]

802-811 Nikephoros I

Illegitimate succession: Nikephoros rebels against Irene and deposes her; the people curse "the crowned and he who was crowning". **Bad omens**: Many have ill forebodings. Even the weather becomes gloomy. **Treacherous:** Nikephoros simulates benignity towards Irene, gets her to not conceal any of the imperial treasure. Then he breaks his oath – exiles her to Prinkipos and later to Lesbos, where she dies. Nikephoros also breaks his oath to a pretender, Bardanios – has him blinded.[349]

[346] Theophanes 1997: pp. 653-57
[347] Theophanes 1997: p. 651
[348] Theophanes 1997: p. 653
[349] Theophanes 1997: pp. 655-58

Illegitimate succession: Nikephoros crowns his son, Staurakios, emperor, in the ambo in Hagia Sophia. Staurakios is "in all respects unsuitable for this office".[350]

Nikephoros is known to deceive men. "A peculiar trait of character". He "had a faculty for women's tears".[351]

Weak religious and political control: Monks in Constantinople disapprove of Nikephoros' appointment of patriarch; Nikephoros cannot expel the monks – more than 700![352]

Military failure: Defeated by the Arabs in Phrygia: "He lost many men and was himself on the point of being captured, had not some of the bravest officers managed with difficulty to deliver him from danger."[353]

Nikephoros loses to the Arabs: he is frightened, perplexed and he despairs; he must accept a peace and he must pay tribute. Then Nikephoros breaks the treaty, with the result that Arab forces attacks again and wreak havoc on the Byzantines.[354]

Military: A military expedition against the Bulgars achieves nothing, and Nikephoros returns in haste to Constantinople to avert a revolt by parts of the army and imperial officials: "When he had come to Adrianople, he became aware that a revolt against him was being planned by imperial officials and by the *tagmata*". He punishes his opponents with scourging, exile, and confiscation.[355]

Avarice: He settles "refugees and aliens" in Thrace, planning to extract "a considerable amount of gold by way of annual taxes – this man who did everything for the gold he loved and not for Christ".[356]

Brutal/depraved: Nikephoros picks a wife for his son; he forces her, although she is already betrothed and has lain with her fiancée many times. Nikephoros selects with her two maidens, who he openly violates on the wedding day.[357]

[350] Theophanes 1997: p. 659
[351] Theophanes 1997: pp. 659-60
[352] Theophanes 1997: pp. 661-62
[353] Theophanes 1997: p. 660
[354] Theophanes 1997: pp. 661-62
[355] Theophanes 1997: p. 663
[356] Theophanes 1997: p. 663
[357] Theophanes 1997: pp. 663-64

Religious and political failure: "Theodore, abbot of Studios, and his brother Joseph, the archbishop of Thessalonica, along with the recluse Platon and their other monks withdrew from communion with Nikephoros, the most holy patriarch, on account of the *oikonomos* Joseph who had unlawfully married Constantine and Theodote." Nikephoros holds a synod against certain abbots, monks and the archbishop of Thessalonica; he then expels them from Constantinople.[358]

Military failure: Nikephoros fails in a military campaign against the Bulgars. He also refuses a promise of immunity to officers who escaped the massacre.[359]

Religious failure/liar: Nikephoros swears to the Imperial City that he has celebrated Easter in the court of the Bulgarian Kroummos.[360]

Unpopular: Nikephoros tries to manipulate his soldiers – they violently protest at his tent. "[…] advancing to the imperial [tent], cast many insults and curses upon him, swearing that they could no longer suffer his infinite avarice and mischievous character". **Brutal/not to be trusted**: "While the army was on its way back, he pretended to be about to pay them, but instead punished most of them at St Mamas by lashes, tonsure, and exile, and the rest he conveyed to Chrysopolis having transgressed his terrible oaths. On account of their misfortune they called the Bosporus the 'river of fire'."[361]

Economy/brutal: Nikephoros institutes a series of taxes, which affect the whole empire. Theophanes describes these actions "[…] in order to indicate this man's inventiveness in all manner of greed. […] In this year Nikephoros extended his designs against the Christians by way of an ungodly control over the purchase of all kinds of animals, cattle and produce, the unjust confiscations and fines imposed upon prominent persons, and the exaction of interest on ships (he who issued laws against usury!) and a thousand other evil inventions. To describe all of them in detail would appear tedious to those who seek to learn events in a succinct form."[362]

Bad omen: A "man of lowly station", dressed as a monk, tries to kill Nikephoros. **Heretic**: "The emperor was an ardent friend of the Manichees (now called Paulicians) and of his close

[358] Theophanes 1997: p. 665
[359] Theophanes 1997: pp. 665-66
[360] Theophanes 1997: p. 666
[361] Theophanes 1997: p. 666
[362] Theophanes 1997: pp. 667-71

neighbours, the Athinganoi of Phrygia and Lykaonia, and delighted in their prophecies and rites." Nikephoros uses their magic in defeating a rebellious patrician. **Heretic/brutal**: "He commanded military officers to treat bishops and clergymen like slaves, to lodge high-handedly in episcopal residences and monasteries and abuse their goods." **Greedy/unjust**: "Uncorrected by so many presages, the new Ahab, who was more insatiable than Phalaris or Midas, took up arms against the Bulgarians along with his son Staurakios."[363]

Military loss: Nikephoros attacks the Bulgarians; raises taxes; forces people to fight with slings and sticks; the disastrous rising of the Dog-star; orders animals, 15 infants and persons of all ages to be slain; then takes the "court" of Kroummos; finally, Nikephoros loses and is killed; so are many of his soldiers. **Humiliated**: Kroummos uses his skull to drink from.[364]

Negative characteristics: "His slaying a consolation to many people […] his effeminate servants (with whom he went to bed) […] He surpassed all his predecessors by his greed, his licentiousness, his barbaric cruelty."[365]

811-811 Staurakios

Unlucky: Staurakios participates in his father's attack on the Bulgars; he is mortally wounded in battle. He has his father's implacable character and is alienated from his sister Prokopia "for plotting against him at the instigation of the Augusta Theophano; for the unhappy woman, who was childless, was hoping to obtain the Empire straight away in the manner of the blessed Irene".[366]

Political failure: Staurakios tries to secure the empire for his wife, but he fails in this. He also fails in removing his brother-in-law, Michael. Michael becomes emperor.[367]

Forced to abdicate: Staurakios does not accept Michael as emperor but has no choice. "Having heard of his proclamation, Staurakios immediately cut off his hair and put on monastic garb through the offices of his relative, the monk Symeon, all the time calling for the patriarch. The latter came to the palace together with the emperor Michael and Staurakios' sister and fervently begged Staurakios not to be grieved by the turn of events, which was due

[363] Theophanes 1997: pp. 671-72
[364] Theophanes 1997: pp. 672-74
[365] Theophanes 1997: p. 674
[366] Theophanes 1997: pp. 674-75
[367] Theophanes 1997: p. 674

not to a plot, but to despair concerning his life. Still raging with his father's wickedness, Staurakios did not acquiesce […]" Soon after he dies of his wound.[368]

811-813 Michael I Rangabe

Promises to keep his hands unsullied …

Legitimate: Michael is proclaimed emperor by the entire Senate and the tagmata in the Hippodrome. He is then crowned in the ambo in Hagia Sophia. **Generous**: Michael donates gold to the patriarch and the clergy. He is magnanimous and liberal. He donates gifts to the Senate and the army. **Orthodox:** Michael is "pious and highly orthodox".[369]

Diplomatic success: Michael sends an embassy to Charlemagne: for a peace treaty and a marriage contract for his son Theophylaktos. The patriarch sends a synodic letter to the Pope (he has previously been prevented by Nikephoros in doing this).[370]

Legitimate succession: Michael crowns his son, Theophylaktos, by the hand of the patriarch in the ambo of Hagia Sophia.[371]

Generous: "He offered a sumptuous adornment for the holy sanctuary, namely golden vessels set with stones and a set of four curtains of ancient manufacture, splendidly embroidered in gold and purple and decorated with wonderful sacred images. He also donated 25 lbs. of gold to the patriarch and 100 lbs. to the venerable clergy, so adorning the holy feast and his son's proclamation."[372]

Theological dispute: Michael decrees the death penalty against the Paulicians and Athinganoi in Phrygia but is then turned back from this course by "certain perverse counsellors". Both sides argue from theological positions. Michael executes some of the heretics, but the matter is unsettled.[373]

Military failure: Campaigning against the Bulgarians, Michael is less than successful: "evil and perverse" counsellors cause sedition and unrest in the army; the Bulgarians extends their

[368] Theophanes 1997: pp. 677-79
[369] Theophanes: pp. 677-78
[370] Theophanes: p. 678
[371] Theophanes: p. 678
[372] Theophanes: p. 678
[373] Theophanes: p. 678

power over Thrace and Macedonia. The populations that had been forcibly resettled by Nikephoros, flees, and return to their former homes.[374]

Renewed conflict with the Bulgarians, who invade Byzantine territory. Michael wants to make a peace agreement, but his councilors reject this. Then, when Michael again sets out against the Bulgarians, the iconoclasts again revolt in Constantinople.[375]

Political and theological conflict: In Constantinople opponents of Michael, take up arms to "subvert the orthodox faith". They call for iconoclasm, as in the days of Constantine V: he at least, was successful against the Bulgarians. Michael manages to quell this revolt. Even though the insurgents are arrested, the admiration for Constantine V and iconoclasm is a large problem for Michael.[376]

Military failure/abdication: Again, Michael is bested by the Bulgarians and has to flee back to Constantinople. "As for the emperor, he was making his homeward escape, cursing the army and its commanders and swearing he would abdicate the Empire. […][377]

When the strategoi and the army had learnt that the emperor had fled to the City, they despaired of being ruled by him any longer and, having taken counsel among themselves, implored (the patrician) Leo, strategos of the Anatolics, to help the common cause and protect the Christian state." Michael wants to abdicate his rule, and even though he initially is prevented in doing this by the patriarch, he finally does so when the strategos Leo consents to becoming emperor. "On being informed of his proclamation, Michael, together with Prokopia and their children, sought refuge in the chapel of the Pharos, where they cut off their hair and donned monastic garb […]." The Bulgarians invade all the way to Constantinople and plunder the suburbs, before returning home.[378]

[374] Theophanes: p. 679
[375] Theophanes: pp. 681-84
[376] Theophanes: pp. 684-85
[377] Theophanes: pp. 685
[378] Theophanes: pp. 685-86

Appendix B

Tabari - extracts

749-754 Abū al-ʿAbbās al-Saffāh Volume 27/28

Al-Saffāh was the first of the Abbasid caliphs, and his claim to rule over the Islamic world was based on lineage: according to the Abbasids, their family ties to the Prophet Muhammad made them the rightful heirs to rulership over all Muslims.

Legitimate: **Genealogy**: Al-Saffāh is a descendant of the Prophet's uncle. He asserts this claim in a sermon from the minbar/mosque in Kūfah. The 'Abbasid rebellion is a return to rightful rule; the people have been wronged by the Umayyads. Al-Saffāh receives "the handclasp of allegiance".[379]

Controlling wealth: In a sermon to the people of Kufah: Even though the Muslims position as the "kin of God's Messenger", is privileged, the Abbasid position is even more exalted: "Know that if you take anything as booty, one fifth of it is for God and for the Messenger and for the near kinsmen and for orphans."

"People of Kufah, you are the halting-place of our love, the lodging of our affections. You it is who remained steadfast, you who were not deflected from our love by the injustice of the people of tyranny against you until you reached our epoch and God brought you our revolution. You of all mankind are most fortunate in us and most worthy of our generosity. We have increased your allowances to a hundred dirhams. Make ready, then; for I am the manifest Spiller (Saffāh), the desolating Avenger." Al-Saffāh controls the booty and spoils in the Islamic empire.[380]

Pious: Al-Saffāh will rule according to what God has sent down and in accordance with the Book of God.[381]

Orthodox: Again, in Kufah: Al-Saffāh claims descent from Muhammad.[382]

Weak ruler: The people of the Jazirah "put on white" and throw off the allegiance to al-Saffāh.[383] The conflict between Al-Saffāh and his general Abū Muslim: the general

[379] Al-Ţabarī 1990: Vol. 27, pp. 152-57
[380] Al-Ţabarī 1990: Vol. 27, pp. 152-57
[381] Al-Ţabarī 1990: Vol. 27, pp. 152-57
[382] Al-Ţabarī 1990: Vol. 27, p. 161
[383] Al-Ţabarī 1990: Vol. 27, p. 180

supposedly "does just what he pleases".[384] This passage shows al-Saffāh's weakness – he does not dare to confront Abū Muslim, whose large army is loyal to Abū Muslim, not the caliph.[385]

754-775 Abū Jaʿfar al-Manṣūr Volume 28/29

In this part of the chronicle, al-Ţabarī describes administrative detail, government appointments, the travels of the caliph, the foundation of Baghdad and al-Manṣūr's conflict with his nephew, Īsā b. Mūsā, who has a claim to the caliphate. Al-Manṣūr wants his own son, al-Mahdī to be designated as the next caliph, contrary to an arrangement made by al-Saffāh earlier. Eventually, Īsā b. Mūsā is bought off for the time being. He agrees to wait in succession till after al-Mahdī's reign. This process is described in **narrative** and **dialogue** by al-Ţabarī.[386]

Legitimate: **Genealogy**: Before he dies, al-Saffāh has the oath taken to his brother, al-Manṣūr. Another brother, ʿĪsā b. Mūsā, gets it as al-Manṣūr's successor. "The Caliph recorded the deed of these appointments in a document, placed it in a container, sealed it with his own seal and the seals of his family, and entrusted it to 'Isa b. Musa."[387]

Personal weakness/military weakness: Al-Manṣūr is very uneasy about his position when he becomes caliph. He fears two possible opponents:

1. His uncle, ʿAbdallāh b. ʿAlī, who also has a claim to the caliphate. Al-Manṣūr needs Abū Muslim to calm him down by promising to deal with ʿAbdallāh b. ʿAlī – the caliph does not have military control but is reliant on Abū Muslim's generalship. (The general defeats ʿAbdallāh b. ʿAlī at Nisibin – he lives thereafter under house arrest.)[388]

2. Those loyal to Alī b. Ţalīb and his descendants, the rival claimants to a valid dynastic succession from the Prophet Muhammad – this is the faction (The House of Alī) in the Islamic world that eventually will become the Shia. Al-Manṣūr's inability to deal with an actual Alid revolt, led by Muḥammad and Ibrāhīm, the sons of ʿAbdallāh b. Ḥasan. The

[384] Al-Ţabarī 1990: Vol. 27, pp. 185, 190, 206 and 210
[385] Al-Ţabarī 1990: Vol. 27, p. 210
[386] Al-Ţabarī 1990: Vol. 29, pp. 24-38
[387] Al-Ţabarī 1990: Vol. 27, p. 212
[388] Al-Ţabarī 1995: Vol. 28, p. 4

problem and challenge are described as serious. It is al-Manṣūr's cousin, ʿĪsā b. Mūsā who finally defeats the two brothers. But then, there is the story of all the Alids al-Manṣūr killed and hid in a vault in his palace.[389]

Brave, but not a military leader: Al-Manṣūr is described as a "lion" in battle. But he seems not to have led an army himself.[390]

Political weakness: The people give the oath of allegiance, but ʿĪsā b. Mūsā also gets it, as al-Manṣūr's successor; al-Manṣūr becomes caliph, but he does not have the power to nominate his own successor [391]; Eventually, he manages to buy/force ʿĪsā b. Mūsā to give up the claim, and al-Manṣūr's son, al-Mahdī, is named successor. He was a good administrator. [392]

Political/military weakness: Al-Manṣūr kills Abū Muslim. This event shows how weak al-Manṣūr's position is – he has to hide the dead body in a carpet and throw it in the Tigris river! Later in life al-Manṣūr will muse on the three mistakes he made as caliph, and which almost cost him the caliphate/his life. The killing of Abū Muslim is one of them, even though the gamble paid off.[393]

Benevolent/pious: Al-Manṣūr enlarges the Mosque in Mecca; this is "the Year of Abundance".[394]

Piety: Al-Manṣūr goes on the Pilgrimage, entering the "state of consecration". In other years he leads the Pilgrimage. [395] He is described as praying intensely on the prayer mat (fear?). Al-Manṣūr is abstaining from women.[396] Entertainment was never seen in al-Mansur's house.[397]

Humble/self-reflection: Al-Manṣūr's recognition of three mistakes; "I have made three mistakes from whose evil consequences God has protected me."[398]

[389] Al-Ṭabarī 1995: Vol. 28, p. 110
[390] Al-Ṭabarī 1995: Vol. 28, p. 62
[391] Al-Ṭabarī 1995: Vol. 28, p. 8
[392] Al-Ṭabarī 1995: Vol. 28: pp. 24-38 and Al-Ṭabarī 1990: Vol. 29: pp. 17ff
[393] Al-Ṭabarī 1995: Vol. 28, pp. 30-39
[394] Al-Ṭabarī 1995: Vol. 28, p. 55
[395] Al-Ṭabarī 1995: Vol. 28, p. 60
[396] Al-Ṭabarī 1995: Vol. 28, pp. 278-9
[397] Al-Ṭabarī 1990: Vol. 29, p. 95
[398] Al-Ṭabarī 1995: Vol. 28, p. 67

Magnanimous: Al-Manṣūr forgives offense; he is generous with money and appointments to governorships.[399]

Cunning: He shows cunning in sending out spies against his enemies.[400]

Angry: Al-Manṣūr is mad with anger.[401] He expresses rage and cruelty.[402] A poem laments the brutality of al-Manṣūr.[403] Al-Manṣūr orders a man to be buried alive.[404] There are other descriptions of al-Manṣūr's cruelty.[405]

Shifting appearances/personality: Al-Manṣūr is describes as good-natured in private vs gloomy/mad in public.[406]

Magic: Al-Manṣūr uses a magic mirror to search for his opponent, Muḥammad.[407]

Use of astrologer: Al-Manṣūr seeks assurances of victory with an astrologer. Al-Manṣūr uses a group of astrologers and mathematicians in the planning of Baghdad.[408]

Impious: Muḥammad accuses al-Manṣūr of building the Green Dome in Baghdad to compete with the Kaʿbah.[409]

Avoiding a sworn contract: A legal scholar is asked by one of al-Manṣūr's opponents about the oath sworn to the caliph. The answer is the following: "'You gave the oath of allegiance only under compulsion. A sworn contract is not incumbent upon anyone who has been coerced.'"[410]

Debatable legitimacy: Letters between al-Manṣūr and Muḥammad, debating legitimacy. The caliph does not recognize kinship through women (Fatima, the Prophet's daughter).[411]

[399] Al-Ṭabarī 1995: Vol. 28, p. 68
[400] Al-Ṭabarī 1995: Vol. 28, p. 88
[401] Al-Ṭabarī 1995: Vol. 28, p. 101
[402] Al-Ṭabarī 1995: Vol. 28, pp. 125-28
[403] Al-Ṭabarī 1995: Vol. 28, pp. 131-33
[404] Al-Ṭabarī 1995: Vol. 28, p. 133
[405] Al-Ṭabarī 1995: Vol. 28, pp. 133-35 and 138-48
[406] Al-Ṭabarī 1990: Vol. 29, p. 95
[407] Al-Ṭabarī 1995: Vol. 28, pp. 113 and 255
[408] Al-Ṭabarī 1995: Vol. 28, pp. 163 and 267
[409] Al-Ṭabarī 1995: Vol. 28, p. 152. This is an anachronism as Baghdad was built later.
[410] Al-Ṭabarī 1995: Vol. 28, p. 156
[411] Al-Ṭabarī 1995: Vol. 28, pp. 166-76

Stinginess: Al-Manṣūr is not paying the troops. He is generally known for his stinginess, and this reputation earns him the nickname "Father of small coins/pennies".[412]

Building Baghdad: The new city is built because of a need for political and military control (away from the supporters of the Umayyads in Syria). In addition, there is a need to impress the population in the Islamic world and the Byzantines.[413]

Devious/evil: Al-Manṣūr tries to trick ʿĪsā b. Mūsā into killing an important person. This would make ʿĪsā b. Mūsā unpopular in the family, but ʿĪsā b. Mūsā refuses to do it.[414]

Wise: Al-Manṣūr speaks words of wisdom: "Do not settle a matter without thinking about it, for the thought of the intelligent man is his mirror in which he sees his good and his evil."[415]

Lacking religious authority: Al-Manṣūr needs to seek legal advice on marriage contract with faqihs.[416]

Asserting religious authority: Al-Manṣūr holds a sermon in Baghdad.[417]

775-785 Al-Mahdī Volume 29

The conflict over al-Mahdī's succession has been described in the part on his father, al-Manṣūr's, reign. In this part of the chronicle, two elements are of interest: The first is a description of signs of rulership: **The staff of the Prophet** and **the Prophet's mantle**, and **the seal of the caliphate**.[418]

His bad Arabic: During a pilgrimage to Mecca with his father, al-Mahdī speaks but it is commented to his father that: "Commander of the Faithful, will you put this fellow in the hands of someone who could correct his speech? He speaks as carelessly as the slave girl!"[419]

Generous: Generous with money.[420]

[412] Al-Ṭabarī 1995: Vol. 28, p. 165
[413] Al-Ṭabarī 1995: Vol. 28, p. 238 and Al-Ṭabarī 1990: Vol. 29, p. 3
[414] Al-Ṭabarī 1990: Vol. 29, pp. 15ff
[415] Al-Ṭabarī 1990: Vol. 29, pp. 106-107
[416] Al-Ṭabarī 1990: Vol. 29, p. 127
[417] Al-Ṭabarī 1990: Vol. 29, pp. 131-32
[418] Al-Ṭabarī 1990: Vol. 29, p. 165
[419] Al-Ṭabarī 1995: Vol. 28, p. 98
[420] Al-Ṭabarī 1990: Vol. 29, pp. 164 and 194

Weak, and easily influenced by his wife: Al-Mahdī is influenced by his wife, Khayzuran.[421] Later by the "freedmen".[422]

Conflict over legitimacy: Al-Mahdī's cousin ʿĪsā b. Mūsā gives in and receives an enormous sum of money to renounce his right to the caliphate in favor of al-Mahdī's son, al-Hādī.[423]

Pious: Al-Mahdī improves and restores the Ka'bah and "the Mosque of the Prophet of God" in Mecca.[424]

Dissolute and licentious: Al-Mahdī is described as dissolute and licentious.[425]

785-786 Mūsā al-Hādī Volume 30

Politically Weak: The army demands payment and eventually gets it.[426]

Weak: Al-Hādī's brother, Hārūn al-Rashīd, is the one who takes control of Baghdad; Hārūn then takes the oath on al-Hādī's behalf as caliph, and to himself (Hārūn) as successor to al-Hādī.[427]

Weak: Al-Hādī has a serious conflict with his mother. He forbids his men to see and petition her. She later has him killed.[428]

Weak: Al-Hādī tries to get his own son confirmed as caliph, over Hārūn, but this fails.[429] The vizier Yaḥyā convinces al-Hādī to let Hārūn be caliph first, then al-Hādī's son can be the next successor.[430]

Negligent of duties: Al-Hādī is not hearing petitions, as is expected of a good caliph.[431]

Supposedly two persons: One in private, another in public.[432]

[421] Al-Ţabarī 1990: Vol. 29, p. 177
[422] Al-Ţabarī 1990: Vol. 29, p. 200
[423] Al-Ţabarī 1990: Vol. 29, p. 179
[424] Al-Ţabarī 1990: Vol. 29, p. 194
[425] Al-Ţabarī 1990: Vol. 29, pp. 227 and 258
[426] Al-Ţabarī 1995: Vol. 30, pp. 5-6
[427] Al-Ţabarī 1995: Vol. 30, p. 8
[428] Al-Ţabarī 1995: Vol. 30, pp. 42-5
[429] Al-Ţabarī 1995: Vol. 30, p. 46
[430] Al-Ţabarī 1995: Vol. 30, p. 50
[431] Al-Ţabarī 1995: Vol. 30, p. 60
[432] Al-Ţabarī 1995: Vol. 30, pp. 67-8

Harelip: "He used to have the nickname of "Mūsā, shut your mouth!"" Otherwise, he is described as a handsome man.[433]

786-809 Hārūn al-Rashīd Volume 30

Symbols/regalia: Here al-Ṭabarī describes **insignia of royalty**: The Prophet's **cloak** (*burdah*), the **sword** (*sayf*), and the **parasol** (*mizallah*); and the **seal ring** (*khatam*) and **sceptre** (*qadib*).[434] Another important aspect of al-Rashīd's reign for our purposes is his formalized arrangement with **documents signed at Mecca** and **deposited in the Ka'bah**. He does this to ensure the proper succession for three of his sons: al-Amīn, al-Maʾmūn and al-Qasīm.[435]

Military: 29/212-213 When Hārūn is heir apparent, his father al-Hādī appoints him to lead a summer expedition against the Byzantines. Al-Hādī sends Yaḥyā b. Khālid b. Barmak with Hārūn: "He sent with him al-Ḥasan and Sulaymān, sons of Barmak, and he sent Yaḥyā b. Khālid with him in charge of the administration of the army, his expenses, his secretariat, and the managing of his affairs, and all Hārūn's business was in his hands. Al-Rabīʿ the Chamberlain was appointed with Hārūn to go on the raid on behalf of al-Mahdī, and (the differences) between al-Rabīʿ and Yaḥyā were on account of that."[436]

Weak: Hārūn is initially reconciled to giving up succession rights; Yaḥyā convinces him otherwise.[437]

Immature/weak: When Hārūn becomes caliph, he appoints Yaḥyā as vizier – gives him his seal ring; Khayzuran is consulted by Yaḥyā.[438]

Generous with money. **Khayzuran** also: 30/102 Pilgrimage, performing it.[439]

Improves in **stature**: Khayzuran dies. The matter of the seal ring (?).[440]

Generous: Generous with money.[441]

[433] Al-Ṭabarī 1995: Vol. 30, p. 580
[434] Al-Ṭabarī 1995: Vol. 30, Footnote 12, p. 5
[435] Al-Ṭabarī 1995: Vol. 30, pp. 179ff
[436] Al-Ṭabarī 1990: Vol. 29, pp. 212-13
[437] Al-Ṭabarī 1995: Vol. 30, p. 48
[438] Al-Ṭabarī 1995: Vol. 30, pp. 97-8
[439] Al-Ṭabarī 1995: Vol. 30, p. 102
[440] Al-Ṭabarī 1995: Vol. 30, p. 107
[441] Al-Ṭabarī 1995: Vol. 30, p. 10

Pious: Pilgrimage.[442]

Has God's favor: The people of Syria approve of him.[443]

Lacks political control: The people of Kufah rebels.[444]

Dynastic control: Secures the succession of his three sons.[445]

Weak: Needs **legal backing** in formal decisions, repudiates guarantee of safe conduct and needs a judge to confirm.[446]

Weak: Safety in Baghdad.[447]

Donations, poetry, literature, religious law[448] 30/305

809-813 Muḥammad al-Amīn Volume 31

The four- and one-half year of al-Amīn's reign is dominated by the conflict and civil war between al-Amīn and his half-brother al-Maʾmūn. As we saw in the last section, their father, Hārūn al-Rashīd, tried to ensure an ordered succession among three of his sons. We will only follow this conflict through al-Amīn's reign. What interest us in this section are three different descriptions. The first is a reference to the reviving of the **Sunnah** and sending for **religiously learned men**.[449] This is important for how the status of the caliphs was perceived at this time. The second description is on how al-Amīn **tears up the signed letters** that his father deposited in Mecca.[450] The third description concerns how displeased the present **Governor of Mecca** is by al-Amīn's actions and denounces him.[451]

Too young: Al-Amīn: his father secures oaths of allegiance when he is five years old. Al-Amīn is hailed in a poem as **nobly born**.[452]

[442] Al-Ţabarī 1995: Vol. 30, p. 154
[443] Al-Ţabarī 1995: Vol. 30, p. 160
[444] Al-Ţabarī 1995: Vol. 30, p. 164
[445] Al-Ţabarī 1995: Vol. 30, pp. 183ff
[446] Al-Ţabarī 1995: Vol. 30, pp. 121ff
[447] Al-Ţabarī 1995: Vol. 30, pp. 356-7
[448] Al-Ţabarī 1995: Vol. 30, p. 305
[449] Al-Ţabarī 1992: Vol. 31, p. 17
[450] Al-Ţabarī 1992: Vol. 31, p. 27
[451] Al-Ţabarī 1992: Vol. 31, pp. 124ff
[452] Al-Ţabarī 1995: Vol. 30, pp. 111-12

Asserting control: Upon getting the message about his father's death, al-Amīn commands the people to be present at the Friday sermon. He leads them in worship, before ascending the pulpit.[453]

Weak (?): Demanding loyalty and obedience from his brother, al-Mamun.[454] Commanding his brother Salih's return to Baghdad.[455]

Weak: Reference to the reviving of the Sunnah by al-Mamun and sending for religiously learned men. At this time the power of the caliphs in religious matters were slipping (see Crone: God's Caliphs).[456]

Authority contested: Al-Mamun refuses to acknowledge Musa's position.[457] Al-Amīn tears up two letters in the Kabah, which confirms al-Maʾmūn's son as heir.[458] Letters between the brothers.[459] Forbids prayers to al-Amīn and Qasim.[460]

Generous: Gives money and fancy clothes to the army.[461]

Heedless of signs (brave?): Disregards his astrologer and the moon.[462]

Not too evil: He will not kill his two nephews.[463]

Loses authority: The Governor of Mecca Casts off Allegiance to al-Amin.[464]

Resented[465]

Bad omens: The slave girl's song; the breaking of the cup.[466]

Frivolous: Al-Amīn is fond of eunuchs, entertainers, animals, parties, not close to his family etc.[467]

[453] Al-Ţabarī 1992: Vol. 31, pp. 2-3
[454] Al-Ţabarī 1992: Vol. 31, p. 8
[455] Al-Ţabarī 1992: Vol. 31, p. 6
[456] Al-Ţabarī 1992: Vol. 31, pp. 17-18
[457] Al-Ţabarī 1992: Vol. 31, pp. 22-27
[458] Al-Ţabarī 1992: Vol. 31, p. 27
[459] Al-Ţabarī 1992: Vol. 31, pp. 40-47
[460] Al-Ţabarī 1992: Vol. 31, p. 47
[461] Al-Ţabarī 1992: Vol. 31, p. 48
[462] Al-Ţabarī 1992: Vol. 31, pp 76-77
[463] Al-Ţabarī 1992: Vol. 31, pp. 94-96
[464] Al-Ţabarī 1992: Vol. 31, pp. 124-29
[465] Al-Ţabarī 1992: Vol. 31, p. 125
[466] Al-Ţabarī 1992: Vol. 31, pp. 178-81
[467] Al-Ţabarī 1992: Vol. 31, pp. 225-28

Ignominious death: During the conflict between the two brothers, al-Amīn and al-Maʾmūn, the forces of al-Maʾmūn besiege Baghdad. Al-Amīn tries to surrender to the general he knows but is eventually caught by another of al-Maʾmūn's commanders and killed.[468]

813-833 ʻAbdallāh b. Hārūn al-Maʾmūn Volume 32

Succession - strong: With the death of al-Amīn, his brother al-Ma'mūn becomes sole ruler over the muslims, and "the people in the eastern lands, in Iraq and the Hijaz, came together and gave their obedience" to him.[469]

Weak/small economic control: From Khurasan in the east, al-Ma'mūn writes to Ṭāhir al-Husayn who controls Baghdad and orders him to "hand over the whole of the tax revenues in his possession, collected from all the provinces, to the representatives of al-Ḥasan b. Sahl […]", but "[…] Ṭāhir refused to hand over the land tax to ʻAlī until he had paid in full the army's pay allowances. When he had fulfilled his obligations to them, he handed over the tax revenues to him."[470]

Economic control: Al-Ma'mūn seemingly has control: "The notable events taking place during this year included the arrival in Baghdad of al-Ḥasan b. Sahl, as al-Ma'mūn's appointee with responsibility for both military and financial matters.
When he reached the city, he divided up his tax collectors (*ʻummāl*) amongst the various districts and provinces."[471]

Politically weak: In these sections Tabari describes a series of insurrections and revolts, which all point to al-Ma'mūn's lack of political, military, and religious control in the regions west of Khurasan.[472]

[468] Al-Ǧabarī 1992: Vol. 31, pp. 186-95
[469] Al-Ǧabarī 1987: Vol. 32, p. 32
[470] Al-Ǧabarī 1987: Vol. 32, p. 10
[471] Al-Ǧabarī 1987: Vol. 32, p. 12
[472] Al-Ǧabarī 1987: Vol. 32, pp. 13ff

Political failure: The revolt of Muhammad b. Ibrāhīm. Important conflicts outside of al-Ma'mūn's control.[473]

Religious/political failure: Al-Ma'mūn's general, Harthamah tells the people he will lead the pilgrimage. He holds back pilgrims from various regions, awaiting a victory in Kufah. One of his opponents has other plans: "Abū al-Sarāyā sent representatives to Mecca and Madīnah who would take control there and take charge of the pilgrimage."[474]

Religious/political failure: The caliph does not have control in Mecca or Medina; various factions fight over control.[475]

Religious failure: The 'Alids take Mecca; The Ka'bah gets a new covering of silk; the Abbasids are condemned, and their covering thrown away, so that "the Holy House might be purified from [the profanation] of their covering."[476] Purging of Mecca: Abbasid followers are tortured, and their valuables are taken; the columns of the Sacred Mosque are stripped of their cold coverings, iron, and teak beams.[477] Conflicts around Mecca.[478]

Politically weak: Conflict with Harthamah. Harthamah claims to have acted in the best of al-Ma'mūn's interests in the west. Based om misinformation, al-Ma'mūn has him killed.[479]

Politically weak: Manṣūr b. al-Mahdī accept the military command over Baghdad, from people who are dissatisfied with al-Ma'mūn.[480]

Controlling succession: "Al-Ma'mūn Designates 'Alī b. Mūsā as Heir to the Throne" in an attempt to heal the split between the Abbasid and the Alids.[481]

[473] Al-Ţabarī 1987: Vol. 32, p. 13
[474] Al-Ţabarī 1987: Vol. 32, p. 19
[475] Al-Ţabarī 1987: Vol. 32, pp. 20-23
[476] Al-Ţabarī 1987: Vol. 32, p. 29
[477] Al-Ţabarī 1987: Vol. 32, p. 30
[478] Al-Ţabarī 1987: Vol. 32, pp. 30-39
[479] Al-Ţabarī 1987: Vol. 32, pp. 40-41
[480] Al-Ţabarī 1987: Vol. 32, pp. 46-55
[481] Al-Ţabarī 1987: Vol. 32, pp. 60-61

Controlling succession: Everyone is to swear allegiance to ʻAlī and "To wear green-sleeved coats, tall, pointed caps and other distinguishing features."[482]

Not controlling succession: Not everyone agrees to this. Especially members of the Abbasid family in Baghdad are angered. As a reaction to the caliph's orders, the people of Baghdad instead give their allegiance to Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī. The members of the Abbasid family declare al-Ma'mūn deposed.[483]

Succession/economy - weak: Al-Ma'mūn declares that green shall be the colors of the caliphate, not the traditional black of the Abbasids. This is met with resistance. In addition, he is forced by the army to pay them large sums of money. In general, in both the above and in the following sections: fighting and disputes over who should be caliph, and between the ʻAbbasid and the ʻAlid supporters.[484]

Succession/political - weak: In these sections, al-Ma'mūn seems to be unaware of important events. As a result, al-Ma'mūn decides to depart for Baghdad. [485]

Politically weak: Al-Ma'mūn's conflict with his own family in Baghdad.[486]

Succession/political - stronger: The people of Baghdad throw off allegiance to Ibrāhīm.[487]

Succession/political control: Al-Ma'mūn takes control over Baghdad.[488]

Political control - weak: Al-Ma'mūn accepts that the people go back to wearing black, not green.[489]

[482] Al-Ţabarī 1987: Vol. 32, pp. 61-62
[483] Al-Ţabarī 1987: Vol. 32, pp. 62-63
[484] Al-Ţabarī 1987: Vol. 32, p. 67
[485] Al-Ţabarī 1987: Vol. 32, pp. 78-79
[486] Al-Ţabarī 1987: Vol. 32, p. 85
[487] Al-Ţabarī 1987: Vol. 32, p. 88
[488] Al-Ţabarī 1987: Vol. 32, p. 92
[489] Al-Ţabarī 1987: Vol. 32, p. 96

Economic ideal: Al-Ma'mūn's general, Ṭāhir's advice to his son: On appointing his son to a military command, Ṭāhir sent him an epistle, containing advice on how to rule.[490] The epistle has been described as an early example of the "Mirrors for Princes" genre in Arabic.[491] Key concepts that Ṭāhir writes about: Devout/moderate/favorable attitude towards people – but not naïve/punish swiftly when necessary/keep agreements/make friends with serious people/shun evil thoughts and oppressive behavior/avoid hasty temper/royal authority belongs to God alone/do not be avaricious.

Economic control: Al-Ma'mūn quells a rebellion in Yemen that is related to taxation.[492]

Geography (Andalusia outside of the caliph's control): This is a rare example of Tabari writing about events that has to do with Spain: The "activities of 'Abdallah and the Andalusians" who come to Egypt from Andalusia in Spain.[493]

Economic control: Al-Ma'mūn maintains the tax level in Qumm; he sends military forces to enforce the taxation.[494]

Theological control: 32/176-77 The year 827-828: Al-Ma'mūn proclaims the doctrine of the createdness of the Qur'ān.[495]

Military control: Al-Ma'mūn appoints his brother as governor of Syria and Egypt, and his son over the Jazirha, the frontier regions and the defensive fortresses.[496]

Military control: Al-Ma'mūn leads a campaign against the Byzantines. He is victorious, but it all sounds more ritualistic than a real attack on the Byzantine Empire: "In this year, after leaving the land of the Byzantines, al- Ma'-mum set off for Damascus."[497]

[490] Al-Ǧabarī 1987: Vol. 32, pp. 110-29
[491] Al-Ǧabarī 1987: Vol. 32, Introduction, p. 3
[492] Al-Ǧabarī 1987: Vol. 32, p. 131
[493] Al-Ǧabarī 1987: Vol. 32, p. 164
[494] Al-Ǧabarī 1987: Vol. 32, p. 166
[495] Al-Ǧabarī 1987: Vol. 32, pp. 176-77
[496] Al-Ǧabarī 1987: Vol. 32, pp. 178-79
[497] Al-Ǧabarī 1987: Vol. 32, pp. 184-88

Political control: Al-Ma'mūn asserts control over a tyrannical governor.[498]

Military/political/diplomatic control: Letters between the Byzantine emperor Theophilus and al-Ma'mūn.[499]

Theological control/losing control: Al-Ma'mūn declares the createdness of the Quran. By doing this, he claims a role as a theological arbiter. But he faces strong opposition.[500]

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[498] Al-Ţabarī 1987: Vol. 32, p. 192
[499] Al-Ţabarī 1987: Vol. 32, pp. 195-97
[500] Al-Ţabarī 1987: Vol. 32, pp. 199ff

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