

‘Abbāsīd-Carolingian Diplomacy in Early Medieval Arabic Apocalypse

Abstract: Study of the diplomacy between the Carolingians and the ‘Abbāsīds has been hampered by the absence of any sources from the Caliphate commenting on their relationship. This paper identifies two variants of the Arabic Tiburtine Sibyl, apocalyptic prophecies composed by Syriac Christians in the early ninth century, that provide contemporary Arabic references to contact between Charlemagne and Hārūn al-Rashīd. In doing so, they shed new light on this diplomatic activity by indicating that it was considerably more important for the Caliph than normally appreciated. Combined with other references to the Franks in Arabic apocalyptic of the period, the evidence of these Sibyls suggests that Hārūn al-Rashīd accrued considerable prestige from his reception of Charlemagne’s envoys and the gifts that they brought with them.

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Writing in eighth-century Francia, the author of a continuation to the *Chronicle of Fredegar* informs the reader that in the reign of the first Carolingian king of the Franks, Pippin III (r.751-768):

Was told that his envoys, who had formerly been sent to Amormuni, king of the Saracens, had returned to Marseilles after three years; and they came to the king with legates of the aforesaid Amormuni, king of the Saracens, bringing with them many gifts.¹

These ambassadors from the ‘Abbāsīd Caliph al-Manṣūr (r.754-775) arrived in the winter of 767 and left after attending an assembly with Pippin near Nantes the following spring.² More than three decades passed before the next diplomats from the Caliphate appeared in the

¹ ‘The Continuations of the Chronicle of Fredegar’, *Quellen zur Geschichte des 7. und 8. Jahrhunderts*, ed. A. Kusternig (Darmstadt, 1982), ed. H. Haupt, 272-324, a.768 ‘Nunciatum est regi, quod myssos suos, quos dudum ad Amormuni regi Saracinorum misserat post tres annos ad Marsiliam reversum fuisset; legationem predictus Amormuni rex Sarracinorum ad praefato rege cum multis muneribus secum adduxerat’, 320

² On the dating see M. McCormick, ‘Pippin III, the Embassy of Caliph al Manṣūr, and the Mediterranean World’, *Der Dynastiewechsel von 751: Vorgeschichte, Legitimationsstrategien und Erinnerung*, ed. M. Becher & J. Jarnut (Münster, 2004), 221-241, 233-235.

Frankish world. The entry in the *Royal Frankish Annals* for the year 801 reports the arrival in Italy of envoys from Hārūn al-Rashīd (r.786-809) in response to an embassy sent by Pippin's son Charlemagne (r.768-814) in 797.³ The Caliph's legates were followed the subsequent year by the famous elephant Abū al-‘Abbās, sent by Hārūn as a gift to the Carolingian Emperor.⁴ The annals record that Charlemagne sent a further embassy in 802, who returned with more gifts and another ‘Abbāsīd diplomat in 806.⁵ Charlemagne may have sent another mission in 807, after which diplomatic contact appears to have ceased.⁶ Finally, the *Annals of St-Bertin* note that in 831 ‘legates came from Amīr al-Mumminin of Persia’ to an assembly held at Thionville by Charlemagne's successor, Louis the Pious (r.814-840).⁷ This embassy of Caliph al-Ma‘mūn (r.813-833) is the last that can be observed between the Carolingians and the ‘Abbāsīds.

The previous paragraph demonstrates more than just that the Franks consistently mistook the title *Amīr al-Mu‘minīn* for a name. As the above suggests, the evidence for Carolingian diplomacy with the ‘Abbāsīd Caliphate is clear and contemporary. It is also entirely Frankish. There is almost no reference to diplomacy with the Carolingians in any of the sources produced in the period in the Caliphate. The earliest Arabic mention of the elephant sent to Charlemagne is contained in the *Ḥadārat al-Islām fī dāri’l-salām*, published in Cairo in 1888 by Jamīl Nakhīlī Mudawwar, reflecting European influence in Egypt in the nineteenth century rather than residual memories of the ninth.⁸ The absence of any comment in the medieval Arabic accounts prompted some scholars to question whether any diplomacy with the Carolingians actually took place. These doubts were first raised by Pouqueville in 1833 and revived by Barthold in 1912.⁹ The silence of the sources remained a compelling problem for later Orientalists such as Walther Björkman in 1965.¹⁰

³ MGH, SRG 6, *Annales regni Francorum inde a. 741 usque ad 829, qui dicuntur Annales Laurissenses maiores et Einhardi*, ed. F. Kurze (Hannover, 1895), a.801 114.

⁴ ARF, a.801 116.

⁵ ARF, a.806 122.

⁶ ‘Formulae Salzburgenses’, MGH *Formulae Merowingici et Karolini aevi Formulae*, ed. K. Zeumer (Hannover, 1886), no. 62, 453-454.

⁷ *Les Annales de Saint-Bertin*, trans. F. Grat, J. Vieliard & S. Clémencet, ed. L. Levillain (Paris, 1964), a.831 ‘legati amīr al-mumminin de Perside venientes,’ 4.

⁸ E. Köcher, *Untersuchungen zu Ġamīl al-Mudawwar's Ḥadārat al-Islām fī Dār as-Salām* (Berlin, 1958), 57-60.

⁹ F.C.H.L. Pouqueville ‘Mémoire historique et diplomatique sur le commerce et les établissements français au Levant’ *Mémoires de l'académie des inscriptions*, 10 (1833), 529; Barthold is summarized by F.W. Buckler in ‘Appendix 1: Charles the Great and Hārūn ar-Rashīd, a summary’ *Hārūnu’l-Rashīd and Charles the Great* (Cambridge MA, 1931), 43-47.

¹⁰ W. Björkman, ‘Karl und der Islam’, *Karl der Grosse: Lebenswerk und Nachleben*, ed. W. Braunsfels, 1 (Düsseldorf, 1965), 672-682; F. Omar, ‘Abbāsīyyāt: Studies in the History of the early ‘Abbāsīds, (Baghdad, 1976), 26.

This skepticism can safely be put to rest. The Frankish annals referred to above were all compiled within at most a decade of the events they describe, by people close to the centre of power in the Carolingian monarchy.¹¹ Einhard, a courtier of both Charlemagne and Louis the Pious, discussed the former's relations with Hārūn al-Rashīd at length in his biography of the Emperor.¹² The ambassadors sent by al-Ma'mūn feature in the anonymous biography of Louis the Pious composed by the Astronomer shortly after his subject's death in 840.¹³ Charlemagne's practical interest in the religious institutions of the Holy Land has recently been explored by McCormick.¹⁴ Any attempt to argue against the existence of 'Abbāsīd-Carolingian diplomacy also needs to reckon with the presence of Abū al-'Abbās the elephant at Charlemagne's court between 802 and 810. It is no accident that the nineteenth-century Americanism, 'seeing the elephant', came to mean an unforgettable and potentially life defining encounter.¹⁵ Writing in 825, the Irish monk Dicuil referred in his *De mensura Orbis terrae* to the excitement the elephant caused among the many people who came to visit it.¹⁶ Elephants were expensive, and the only ones that could be tamed came from India.¹⁷ In light of the difficulties involved in acquiring an elephant, Pouqueville's claim that Charlemagne's agent, Isaac the Jew, scammed his employer and, having only pretended to go to the Caliphate, found an elephant in order to complete the illusion, seems a little unlikely. It is perhaps not irrelevant to our understanding of his opinion of Isaac to note that Pouqueville's

¹¹ R. Collins, 'Deception and Misrepresentation in Early Eighth Century Frankish Historiography: Two Case Studies', *Karl Martell in seiner Zeit*, ed. J. Jarnut, U. Nonn & M. Richter (Sigmaringen, 1994), 227-247 and *Die Fredegar-Chroniken* (Hanover, 2007), 89-96; R.D. McKitterick 'Constructing the Past in the Early Middle Ages: The Case of the Royal Frankish Annals', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society Sixth Series*, 7 (1997), 101-129; J. L. Nelson 'The 'Annals of St. Bertin'', *Charles the Bald: Court and Kingdom* (Aldershot, 1990), 23-40.

¹² Einhard, 'Vita Karoli Magni', *MGH, SRG 25, Einhardi Vita Karoli Magni*, ed. G. H. Pertz & G. Waitz (Hannover, 1911), 19.

¹³ The Astronomer, 'Vita Hludowici imperatoris' *MGH, SRG 64, Thegan, Die Taten Kaiser Ludwigs. Astronomus, Das Leben Kaiser Ludwigs*, ed. E. Tremp (Hannover, 1995), 279-555, c.46, 466; M. De Jong, *The Penitential State: Authority and Atonement in the Age of Louis the Pious, 814-840* (Cambridge, 2009), 79-82; C. Booker, *Past Convictions: The Penance of Louis the Pious and the Decline of the Carolingians* (Philadelphia PA, 2009), 293.

¹⁴ M. McCormick, *Charlemagne's Survey of the Holy Land: wealth, personnel, and buildings of a Mediterranean church between antiquity and the Middle Ages* (Washington DC, 2011). See also the essential work of M. Borgolte, *Der Gesandtenaustausch der Karolinger mit den Abbasiden und mit den Patriarchen von Jerusalem* (Munich, 1976).

¹⁵ *A Dictionary of Americanisms: On Historical Principles*, ed. M.M. Mathews (London, 1951), 550.

¹⁶ Dicuil, *Liber de mensura Orbis terrae*, ed. J.J. Tierney (Dublin, 1967), 82-83.

¹⁷ Al-Mas'ūdī, *Les Prairies d'Or*, 2, trans. C. Barbier de Meynard & A. Pavet de Courteille (Paris, 1965), 327. On the capture and training of elephants see T.R. Trautmann, *Elephants and Kings: An Environmental History* (Chicago, 2015), 138-166.

travel notes from his time in Greece contain references to ‘the Jews; a filthy race’ and stories of atrocities against Christians supported by Jews.¹⁸

The absence of the Carolingians from the chronicles of the ‘Abbāsīd period reflects the interests of their composers, rather than a lack of diplomatic relations. A case in point is the historian al-Ṭabarī, whose great *Universal History* pays little enough attention to Muslim lands such as Ifrīqiya and al-Andalus for it to be surprising that there is no reference within its pages to the Franks.¹⁹ The only diplomatic contact al-Ṭabarī regularly recorded is that with the Caliphate’s great rival, Byzantium.²⁰ Otherwise mentions of foreign diplomacy were confined to when it went badly wrong and had disastrous consequences, as in the case of Khazar invasions.²¹ ‘Abbāsīd dealings with China are only chronicled in Chinese sources, providing a parallel case to the silence in Arabic writing about contact with the Franks.²²

The existence of diplomatic relations between the ‘Abbāsīds and the Carolingians is therefore certain without the need for any Arabic evidence. Nonetheless, the lack of any perspective from the Caliphate is extremely inconvenient for the purposes of understanding this diplomacy. The reasons why the ‘Abbāsīds responded to messages from the Franks have to be reached by inference, and it is difficult to get any sense of how significant relations with the Carolingians were for them. Frankish writers interpreted Hārūn al-Rashīd’s willingness to respond positively to a distant Christian king asking him out of the blue for an elephant as a sign of Carolingian prestige. Einhard claimed that Charlemagne:

Had such friendship and agreement with Aaron, king of the Persians, who held nearly all the East with the exception of India, that he [Aaron] preferred his friendship above that of all the kings and princes of all the world and judged him alone to deserve honours and gifts.²³

¹⁸ M. Margaroni, ‘The Blood Libel on Greek Islands in the Nineteenth Century’, *Sites of European Antisemitism in the Age of Mass Politics, 1880–1918* (Waltham, 2014), ed. R. Nemes & D. Unowsky, 178-196, 187. On Isaac and the elephant, see *Ex Oriente: Isaak und der weisse Elefant; Bagdad - Jerusalem - Aachen; eine Reise durch drei Kulturen um 800 und heute*, 3 vols. ed. W. Dreßen (Mainz, 2003).

¹⁹ H. Kennedy, *The Early Abbāsīd Caliphate: A Political History* (London, 1981), 216.

²⁰ M. Canard, ‘La Prise d’Héraclée et les Relations entre Hārūn ar-Rashīd et l’Empereur Nicéphore Ier’, *Byzantion*, 32 (1962), 345-379.

²¹ Al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī Vol. 30: The ‘Abbāsīd Caliphate in Equilibrium: The Caliphates of Musa al-Hadi and Hārūn al-Rashīd A.D. 785-809/A.H. 169-193*, ed. C.E. Bosworth (Albany, 1989), 168.

²² R.G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw it: a survey and evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian writings on early Islam* (Princeton, 1997), 249-253; H. Bielenstein, *Diplomacy and Trade in the Chinese World, 589-1276* (Leiden, 2005), 359.

²³ Einhard, ‘Vita Karoli Magni’, ‘Cum Aaron rege Persarum, qui excepta India totum poene tenebat orientem, talem habuit in amicitia concordiam, ut is gratiam eius omnium, qui in toto orbe terrarum erant, regum ac principum amicitiae praeponeret solumque illum honore ac munificentia sibi colendum iudicaret’, 19.

While this no doubt went down very well with Einhard's audience, to modern eyes this grandiosity verges on the comical.

Any Arabic evidence from the period that could be demonstrated to discuss relations between the Caliphs and the Franks would be immensely useful in rectifying these problems, allowing an opportunity to check the Latin sources against an alternative perspective. What follows will argue that such evidence does exist, and can be found in the contemporary Arabic apocalyptic tradition that flourished in the late-eighth and early-ninth centuries. Eccentric as this material is, it does not just provide clues for how writers of the day understood the Franks. In particular, the Christian Arabic Tiburtine Sibyl corpus contains direct reference to relations between Hārūn and Charlemagne, which can be usefully employed to reconsider 'Abbāsīd perspectives on diplomacy with the Franks.

The prophecies attributed to the Tiburtine Sibyl are an admittedly somewhat unlikely place to look for evidence of high politics. The Arabic version tells the story of the Sibyl, a daughter of Heraclius of Ephesus, who interpreted a prophetic dream concerning nine suns had by a hundred pagans of Rome.²⁴ According to the Sibyl, the nine suns corresponded to historical eras to come in the future, including the coming of Jesus and the eventual end of the world. In the going through of each of these ages, the reader is thus presented with a universal history, albeit one made intentionally obscure and framed as prophecy. At its core the piece is an apologetic, seeking to offer proof of the inevitable triumph of Christianity by placing it in the mouth of a pagan prophetess who had ostensibly died before the events described.²⁵ Much of the work is concerned with the events leading to the Apocalypse, presented in a lurid and spectacular fashion.

Eschatology is ever a flexible discipline and prophets must needs be pragmatic. Thinking of the Tiburtine Sibyl as a unified text is unhelpful. As apocalypses are wont to be postponed, so old ideas get adapted and repurposed by successive generations to better fit the needs of the present. The legend of the Tiburtine Sibyl was first written in the fourth century

²⁴ J. Schleifer 'Die Erzählung der Sibylle: Ein Apokryph nach den Karschunischen, Arabischen und Äthiopien Handschriften zu London, Oxford, Paris und Rom', *Denkschriften der Kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Phil.-hist.*, 53 (1910), 1-79. What follows draws heavily on M.N. Swanson, 'Ḥikmat Sibillā', *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History (600-1500)*, Vol. 1 600-900, ed. D. Thomas & B. Roggema (Leiden, 2009). On the apocalyptic significance of Heraclius, see M. Cook, 'The Heraclian dynasty in Muslim Eschatology', *al-Qanṭara*, 13 (1992), 3-23.

²⁵ A. Holdenried, *The Sibyl and her Scribes: Manuscripts and Interpretation of the Latin 'Sibylla Tiburtina' c. 1050-1500* (Aldershot, 2006).

in Greek. It was eventually translated into Latin, and would have a long career in that language in Western Europe.²⁶ It also circulated in the Eastern Roman world, as demonstrated by a sixth-century Greek version known as the *Oracle of Baalbek*, and references to variants appearing in Syriac in the late fifth or sixth century.²⁷ After the establishment of the Caliphate, a number of versions appeared in Arabic and Garshuni (Arabic written in Syriac script).²⁸ Of these, the variant labelled Arab I by Schleifer probably dates to the early eighth century, Arab II, III and IV to the period immediately after the death of Hārūn al-Rashīd, while Arab V belongs to an eleventh-century Coptic context. What follows is primarily concerned with Arab III and Arab IV from the middle generation of Arabic Sibyls. Arab IV is only found in one manuscript (Leeds Arabic MS 184) and appears to be a slightly longer version of Arab III.²⁹ Given the similarity between these versions, they will be treated as essentially the same text, following Swanson, unless specifically stated.

Much of the Arabic Sibyl's value comes from its date and place of origin. Arab III and IV are the product of a West Syriac milieu. The text is highly concerned with the fate of Syria, and refers to Baghdad as 'the great city which lies to the east'.³⁰ Where the place of composition of the surviving manuscripts can be located, as in the case of Rome BAV 58 (fol.164v-172r), it is often in Upper Mesopotamia, copied by monks who looked to the Miaphysite Patriarchs of Antioch for leadership.³¹ Other manuscripts which include Arab III, such as those acquired in Constantinople in 1727-1730 by the French philologist François Sevin (Paris BnF.arab.70, fol.126v-147r, Paris BnF.arab.71, fol.2v-12r), appear to be Syrian, and contain a considerable amount of Chalcedonian Melkite material.³² The manuscript in

²⁶ E. Sackur, *Sibyllinische Texte und Forschungen: Pseudomethodius, Adso und Tiburtinische Sibylle* (Halle, 1898), 177-187; P.J. Alexander, *The Oracle of Baalbek: The Tiburtine Sibyl in Greek Dress* (Washington, 1967), 3-4; B. McGinn, 'Oracular Transformations: The Sibylla Tiburtina in the Middle Ages', *Sibille e linguaggi oracolari: mito, storia, tradizione*, ed. I. Chirassi Colombo & T. Seppilli (Pisa, 1998), 603-644, 611-613; A. Holdenried, 'Many Hands Without Design: The Evolution of a Medieval Prophetic Text', *The Mediaeval Journal*, 4 (2014), 23-42.

²⁷ Alexander, *The Oracle of Baalbek*; S. Brock, 'A Syriac Collection of Prophecies of the Pagan Philosophers', *Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica*, 14 (1983), 203-246, 209.

²⁸ Arab I, II and III can be found in Schleifer 'Die Erzählung der Sibylle'; Arab IV in R.Y. Ebied & M.J.L. Young, 'An unrecorded Arabic version of a Sibylline prophecy', *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, 43 (1977), 279-307 and Arab V in R.Y. Ebied & M.J.L. Young, 'A Newly-discovered version of the Arabic Sibylline Prophecy', *Oriens Christianus*, 60 (1976), 83-94.

²⁹ Ebied & Young, 'An unrecorded Arabic version of a Sibylline prophecy'.

³⁰ Arab III, 33, Arab IV, 296-297.

³¹ *Bibliothecae Apostolicae Vaticanae codicum manuscriptorum catalogus: in tres partes distributus in quarum prima orientales in altera Graeci in tertia Latini Italici aliorumque Europaeorum idiomatum codices*, ed. S.E. Assemani & G.S. Assemani, Vol 2: *Codices Chaldaicos sive Syriacos* (Rome, 1758), no. 58, 342-355.

³² *Catalogue des manuscrits arabes: Première partie, manuscrits chrétiens*, Vol.1, ed. G. Troupeau (Paris, 1972), 50-51.

which Arab IV appears has a number of other texts primarily concerned with Syria.³³ The early date of Arab I may be a sign that Arabic Tiburtine Sibyls were first written by the Melkite Syriac community, which rapidly adopted Arabic as an ecclesiastical language.³⁴ Nonetheless, they probably reached members of the Jacobite church very quickly, as was the case with other apocalypses such as that of Pseudo-Methodios.

Apart from a ninth- or tenth-century fragment from Sinai and an unpublished manuscript from 1002, the oldest manuscripts of these texts are fifteenth century.³⁵ Their dating to the period after the death of Hārūn al-Rashīd depends on internal criteria. Apocalyptic texts such as the Tiburtine Sibyl divide into two sections, the historical and the prophetic.³⁶ The first of these is a *vaticinium ex eventu*, in which the composer discusses events in the past, which are presented as a prediction. Doing so allows the author to develop their understanding of the historical progress of humanity, leading to the apocalyptic ending. This material seeks to convince the audience of the genuine prophetic powers of the Sibyl. Although the narrative is deliberately cryptic for purposes of verisimilitude, the reader should be able to solve the riddles they are presented with, allowing them to identify the figures and events being alluded to in the text. The prophetic section that follows is then concerned with things to come in the writer's future. It is generally stylistically distinct, as the author is unshackled from the need to correspond to known events, becoming increasingly spectacular. The end of the historical section is determined by the cessation of material that can be connected with known events.³⁷ This means that the last identifiable historical moment normally corresponds with the circumstances in which the author was writing.³⁸

In the case of these Arabic Sibyls, that transition takes place in the middle of the age of the eighth sun. Jesus ('He who was hung on the cross') comes in the sixth age.³⁹ The arrival of a man in the seventh age 'from the south called Forty and Eight and Forty and Four' refers to Muḥammad, with the numbers alluding to the Arabic letters m-ḥ-m-d.⁴⁰ The

³³ Arab IV, 285, 296-297.

³⁴ S.H. Griffith, 'The Church of Jerusalem and the 'Melkites': The Making of an 'Arab Orthodox' Christian Identity in the World of Islam (750-1050 CE)', *Christians and Christianity in the Holy Land: From the Origins to the Latin Kingdoms*, ed. O. Limor & G. Stroumsa (Turnhout, 2006), 175-204, 176 and *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam* (Princeton, 2008), 137-139.

³⁵ Swanson, 'Ḥikmat Sibillā'.

³⁶ P.J. Alexander, 'Medieval Apocalypses as Historical Sources', *The American Historical Review*, 73 (1968), 997-1018, 999, 1009.

³⁷ Alexander, *The Oracle of Baalbek*, 52.

³⁸ M. Cook, 'Eschatology and the Dating of Traditions', *Princeton Papers in Near Eastern Studies*, 1 (1992), 23-48, 25.

³⁹ Arab III, 23-25, Arab IV, 292-295.

⁴⁰ Arab III, 29, Arab IV, 295.

idea of a ‘man from the south’ also features in contemporary Muslim traditions originating in Ḥimṣ, which may strengthen the idea of a Syrian derivation for the Sibyl, although in that context it refers to an apocalyptic figure yet to come.⁴¹ More directly it suggests a debt to *The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles*, a Syriac apocalypse from Edessa in the late seventh century, which equates the coming of the Arabs with the ‘Southern Wind’ in Daniel 7:2 and 11.⁴² In the eighth age described by the Sibyl, Hārūn al-Rashīd is identifiable as the ‘king [who] shall reign there for twenty-three years but shall not complete the twenty-fourth’.⁴³ This king ‘shall leave as his successors two sons, the name of one being the same as the name of the one who shall come from the south’, which can be recognised as an allusion to the division of the Caliphate between Hārūn’s sons, Muḥammad al-‘Amīn and ‘Abd Allāh al-Ma‘mūn, decided at Mecca in 802.⁴⁴

In Arab III, the death of Hārūn al-Rashīd in 809 and the beginning of civil war between his sons in 811 are the last recognisable events. Arab IV goes a little further, with an additional line stating that ‘Syria shall weep over the one who is called Amīn’, referring to the execution of al-‘Amīn following the taking of Baghdad by al-Ma‘mūn’s troops in 813.⁴⁵ The next lines are suitably apocalyptic:

At that time the slave shall sit and the master work...The slaves shall consider themselves the masters, and offspring who neither their fathers nor mothers shall be governors in the world. At that time sin shall increase, and fornication, while civil intercourse shall be at a standstill, almsgivings shall cease, lies and justice shall appear, and priests shall become fornicators.⁴⁶

⁴¹ W. Madelung, ‘Apocalyptic Prophecies in Ḥimṣ in the Umayyad Age’, *Journal of Semitic Studies*, 31 (1986), 141-185, 149.

⁴² *The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles: Together with the Apocalypses of each one of them*, ed. & trans. J. Rendel Harris (Cambridge, 1900), 36-38; H.J.W. Drijvers, ‘The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles: A Syriac Apocalypse from the Early Islamic Period’, *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East: I. Problems in the Literary Source Material*, ed. A. Cameron & L.I. Conrad (Princeton, 1992), 189-213; G.J. Reinink, ‘From Apocalypses to Apologetics: Early Syriac Reactions to Islam’, *Endzeiten: Eschatologie in den monotheistischen Weltreligionen*, ed. W. Brandes & F. Schmieder (Berlin, 2008), 75-89, 75-76.

⁴³ Arab III, 33, Arab IV, 296-297.

⁴⁴ Arab III, 33, Arab IV, 296-297; F. Gabrieli, ‘La successione di Hārūn ar-Rašīd e la guerra fra al-Amīn e al-Ma‘mūn’, *Rivista degli Studi Orientali*, 11 (1926-8), 341-397; R.A. Kimber, ‘Hārūn al-Rashīd’s Meccan Settlement of AH 186/AD 802’, *Occasional Papers of the School of Abbāsīd Studies* 1 (St. Andrews’, 1986), 55-79; A. Marsham, *Rituals of Islamic Monarchy: Accession and Succession in the First Muslim Empire* (Edinburgh, 2009), 224.

⁴⁵ Arab IV, 296-297.

⁴⁶ Arab III, 35, Arab IV, 296-297.

By the subsequent ninth age the composer is well into a world of revelation, with the appearance of a Last-Emperor-type figure called the Lion Cub, the invasion of Gog and Magog, the emergence of the Antichrist among the Jews and the sending of angels by Jesus to defeat said Antichrist.⁴⁷

This means that Arab III can be dated to the years between 811 and 813. The range of possible dates is broader for Arab IV. Civil wars in the Caliphate prompted waves of eschatological material.⁴⁸ The struggle between the sons of Hārūn al-Rashīd and the subsequent disturbances that spilled out as a consequence in the provinces of the west were no exception, leading to a great deal of apocalyptic writing in both Christian and Muslim communities.⁴⁹ A case in point is the Christian apocalypse contained within *The Legend of Bahīrā the Monk*, which places great emphasis on the siege of Baghdad in 812-813 and al-Ma‘mūn.⁵⁰ Arab IV could conceivably have been written as late as 826, which was when Syria was finally conclusively brought under al-Ma‘mūn’s control, following the defeat of the last of the local rebels and Umayyad pretenders in the province by ‘Abbāsīd forces.⁵¹

An argument might be made for the earlier end of the potential range of dates based on sources from beyond the Caliphate that suggest a peak in the persecution of Christians at around 812 or 813. The *Chronicle* of Theophanes, compiled in the same decade, reports ‘slaughter, rapine, and various misdeeds’ carried out against the Christians of Palestine as a result of the conflict.⁵² The entry for 812/813 records the coming of Christian refugees from Palestine to Constantinople, ‘fleeing the excessive misdeeds of the Arabs.’⁵³ *The Life of Michael Synkellos*, composed after Second Iconoclasm, includes among the objectives that prompted Michael to travel from the monastery of Mar Sabas in 812/813 the task of raising

⁴⁷ Arab III, 39, Arab IV, 302-305. On the Lion Cub, see P.J. Alexander, *The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition* (Berkeley, 1985), 102, 172; D. Jäckel, *Der Herrscher als Löwe: Ursprung und Gebrauch eines politischen Symbols im Früh- und Hochmittelalter* (Cologne, 2006), 242-250; Gog and Magog, A.B. Schmidt, ‘Die „Brüste des Nordens“ und Alexanders Mauer gegen Gog und Magog’, *Endzeiten: Eschatologie in den monotheistischen Weltreligionen*, ed. W. Brandes & F. Schmieder (Berlin, 2008), 89-99.

⁴⁸ W. Madelung, ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Zubayr and the Mahdi’, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 40 (1981), 291-305; S.A. Arjomand, ‘Islamic Apocalypticism in the Classical Period’, *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism, Vol. 2 – Apocalypticism in Western History and Culture* (New York, 2000), 238-283, 248.

⁴⁹ T. El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography: Hārūn al-Rashīd and the Narrative of the ‘Abbāsīd Caliphate* (Cambridge, 1999); Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic*, 45-48; Arjomand, ‘Islamic Apocalypticism’, 263; H. Yücesoy, *Messianic Beliefs and Imperial Politics in medieval Islam: the ‘Abbāsīd caliphate in the early ninth century* (Columbia, 2009), 74-78.

⁵⁰ B. Roggema, *The Legend of Sergius Bahīrā: Eastern Christian Apologetics and Apocalyptic in Response to Islam* (Leiden, 2008), 86-90.

⁵¹ *The History of al-Ṭabarī Vol. 32: The Reunification of the ‘Abbāsīd Caliphate*, trans. C.E. Bosworth (Albany, 1987), 164-165. On the civil war in Syria see P.M. Cobb, *White Banners: Contention in ‘Abbāsīd Syria, 750-880* (Albany, 2001).

⁵² *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*, trans. C. Mango & R. Scott (Oxford, 1997), a.808/9, 665.

⁵³ *Theophanes*, a.812/3, 683.

money from the Pope in response to ‘a certain heavy fine [that] was imposed by the impious Hagarenes’.⁵⁴ Although Michael never travelled further west than Constantinople, news of trouble reached the Frankish world. The Fulda Codex of the contemporary *Shorter Lorsch Annals* note that in 814 a ‘great persecution of the Christians in the East’ took place.⁵⁵ These sources may be exaggerated, but cumulatively, they attest to a great disruption, displacing people and damaging communities and buildings, offering a suitably apocalyptic context for the Arab Sibyl.

To summarise the above, the Arab Sibyls III and IV are Christian apocalypses produced in Syria shortly after the death of Hārūn al-Rashīd. They were thus written in a very different context to the works of tenth-century Muslim chroniclers in Baghdad which form the backbone of our understanding of the early Caliphate. Having lived through his reign, their writers can offer an alternative perspective on Hārūn al-Rashīd. Their treatment of him is brief, but worth quoting in full:

Syria and the great city which lies in the east shall be laid waste. A king shall reign there for twenty-three years but shall not complete the twenty-fourth. There shall come thither gifts from the islands of the sea, and from the countries of *al-ifranjiyya*, since none of these things mentioned will occur in those lands. In his days the country of Syria shall flourish, but shall be ruined upon his decease. He shall leave as his successors two sons, the name of one being the same as the name of the one who shall come from the south.⁵⁶

Given the brevity of the passage, the amount of it that is taken up by discussion of his dealings with *al-ifranjiyya* is striking.

What exactly the word ‘*al-ifranjiyya*’ means in the passage is not immediately obvious. Arabic ethnography of the period could be very vague, with the term *ifranj* being applied to most of the inhabitants of Western Europe.⁵⁷ Despite this, the work of König

⁵⁴ *The Life of Michael the Synkellos*, trans. M.B. Cunningham (Belfast, 1991), c.6, 57-59; C. Sode, *Jerusalem, Konstantinopel, Rom: Die Viten des Michael Synkellos und der Brüder Theodoros und Theophanes* (Stuttgart, 2001), 146.

⁵⁵ ‘Das Chronicon Laurissense breve’, ed. H. Schnorr von Carolsfeld, *Neues Archiv der Gesellschaft für ältere deutsche Geschichtskunde*, 36 (1911), pp. 13-39, a.814, ‘persecutionem magnam in orientalibus partibus christiani habebant’, 38.

⁵⁶ Arab III, 33, Arab IV, 296-297.

⁵⁷ On this subject see A. Samarraï, ‘Some Geographical and Political Information on Western Europe in the Medieval Arabic Sources’, *The Muslim World*, 62 (1972), 304-322, 305; A. al-Azmeh, ‘Barbarians in Arab Eyes’, *Past and Present*, 134 (1992), 3-18; T. Abdullah, ‘Arab Views of Northern Europeans in Medieval

strongly suggests that *al-ifranjiyya* in this case can be safely identified as the Franks.⁵⁸ In an earlier section, just before the material on Hārūn al-Rashīd, the Sibyl differentiates between *al-ifranjiyya* and the Byzantines, saying ‘the roads between *al-ifranj* and the Romans [*al-rūmī*] shall be cut’.⁵⁹ The curious reference might be a garbled reflection of tensions between Aachen and Constantinople following Charlemagne’s coronation as emperor in 800, but in any case strengthens the identification for *al-ifranjiyya* with the Franks by ruling out the possibility of confusion with the Byzantines.⁶⁰

Taken together, this indicates that Arab III and IV preserve an Arabic account of contact between Hārūn al-Rashīd and the Franks, produced within living memory of the embassies recorded in Carolingian sources. Indeed, Arab III was written before the death of Charlemagne on 28 January 814. Although the relevant passage is extremely short, it contains much that is valuable for the understanding of ‘Abbāsīd-Carolingian diplomacy. In order to appreciate the full importance of the testimony of the Sibyl, it is useful to consider the wider presence of the Franks in Arabic apocalyptic material of the period. Ideas from Muslim apocalyptic traditions echo in the Sibyls.

As the reference to ‘the man from the south’ suggests, the Christian authors of the Sibyls worked in a fluid eschatological environment, with concepts circulating among different confessions and among practitioners of different faiths.⁶¹ The best source for early Muslim apocalyptic traditions is *The Book of Tribulations* assembled by Nu‘aym b. Ḥammād al-Marwazī (d.843).⁶² A native of Khurasan, Nu‘aym travelled across the Caliphate before settling in Egypt. He gathered an enormous number of predictions and prophecies, many of them concerned with the apocalypse, which he arranged by contents in the *Book of Tribulations*. Although in many ways an unlikely source, Nu‘aym’s collection is of great

History and Geography’, *Images of the Other: Europe and the Muslim World Before 1700*, ed. D. R. Blanks (Cairo, 1997), 73-80; D. König, ‘The Christianisation of Latin Europe as seen by Medieval Arab-Islamic Historiography’, *The Medieval History Journal*, 12 (2009), 431-472.

⁵⁸ D.G. König, *Arabic-Islamic Views of the Latin West: Tracing the Emergence of Medieval Europe* (Oxford, 2015), 190-201.

⁵⁹ Arab III, 31, Arab IV, 296-297.

⁶⁰ For an overview of Carolingian-Byzantine relations see, M. McCormick, ‘Byzantium and the Early Medieval West: Problems and Opportunities,’ *Europa medievale e mondo bizantino: contatti effettivi e possibilità di studi comparati*, ed. G. Arnaldi & G. Cavallo (Rome, 1997), 1-17; J. Shepard, ‘Byzantine relations with the outside world in the ninth century: An introduction’ and C. Wickham, ‘Ninth-century Byzantium through western eyes’ in *Byzantium in the Ninth Century: Dead or Alive?*, ed. L. Brubaker (Aldershot, 1998), 167-180, 245-256.

⁶¹ H.J.W. Drijvers, ‘Christians, Jews and Muslims in Northern Mesopotamia in Early Islamic Times: The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles and Related Texts’, *La Syrie de Byzance a l’Islam: VIIe-VIIIe siècles*, ed. P. Canivet & J. Rey-Coquais (Damascus, 1992), 67-74; G.J. Reinink, ‘The Beginnings of Syriac Apologetic Literature in Response to Islam’, *Oriens Christianus*, 7 (1993), 165-187, 182-183; D. Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic* (Princeton, 2002), 6.

⁶² Nu‘aym b. Ḥammād, *“The Book of Tribulations”: The Syrian Muslim Apocalyptic Tradition*, trans. D. Cook (Edinburgh, 2017), xii.

value for acquiring a different perspective to those of writers in Baghdad. The bulk of Nu‘aym’s traditions originated in Syria and Egypt.⁶³ They also supported a wide variety of different political interests. The presence of prophecies in favour of long-vanished causes such as that of Ibn al-Zubayr (d.692) attests both to Nu‘aym’s omnivorous interests and the age of some of the material he assembled.⁶⁴

The Franks appear in this collection among the barbarian peoples whose coming acts as a harbinger of the apocalypse. ‘The Apocalypse of Weeks’ attributed by Nu‘aym to Arṭāt b. al-Mundhir (d.778/80), a scholar of Ḥimṣ in Syria, announces that when the end of the world comes ‘the Franks will make their weapons manifest’.⁶⁵ Franks were frequently associated with weapons in the Caliphate. Al-Kindī discussed Frankish swords at length in a treatise on swords commissioned by Caliph al-Mu‘taṣim (r.833-842).⁶⁶ In his *Fihrist*, Ibn al-Nadīm referred to seeing Frankish swords in tenth-century Baghdad.⁶⁷ According to Arṭāt, in 782/3 ‘the ruler of al-Andalus’, who is described as a descendent of the Umayyads and is presumably the rebel Emir of Córdoba, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Mu‘āwiya, shall march on Syria with an army of ‘Berbers, Franks and lions’ whelps [Arabs]’ until they are defeated in a battle on the Jordan River.⁶⁸ The Franks here feature as one of a wider cast of the warrior races of the west.

‘The Apocalypse of Weeks’ is one of a number of prophecies of rulers in the West invading the Caliphate contained within *The Book of Tribulations*. While many of these rulers can be identified as Byzantine Emperors, or vengeful Umayyads coming from Córdoba, others appear to be Franks. Most interesting are those concerned with a figure named Dhū al-‘Arf (the One with the Mane). Nu‘aym includes two variants, the first of which is longer than the other, but they are broadly the same.⁶⁹ In both, Dhū al-‘Arf will be ‘a man from among the enemies of the Muslims of Andalus...who will gather the tribes of polytheism’.⁷⁰ Having

⁶³ *The Book of Tribulations*, xii-xiii.

⁶⁴ S. Bashear, ‘Apocalyptic and Other Materials on Early Muslim-Byzantine Wars: A Review of Arabic Sources’, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1 (1991), 173-207, 173; M. Shaddel, ‘‘Abd Allāh ibn al-Zubayr and the Mahdī: Between Propaganda and Historical Memory in the Second Civil War’, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 80 (2017), 1-19.

⁶⁵ *The Book of Tribulations*, no.1949, 437-446, 442. W. Madelung, ‘The Sufyānī between Tradition and History’, *Studia Islamica*, 63 (1986), 5-48, 20-21; M. Cook, ‘An Early Islamic Apocalyptic Chronicle’, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 52 (1993), 25-30.

⁶⁶ *Medieval Islamic Swords and Swordmaking: Kindī's treatise "On swords and their kinds"*, ed. & trans., R.G. Hoyland & B. Gilmour (Cambridge, 2012), 43, 77-79.

⁶⁷ Ibn al-Nadīm, *The Fihrist of al-Nadīm: A Tenth-Century Survey of Muslim Culture*, ed. & trans. B. Dodge (New York, 1970), 38.

⁶⁸ *The Book of Tribulations*, no.1949, 442.

⁶⁹ *The Book of Tribulations*, no.1300, 287-288, no.1852, 417.

⁷⁰ *The Book of Tribulations*, no.1300, 287.

united the Christians of the West, Dhū al-‘Arf will overrun al-Andalus and invade North Africa, chasing the Muslims all the way to Egypt. The Muslims will make their stand beneath the Pyramids and defeat Dhū al-‘Arf, who will subsequently convert to Islam.

Making sense of this is naturally a challenge. Dating a tradition like this is hard, particularly as prophecies could be adapted for later reuse in changed circumstances. Nu‘aym’s thematic method of categorisation strips each passage of their context. The longer variant of the Dhū al-‘Arf legend is attributed to ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ (d.684), the son of the conqueror of Egypt. This needs to be treated with caution as ‘Abd Allāh was frequently invoked as an authority for a wide range of dubious material. More promising is the shorter version, for which Nu‘aym cites the Egyptian scholars and jurists al-Layth b. Sa‘d (d.791) and ‘Abd Allāh b. Lahī‘a (d.780-1). This is interesting for a number of reasons. Ibn Lahī‘a is known for transmitting apocalyptic material.⁷¹ Both scholars were authorities for Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam’s *History of the Conquest of Egypt*, where al-Layth is the main source for passages discussing the Franks, naming them ‘the fiercest enemies of al-Andalus’, an idea that echoes the prophecy’s framing of Dhū al-‘Arf as the foe of al-Andalus.⁷²

This suggests that Nu‘aym is here reporting material that was circulating in mid to late eighth-century Egypt. Egypt is prominent in the legend as the place where Dhū al-‘Arf is to be defeated and all of the authorities cited are Egyptian. As David Cook has noted, it is difficult to discuss an eighth-century Christian king who rules many Christian peoples and is known to be a specific enemy of and threat to the Muslims of al-Andalus without seeing the shadow of a Carolingian.⁷³ Exactly which Carolingian is hard to say. Every generation of the Carolingians from Charles Martel to Louis the Pious was involved in incursions into al-Andalus.⁷⁴ The lack of specificity was probably a mark in the prophecy’s favour, as it remained relevant into Nu‘aym’s lifetime.

These Arabic traditions were far from alone in viewing the Franks in an apocalyptic or messianic light. Reporting to Otto I on his diplomatic mission to Nikephoros II Phokas in 968-9, Liudprand of Cremona made reference to Visions of Daniel or ‘Sibyllines’ consulted

⁷¹ R.G. Khoury, *‘Abd Allāh ibn Lahī‘a (97-174/715-790): Juge et Grandmaitre de l’École Égyptienne, avec Édition Critique de l’unique rouleau de papyrus arabe conservé à Heidelberg* (Wiesbaden, 1986).

⁷² Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam, *Futūḥ Miṣr wa-akhbārūhā*, ed. C.C. Torrey (Cairo, 1999) 216-217; J.E. Brockopp, *Early Mālikī Law: Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam and his Major Compendium of Jurisprudence* (Leiden, 2000), 2, 13-15 and ‘The Formation of Islamic Law: The Egyptian School (750-900)’, *Annales Islamologiques*, 45 (2011), 123-140, 129-134. On the Egyptian context, A. El Shamsy, *The Canonization of Islamic Law: A Social and Intellectual History* (Cambridge, 2013), 91-111.

⁷³ “*The Book of Tribulations*”, no.1300, 287.

⁷⁴ P. Sénac, *Les Carolingiens et al-Andalus (VIII^e – IX^e siècles)* (Paris, 2002).

by both Byzantines and Muslims in their decisions about military strategy.⁷⁵ Liudprand paid special attention to the prophecies attributed to a Bishop Hippolytus, which were interpreted in Constantinople to predict that Nikephoros and Otto would jointly overcome the Saracens.⁷⁶ The Bishop of Cremona disagreed with this reading, preferring instead to see them as proof that ‘not the Greeks, but the Franks shall crush the Saracens’.⁷⁷ Eschatological texts referring to conflict with Arabs were also read in the Frankish world. Latin translations of the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodios* circulated from an early period, with an abbreviated version being produced in the context of Muslim invasions in the 730s.⁷⁸ In 853 Audradus Modicus, a prophetic monk of Tours, claimed nocturnal visions in which St. Martin of Tours helped Charles the Bald ‘to free Spain from the infidel’.⁷⁹ Arabic prophecies were part of a wider febrile, if amorphous, set of concepts that could be used and reinterpreted by a wide range of readers and writers.

While apparently thin and confused, the testimony of *The Book of Tribulations* indicates that, unlike the writers of Iraq, those of Syria and Egypt were concerned by the power of the Franks. Their appearance in the apocalyptic nightmares of the eighth century suggests an environment in which the Franks were understood as a dangerous people, inimical to Islam, led by kings who possessed the potential to roll up the entire Maghreb and march into the heart of the Caliphate. With this context, the prominence of the Franks in the account of the Tiburtine Sibyls takes on a new significance. In writing about Hārūn receiving gifts from the Franks, the authors of the Sibyls were demonstrating that the Caliph could command the respect and admiration of a people known to be formidable, making a statement about Hārūn’s own power and reach.

⁷⁵ Liudprand of Cremona, ‘*Relatio de legatione Constantinopolitana*’, *CCCM 156 Liudprandi Cremonensis opera omnia*, ed. P. Chiesa (Turnholt, 1998), 185-218, ‘Habent Greci et Saraceni libros, quos ὀράσεις, sive visions, Danielis vocant, ego autem Sibyllanos’, 204.

⁷⁶ Liudprand, ‘*Relatio*’, 204; Alexander, *The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition*, 96-122; W. Brandes, ‘Liudprand von Cremona (legatio cap. 39-41) und eine bisher unbeachtete west-östliche Korrespondenz über die Bedeutung des Jahres 1000 A.D.’, *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, 93 (2000), 435-463.

⁷⁷ Liudprand, ‘*Relatio*’, ‘Grecos non debere Saracenos, sed Francos conterere’, 206. On the politics of the embassy see H. Mayr-Harting, ‘Liudprand of Cremona’s Account of his Legation to Constantinople (968) and Ottonian Imperial Strategy’, *The English Historical Review*, 116 (2001), 539-556.

⁷⁸ O. Prinz, ‘Eine frühe abendländische Aktualisierung der lateinischen Übersetzung des Pseudo-Methodios’, *Deutsches Archiv für Erforschung des Mittelalters*, 41 (1985), 1-23; R.M. Pollard, ‘One “Other” on Another: Petrus Monachus’ *Revelationes* and Islam’, *Difference and Identity in Francia and Medieval France*, eds. M. Cohen & J. Firnhaber-Baker (Aldershot, 2010), 25-42.

⁷⁹ Audradus Modicus, *Book of Revelations*, ed. L. Traube, ‘O Roma nobilis. Philologische Untersuchungen aus dem Mittelalter’, *Abhandlungen der Philosophisch-Philologischen Classe der Königlich Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, 19 (1891), 297-396, no.11, ‘Do tibi, Karole, ut Hispanias duce beato Martino principe [iterum] liberet ab infidelibus’, 383; trans. P.E. Dutton, *Carolingian Civilization: A Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. P.E. Dutton (North York, 2009), 355; P.E. Dutton, *The Politics of Dreaming in the Carolingian Empire* (London, 1994), 124-143.

This apocalyptic material suggests a new avenue for approaching and interpreting ‘Abbāsid diplomacy with the Carolingians. Diplomacy with the Franks has generally been seen as of little importance to Hārūn’s regime. The lack of reference to the Carolingians in other Arabic sources has been explained by arguments that diplomatic contact between Hārūn al-Rashīd and Charlemagne was rather more flattering for the latter than for the former.⁸⁰ This diplomacy therefore attracted little attention outside of Hārūn’s immediate court circle, and was swiftly forgotten even there. But for the writers of the Arabic Sibyls, contact with the Franks was one of the most outstanding characteristics of Hārūn’s reign, an immediately recognizable clue that could be used to identify him to the reader in the midst of prophetic mysteries.

This should not be taken as proof that Hārūn’s diplomacy with Charlemagne was the most, or even one of the most, important events of his time in power. Hārūn’s reign was long and busy, including the rise and fall of the Barmakid family, war with Byzantium and trouble in a number of provinces.⁸¹ The Tiburtine Sibyls were composed from an unusual perspective. Charlemagne was in contact with the Patriarch of Jerusalem from the last years of the eighth century, receiving gifts and blessings from George (797-807) and Thomas I (807-820).⁸² According to Einhard, the Frankish ruler was very concerned to send alms, including large sums of money, to Christians in the Muslim world.⁸³ This is supported by the survey of the ecclesiastical establishment in the see of Jerusalem commissioned by the emperor and completed in around 808 in order to most effectively distribute aid to churches and monasteries in the region.⁸⁴

That people beyond Palestine and the Frankish world were aware of these efforts is suggested by Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus’ statement in the *De Administrando Imperii* that Charlemagne ‘sent much money and abundant treasure to Palestine and built a very large

⁸⁰ P. Classen, ‘Karl der Große, das Papsttum und Byzanz: die Begründung des karolingischen Kaisertums’, *Karl der Große: Lebenswerk und Nachleben* 1, ed. H. Beumann, *Persönlichkeit und Geschichte* (Düsseldorf, 1965), 537-608, 537, repr. Peter Classen, *Karl der Große, das Papsttum und Byzanz: die Begründung des karolingischen Kaisertums*, ed. H. Fuhrmann & C. Märzl (Sigmaringen, 1965); W. Drews, ‘Karl, Byzanz und die Mächte des Islam’, *Kaiser und Kalifen: Karl der Grosse und die Mächte am Mittelmeer um 800*, ed. Stiftung Deutsches Historisches Museum (Darmstadt, 2014), 86-99, 87.

⁸¹ For a summary see T. El-Hibri, ‘The Empire in Iraq, 763-861’, *The New Cambridge History of Islam: Vol 1 The Formation of the Islamic World, Sixth to Eleventh Centuries*, ed. C.F. Robinson (Cambridge, 2010), 269-304, 280-284.

⁸² ARF, a.799, 108; a.800, 110, 112, a.807, 123-124, a.809, 129; Alcuin, MGH Epp 4, *Epistolae Karolini aevi II*, ed. E. Dümmler (Berlin, 1905), no. 214, 357-358; Einhard, ‘Vita Karoli Magni’, 19; Borgolte, *Der Gesandtenaustausch*, 61-76, 101-107.

⁸³ Einhard, ‘Vita Karoli Magni’, c.27 31-32

⁸⁴ McCormick, *Charlemagne's Survey of the Holy Land*.

number of monasteries'.⁸⁵ Despite this evidence of wider knowledge of Charlemagne's generosity, the nature of the Emperor's involvement would have made him more visible and more significant to a Christian living in Syria than to other inhabitants of the Caliphate, including the ruling elite, particularly if those Christians were Chalcedonians.

That said, the evidence that someone outside of the 'Abbāsīd court noticed the reception of Frankish envoys and thought it important enough to be one of the few things they recorded about Hārūn's reign is striking enough to suggest that a reassessment may be required. There are a couple of other hints that Frankish contact was more important to Hārūn than generally suspected. The first is the expense of the gifts sent to Charlemagne, which included, in addition to the elephant, a beautiful tent, perfumes and balsam and a mechanical brass clock.⁸⁶ It is difficult to determine how many elephants Hārūn had access to, but the answer is most plausibly in single digits. Hārūn's son, al-Mu'taṣim, seems to have possessed one elephant, a gift from an Indian king, used to parade a captured rebel in 838.⁸⁷ When Byzantine ambassadors arrived in Baghdad in 917, they were led past a display of one hundred lions, two giraffes and four elephants.⁸⁸ Hārūn was parting with a very scarce resource when he dispatched Abū al-'Abbās to Charlemagne.

The second hint is that al-Ma'mūn thought it worth his while to send three envoys to Louis the Pious unprompted by the Franks. In Autumn 831 the 'Abbāsīd diplomats attended an assembly at Thionville, where they were presented to the gathered Franks with ambassadors from the Danes and Slavs.⁸⁹ This probably means that they had arrived earlier in the year, and that Louis, having just survived a coup by his sons in 830, was taking the opportunity to secure his position by displaying these foreign dignitaries and their gifts.⁹⁰ This took place relatively shortly after al-Ma'mūn's reconquest of Syria and Egypt, the provinces which granted him access to the Mediterranean. The envoys brought with them 'gifts from their homeland, various kinds of perfumes and fabrics'.⁹¹ Al-Ma'mūn's interest in dispatching envoys to Louis suggests that he did not consider his father's contact with the

⁸⁵ Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De administrando imperio*, ed. & trans. G. Moravcsik & R.J.H. Jenkins (Washington DC, 1985), 109.

⁸⁶ ARF, a.807 123.

⁸⁷ H. Kennedy, 'Caliphs and their Chronicles in the Middle Abbāsīd Period (Third/Ninth Century)', *Texts, Documents and Artefacts: Islamic studies in honour of D.S. Richards*, ed. C.F. Robinson (Leiden, 2003), 17-35, 20.

⁸⁸ *Book of Gifts and Rarities*, trans. G.H. al-Qaddūmī (Cambridge MA, 1996), 152.

⁸⁹ *Annales de Saint-Bertin*, a.831, 4; Astronomer, 'Vita Hludowici imperatoris', c.46, 466.

⁹⁰ On events in 830, E. Boshof, *Ludwig der Fromme* (Darmstadt, 1996), 192-210.

⁹¹ Astronomer, 'Vita Hludowici imperatoris', c.46, 'grandia munera patrię, odorum scilicet diversa genera et pannorum', 466.

Carolingians to be a minor distraction, but rather serious business of state. These are thin straws individually, but combined they suggest that a reassessment of the role played by the Carolingians in this period of 'Abbāsīd politics may be necessary.

The Sibyl also provides a hint as to Hārūn's motivations for engaging with Charlemagne. The reasons for 'Abbāsīd interest in the Carolingians are one of the most understudied areas of their diplomatic relationship. It is often argued that the Caliphs were seeking an ally against their mutual enemies, the Umayyads of Córdoba and the Byzantium.⁹² Arab III and IV offer another possibility. Although written by Christians, their treatment of Hārūn al-Rashīd is fairly sympathetic, with his reign being portrayed as a good time for Syria.⁹³ Diplomacy with the Franks is one of the ways by which this positive depiction is justified. The power of the Caliph's regime is manifested by his contact with peoples across the Mediterranean, and more particularly by the gifts they send, demonstrating that even peoples beyond his direct rule hold him in respect.⁹⁴

Exactly what the gifts brought by the Franks were is a little unclear. Notker the Stammerer claimed that Charlemagne sent Hārūn hunting dogs.⁹⁵ As the monk of St Gall was writing in 885-887, used the dogs as the set up for a joke about Charlemagne's hunting prowess, and never let accuracy get in the way of humour in his history, there is reason to be sceptical about this.⁹⁶ More useful is a letter sent by Charlemagne in 807 to his advisor, Archbishop Arn of Salzburg.⁹⁷ After describing the beauty of the tent received by him from Hārūn, Charlemagne urged Arn to send him gifts that could be shipped to the Caliph, particularly gold and textiles.⁹⁸ It also possible that some of the vast treasure acquired by the Franks from the sack of the Ring of the Avars in 796 made its way East.⁹⁹ Charlemagne is

⁹² F.W. Buckler, *Hārūnu 'l-Rashīd and Charles the Great* (Cambridge MA, 1931); El-Hibri, 'The Empire in Iraq', 281.

⁹³ Arab III, 33, Arab IV, 296-297.

⁹⁴ M.W. Helms, *Ulysses' Sail: an ethnographic odyssey of power, knowledge, and geographical distance* (Princeton, 1988).

⁹⁵ Notker the Stammerer, 'Gesta Karoli Magni Imperatori' *MGH 12 Scriptores Germanicarum Nova Series*, ed. H. F. Haefele (Berlin, 1959), 63.

⁹⁶ D. Ganz, 'Humour as history in Notker's *Gesta Karoli magni*', *Monks, Nuns, and Friars in Mediaeval Society*, ed. E.B. King, J.T. Schaefer & W.B. Wadley (Sewanee, 1989), 171-183; M. Innes, 'Memory, Orality and Literacy in an Early Medieval Society,' *Past and Present*, 158 (1998), 3-36, 13.

⁹⁷ On Arn's role, see J.R. Davis, 'Inventing the Missi: Delegating Power in the Late Eighth and Early Ninth Centuries', *The 'Abbasid and Carolingian Empires: Comparative Studies in Civilizational Formation*, ed. D.G. Tor (Leiden, 2018), 13-51, 23-28.

⁹⁸ 'Formulae Salzburgenses', no. 62, 453.

⁹⁹ ARF a.796, 99; Einhard, 'Vita Karoli Magni', c.13, 15-16. On the conquest of the Avars and the treasure see T. Reuter, 'Plunder and Tribute in the Carolingian Empire', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th Series, 35 (1985), 75-94; W. Pohl, *Die Awaren: Ein Steppenvolk in Mitteleuropa 567-822 n. Chr.* (Munich, 1988); W. Pohl, 'The "Regia" and the "Hring" - Barbarian Places of Power', *Topographies of Power in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. M. De Jong & F. Theuvs (Leiden, 2001), 439-466.

known to have sent some of this windfall to Pope Leo III.¹⁰⁰ King Offa of Mercia and Æthelred of Northumbria also benefitted, with the former receiving ‘a belt and a Hunnic sword and two silk cloaks’.¹⁰¹ It seems plausible that Avar plunder might have featured in the gifts Charlemagne sent with the embassy that set out to see Hārūn in 797. Whatever the exact nature of these gifts, they were enough to get the attention of the composers of the Sibyls.

Hārūn’s engagement with Charlemagne may have been concerned with impressing audiences at home as much as abroad. Within the Carolingian empire, Charlemagne’s diplomacy with Hārūn was widely celebrated as a proof of the newly crowned Emperor’s exalted status.¹⁰² The passage in the Arab Sibyls suggests an analogous reaction in the Caliphate. As the famous reception of Byzantine legates in Baghdad by al-Muqtadir and Ibn al-Furāt in 917 demonstrates, ‘Abbāsīd Caliphs and their Viziers were not above using and displaying foreign diplomats from distant lands as a means toward strengthening a slightly shaky domestic situation.’¹⁰³ The arrival of Charlemagne’s second embassy, possibly in late 802 but more probably in early 803, might have been particularly fortuitous for Hārūn.¹⁰⁴ December 802 had seen the pronouncement of his plans for the succession, followed the subsequent month by the downfall of the Barmakid family, who had been at the heart of Hārūn’s administration.¹⁰⁵ These were both highly controversial political decisions. The reception of the Frankish envoys would have provided the Caliph with an opportunity to demonstrate his power at a moment of uncertainty.

¹⁰⁰ ARF a.796, 99.

¹⁰¹ Alcuin, MGH Epp 4, *Epistolae Karolini aevi II*, ed. E. Dümmler (Berlin, 1905), no. 100, 144-146, ‘unum balteum et unum gladium Huniscum et duo pallia sirica’, 146. J. Story, *Carolingian Connections: Anglo-Saxon England and Carolingian Francia, c. 750-870* (Aldershot, 2003), 104-110 & ‘Charlemagne and the Anglo-Saxons’, *Charlemagne: Empire and Society*, ed. J. Story (Manchester, 2005), 195-210, 200-202

¹⁰² A. Grabois, ‘Charlemagne, Rome and Jerusalem’, *Revue Belge de Philologie et d’histoire*, 59 (1981), 792-801; R.D. McKitterick, *Charlemagne: The Formation of a European Identity* (Cambridge, 2008), 288; A.A. Latowsky, *Emperor of the World: Charlemagne and the Construction of Imperial Authority, 800-1229* (Ithaca, 2013), 7, 19-58.

¹⁰³ Ibn Miskawayh, *The Eclipse of the ‘Abbāsīd Caliphate: Classical Writings of the Medieval Islamic World*, Vol.1 ed. H.F. Amedroz & D.S. Margoliouth (London, 2015), 56-60; Hilāl al-Šābi’, *Rusūm Dār al-Khilāfah: The Rules and Regulations of the ‘Abbāsīd Court*, trans. E.A. Salem (Beirut, 1977), 15-16; *Book of Gifts and Rarities*, 148-155; for context see H. Kennedy, ‘The Reign of al-Muqtadir (295-320/908-32): A History’, *Crisis and Continuity at the Abbāsīd Court: Formal and Informal Politics in the Caliphate of al-Muqtadir (295-320/908-32)*, ed. M. van Berkel, N.M. El Cheikh, H. Kennedy & L. Osti (Leiden, 2013), 13-47, 32.

¹⁰⁴ ARF, a.806 122.

¹⁰⁵ Kennedy, *The Early Abbāsīd Caliphate*, 127; Kimber, ‘Hārūn al-Rashīd’s Meccan Settlement’, 55-79; Marsham, *Rituals of Islamic Monarchy*, 224.

The reception of gifts from western powers had a long pedigree in the models of Near Eastern kingship that influenced the ‘Abbāsids.¹⁰⁶ The Sasanian kings of Iran had placed great emphasis on extorting tribute from the Eastern Roman Empire.¹⁰⁷ Descriptions of rulers such as Darius I, of whom it was said that ‘From China to the western lands of Rome, all kings were his ready slaves and sent to him tribute and gifts’, circulated in ninth-century Iraq and might have served as an example of monarchy to be imitated.¹⁰⁸ An echo of the contemporary importance of foreign gifts received by the ‘Abbāsids can be found in *The Book of Gifts and Rarities*, a catalogue compiled in the late eleventh century by an anonymous Fāṭimid official using material running from the ninth century.¹⁰⁹ It is filled with implausibly vast numbers or extravagant gifts, but provides evidence for the significance of exotic items associated with diplomacy in the cultural imagination of elites.¹¹⁰

The apocalyptic material collected by Nu‘aym also hint that for audiences in the Western Caliphate, the Franks, far from being obscure barbarians beyond the edge of the world, were actually known as an alarmingly dangerous people. The echoes of the might of the Carolingians audible in the legend of Dhū al-‘Arf suggest a context in which Hārūn al-Rashīd’s ability to do business with the Franks might have seemed rather more impressive than previously imagined. The news that the Caliph had managed to bring these agents of the apocalypse to send him gifts would then have added lustre to his own authority and acted as testament to his power.

Apocalypses make for curious history, seeking to order the past into a clear narrative by first making it obscure. We prophecy in part, and the prophecies discussed above are very partial, commenting on the politics of their day in the future tense. But these apocalypses have value for thinking about the ‘Abbāsīd relationship with the Carolingians precisely because they are unlike the more conventional chronicles of al-Ṭabarī and the other historians of Baghdad whose accounts remain the dominant narrative of the Caliphate. Because of their

¹⁰⁶ A. Al-Azmeh, *Muslim Kingship: power and the sacred in Muslim, Christian, and pagan polities* (London, 1997), 62-79; P. Crone, *Medieval Islamic Political Thought* (Edinburgh, 2004), 148-164.

¹⁰⁷ R. Payne, ‘Cosmology and the Expansion of the Iranian Empire, 502–628’, *Past and Present*, 220 (2013), 3-33.

¹⁰⁸ *The Letter of Tansar*, trans. M. Boyce (Rome, 1968), 53.

¹⁰⁹ *Book of Gifts and Rarities*, 5-13. M. Hamidullah, ‘Nouveaux Documents sur les rapports de l’Europe avec l’Orient Musulman au Moyen Âge’, *Arabica*, 7 (1960), 281-300. On gifts in Islam see, F. Rosenthal, ‘Hiba’, C.E. Bosworth, ‘Hiba: The Caliphate’ & G.S. Colin, ‘Hiba in the West’ in *Encyclopedia of Islam* 2nd ed., 3 (Leiden, 1971), 342-347.

¹¹⁰ O. Grabar, ‘The Shared Culture of Objects’, *Byzantine Court Culture from 829 to 1204*, ed. H. Maguire (Washington DC, 1997), 115-129, 128.

origins among jurists of Egypt in the late-eighth century or Christians in Syria in the early-ninth century, the prophetic material provides a different vision of the Caliphate of Hārūn al-Rashīd, one in which the power of the Franks loomed rather larger in the minds of contemporaries than normally recognised.

It would be unwise to place too much weight upon the testimony of the Sibyl. The relevant passage is short and written far away from the places where decisions about foreign policy were made. The Carolingian sources provide better evidence for the diplomatic activity as a whole. With these caveats in place, by offering a non-Frankish perspective, the Sibyl hints at the wider audiences within the Caliphate that were paying attention to the arrival of these visitors from the beyond the sea to the court of Hārūn. In doing so it sheds new light on the motives that led Caliphs to engage with Aachen and on the overall significance of this diplomacy for their wider political agenda.