

PERSIANS AT THE PORT OF PISA: DIPLOMATIC AND TRADE RELATIONS BETWEEN THE CAROLINGIANS AND THE ABBĀSIDS DURING THE REIGN OF CHARLEMAGNE AND HĀRŪN AL-RASHĪD

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Among the many commonly-repeated anecdotes about the reign of Charlemagne (r. 768-814 CE), his diplomatic and trade relations with the ‘Abbāsīd Caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (r. 786-809 CE) is particularly popular. This isn’t surprising, since it subverts modern expectations about medieval interactions between Christians and Muslims, and more

specifically about Charlemagne's attitude towards Muslims — ideas about which mainly come from the 11th century *Song of Roland* which recasts his campaigns against the Basques as holy wars against the Umayyads — while also containing colorful details like Hārūn's gift of an elephant, who then lived in the Carolingian court until it died in 810. However, those who mention this event often relegate it to a footnote or a fun fact, rather than attempting to fully explore its implications. Was Charlemagne's diplomatic relation with Hārūn al-Rashid really so strange? Other than the elephant, what other goods did the two rulers trade? What might have prompted this diplomacy to take place, and what, if anything, resulted from it?

The trade missions between Charlemagne and Hārūn al-Rashīd — there were multiple — weren't the Carolingians' first diplomatic interactions with the 'Abbāsids, nor would they be their last. According to one continuation of the *Chronicle of Fredegar* Charlemagne's father Pepin III exchanged envoys and gifts with al-Manṣūr between 764 and 767, hosting the Caliph's ambassadors in Nantes.¹ Charlemagne's two embassies to Hārūn took place between 797 and 807 followed.² Finally, in the last recorded instance of diplomacy between the Carolingians and the 'Abbāsids, al-Ma'mūn's envoys appear at an assembly held by Louis the Pious in 831, though there are no records of Louis ever reciprocating this mission.³ While diplomacy between Charlemagne and Hārūn al-Rashīd is notable for its length, it wasn't particularly remarkable for its innovation. Nor was it so disastrous that it soured either dynasty on exchanging diplomats again, at least on the 'Abbāsids' end. However, compared to those of Pepin III and al-Manṣūr and of Louis the Pious and al-Ma'mūn, the diplomatic missions between Charlemagne and Hārūn al-Rashīd are quite well-documented.

However, well-documented is a relative term. Primary sources on the decade's worth of trade and diplomacy between Charlemagne and Hārūn al-Rashīd amount only to about three contemporary Frankish accounts — those being the *Annales regni Francorum*,⁴ Einhard's *Vita Karoli Magni*,⁵ and Notker the Stammerer's *Gesta Karoli Magni*⁶ — all of which only somewhat agree on specifics, as well as a 9th century Arabic-language variant of the Tiburtine Sibyl, from an Arab Christian community in Syria unconnected to the 'Abbāsīd court, that somewhat off-handedly mentions the embassies.⁷ Still, these sources provide enough information about the missions for scholars to start piecing together specific details like individual diplomats and the contents of some of the gifts exchanged between the two

¹ Samuel Ottewill-Soulsby, "'Abbāsīd-Carolingian Diplomacy in Early Medieval Arabic Apocalypse,'" *Millennium* 16, no. 1 (2019): 213, <https://doi.org/10.1515/mill-2019-0011>

² "Royal Frankish Annals" in *Carolingian Chronicles*, trans. Bernhard Walter Scholz and Barbara Rogers (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), page, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015015186805>

³ Ottewill-Soulsby, "'Abbāsīd-Carolingian Diplomacy," 214

⁴ "Royal Frankish Annals," 82-87

⁵ Einhard, "The Life of Charlemagne" in *Two Lives of Charlemagne* trans. David Ganz (London: Penguin Classics, 2008), 29-30

⁶ Notker the Stammerer, "The Deeds of Charlemagne" in *Two Lives of Charlemagne* trans. David Ganz (London: Penguin Classics, 2008), 92-96

⁷ Ottewill-Soulsby, "'Abbāsīd-Carolingian Diplomacy," 217

rulers. The Royal Frankish Annals, specifically, lay out a clear, year-by-year timeline of the missions. They start with Charlemagne sending three emissaries, Lantfrid, Sigismund, and Isaac, to Hārūn in 797, to which Hārūn responded with his own envoys, “a Persian from the East” and “a Saracen from Africa” — potentially ‘Ibrāhīm ibn Aghlab, ‘Amīr of Egypt⁸ — in 801, who also brought news of Lantfrid and Sigismund’s deaths.⁹ Isaac returned later that year with Hārūn’s grand gifts to Charlemagne, most notably the elephant Abū al-‘Abbās.¹⁰ Charlemagne sent yet another embassy, presumably in 802 or 803, as Hārūn’s second envoy Abdallah arrived in 807 bearing silk robes, perfumes, and an intricate water clock.¹¹ After this, the exchange of diplomats seems to have stopped, though Charlemagne may have sent yet another mission in 807, which Hārūn never responded to since he died in 809, likely before Charlemagne’s diplomats reached him.¹² All three Carolingian sources generally agree with this sequence of events, so while they might differ in other specifics like who was involved in which trade mission, or what goods were sent between Aachen and Baghdad, confirming that the embassies did happen, likely in the same order given in the Royal Frankish Annals.

The question of what gifts were exchanged is slightly more complex, as the three different Frankish accounts don’t completely agree on Hārūn’s presents, nor do they make any real attempt to record what Charlemagne had to offer. Einhard only vaguely records Hārūn’s “magnificent gifts [...] robes and spices and other riches of the East”, as well as the elephant, “the only one he possessed, to Charles, who had asked for one.”¹³ Notker mentions the elephant, but also includes “monkeys, balsam, nard, unguents of various kinds, spices, scents and many kinds of drugs.”¹⁴ Notker also provides the only list of Charlemagne’s gifts to Hārūn:

Horses and mules from Spain and Frisian robes, white, grey, crimson, and blue, which in Persia, he was told, were rarely seen and highly prized. Dogs too he sent him of remarkable swiftness and fierceness, such as the king of Persia had desired, for hunting and driving away lions and tigers.¹⁵

Because of the texts’ lack of detail and agreement on either ruler’s exact set of gifts, various scholars have theorized other unmentioned trade items. Lawrence Nees suggests that along with (or perhaps instead of) Notker’s list, Charlemagne might have sent Hārūn slaves and illuminated manuscripts, especially with covers of ivory, like the Dagulf Psalter he sent to Pope Hadrian in 795,¹⁶ which he imagines might “have stimulated the Caliph to a

⁸ F. W. Buckler, *Harunūl-Rashid and Charles the Great* (Cambridge: The Mediaeval Academy of America, 1931), 31

⁹ “Royal Frankish Annals,” 82

¹⁰ “Royal Frankish Annals,” 82

¹¹ “Royal Frankish Annals,” 87

¹² Ottewill-Soulsby, “‘Abbāsīd-Carolingian Diplomacy,” 214

¹³ Einhard, “The Life of Charlemagne,” 30

¹⁴ Notker, “The Deeds of Charlemagne,” 94

¹⁵ Notker, “The Deeds of Charlemagne,” 95

¹⁶ Lawrence Nees, “Charlemagne’s Elephant,” *Quintana: Revista de Estudos do Departamento de Historia da Arte* 5 (2006): 37, <https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=65323971003>

triumph of one-upsmanship by sending back the very beast itself.”¹⁷ He also proposes, somewhat more realistically, that Hārūn might have sent elephant tusks along with Abū al-‘Abbās, since the arrival of both his own envoys and Isaac coincide with the production of many carved Carolingian ivories, many of which were quite large, whereas previously ivory carvings were both smaller and rarer.¹⁸ Because no party involved in the diplomatic missions—neither local chroniclers looking to note down every single item, nor the individual envoys traveling between Aachen and Baghdad — kept records that historians deem satisfactory enough, we will likely never know the full inventory of these gift exchanges.

If determining what exactly Charlemagne and Hārūn exchanged is hard, pinpointing either ruler’s motivations is even harder. The only explicit mention of Charlemagne’s motivations can be found in Einhard’s writing, where he claims that Charlemagne simply wanted an elephant,¹⁹ but the truth surely cannot be so simple — or can it? Dutton explains that, while not the main reason, obtaining an elephant might have still been important to Charlemagne, who collected exotic animals as symbols of his status and royal dignity.²⁰ More likely, though, is that Charlemagne’s trans-continental offer of friendship was politically motivated, even though nothing resembling the modern conception of a political alliance came out of it. Carolingian and ‘Abbāsīd interests were well-aligned. The Carolingians resented the Byzantines, the hostility between them stemming from intrafaith conflict, and maintained a “belligerent peace” with the Umayyads in Iberia; this situation was reversed for the ‘Abbāsīds, who despised the Umayyads who refused to recognize them and clung to their former title of Caliph, and were somewhat hostile towards the Byzantines.²¹ Knowing this, Charlemagne might have imagined that an alliance between the two was only natural. Buckler lists three possible motivations for Charlemagne, all potentially overlapping: an attempt to position himself as the protector of ‘Abbāsīd interests in Western Europe (specifically against the Umayyads), a traditional alliance between the Carolingians and the ‘Abbāsīds against the Byzantines, or negotiations for the safety of Christian pilgrims to Jerusalem.²² According to him, Charlemagne and Louis the Pious’ campaigns in Spain throughout the next decade corroborate the first motive,²³ while the Byzantine emperor Nikephoros’ attempts to make peace with Charlemagne in 803 and Hārūn in 804, suspecting the potential of an alliance between them, support the second.²⁴ These two goals together were extremely valuable to both rulers but slightly favored Hārūn, since Charlemagne’s offer to fight against the Umayyads seems to have been on behalf of the ‘Abbāsīds, and not beside them. While it’s impossible to know what Charlemagne might have been thinking as he sent

¹⁷ Nees, "Charlemagne’s Elephant," 38

¹⁸ Nees, "Charlemagne’s Elephant," 41-42

¹⁹ Einhard, "The Life of Charlemagne," 30

²⁰ Paul Edward Dutton, *Charlemagne’s Mustache: And Other Cultural Clusters of a Dark Age* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 61

²¹ Maurits S Berger, *A Brief History of Islam in Europe: Thirteen Centuries of Creed, Conflict, and Coexistence* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2014), 62, <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/46342>

²² Buckler, *Harunu’l-Rashid and Charles the Great*, 22

²³ Buckler, *Harunu’l-Rashid and Charles the Great*, 23

²⁴ Buckler, *Harunu’l-Rashid and Charles the Great*, 26

Lantfrid, Sigismund, and Isaac off to Baghdad in 797, that he conceived of the potential for diplomacy between them shows that the motivation to ally against their common enemies trumped the religious differences between them, at least theoretically.

Buckler's final proposed motivation, the protection of Christian pilgrims to Jerusalem, is slightly more complicated, as both Einhard and Notker claim that Hārūn's gifts included some sort of dominion over Jerusalem, either giving him "that holy and salvific place [the Holy Sepulcher] so it might be thought to be in his power"²⁵ or himself acting as "his [Charlemagne] representative [...] a faithful manager of the revenue of that province."²⁶ While Buckler believes that these sources "appear to leave little room for doubt,"²⁷ other scholars take issue. Runciman specifically questions why the Royal Frankish Annals would omit such an achievement, and instead proposes that "Charles asked for something in Jerusalem and was given it," such as more protections for Catholic pilgrims, permission for Latin priests to serve in the church of the Holy Sepulcher, or most likely, ownership of the church later pilgrims knew as Sancta Maria Latina.²⁸ Contemporary and later chronicles support parts of this claim, as "references [...] to pilgrimages to the Holy Land increased significantly."²⁹ Protections for Christian pilgrims against harm, along with material gains like that of the elephant, were likely secondary, and potentially included as a sign of thanks from Hārūn al-Rashīd.

While the three Frankish sources say little about Charlemagne's motivations, they reveal much about Frankish perceptions of the 'Abbāsids. The Royal Frankish Annals stay neutral, owing to its straightforward style, completely omitting any impression its author may have had of Hārūn al-Rashīd or his envoys. Einhard and Notker are less detached, and both use the 'Abbāsids as mouthpieces to portray Charlemagne's majesty, which is so great that even distant foreigners can perceive it. According to Einhard, Hārūn "held him in favor more than all the kings and princes in the world and thought that he alone was worthy of his honor and generosity."³⁰ While this may seem like Einhard portrays Charlemagne and Hārūn as equals, Latowsky disagrees, asserting that Einhard's writing is stylistically similar to that of Suetonius and Eusebius' depictions of Perso-Roman diplomacy, in which Persians submit to Roman emperors by sending them gifts, including animals, a connection Einhard further emphasizes by calling Hārūn *Rex Persarum*, "the King of the Persians."³¹ Furthermore, Einhard's perception of Hārūn's immense power — he supposedly holds "almost all of the East except India"³² — accentuates the significance of his deference to Charlemagne. By depicting Hārūn as subservient, Einhard demonstrates Charlemagne's immense power,

²⁵ Einhard, "The Life of Charlemagne," 30

²⁶ Notker, "The Deeds of Charlemagne", 96

²⁷ Buckler, *Harunu'l-Rashid and Charles the Great*, 29

²⁸ Steven Runciman, "Charlemagne and Palestine," *The English Historical Review* 50, no. 200 (1935): 612, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/553491>.

²⁹ Richard Hodges, "Charlemagne's Elephant," *History Today* 50, no. 12, (December 2000): 27

³⁰ Einhard, "The Life of Charlemagne," 29

³¹ Anne Latowsky, "Foreign Embassies and Roman Universality in Einhard's Life of Charlemagne," *Florilegium* 22 (January 2005): 39-40, <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/flor/article/view/12515>.

³² Einhard, "The Life of Charlemagne," 29

which is consistent with his view of Charlemagne as Roman imperial authority reborn. Notker also looks down on the ‘Abbāsids, portraying Hārūn’s envoys with a condescending degree of child-like wonder at the Carolingian court. According to Notker:

[Charlemagne] received them with great kindness, and granted them this privilege—that they might go wherever they had a mind to go, as if they were his own children, and examine everything [...] they jumped with joy at this favor and valued the privilege of clinging close to Charlemagne, of gazing upon him [...] more than all the wealth of the East.³³

They explore the Palace of Aachen and are so delighted by the things they see that “they could not refrain from laughing aloud; and they clapped their hands.”³⁴ He also includes a small interlude at the ‘Abbāsīd court, where he says Hārūn “understood the superior might of Charles from these very small matters [Charlemagne’s gifts].”³⁵ Notker uses Hārūn’s envoys, directly comparing them to children, to express Charlemagne’s magnificence, illustrating it through the sheer awe it inspires in them. In contrast with the hooting and hollering diplomats, he depicts Charlemagne as stoic yet generous, which together make him appear quite paternalistic. Charlemagne’s power is so apparent that even the renowned Hārūn al-Rashīd can sense it, despite only seeing his gifts. In both these texts, Carolingian writers undermine ‘Abbāsīd authority to prop up Charlemagne instead, showing that they clearly didn’t think very highly of them while also using these diplomatic missions with such a powerful political entity as proof of Charlemagne’s magnificence.

Although Charlemagne’s motivations and Carolingian perceptions of the ‘Abbāsids have enough textual sources for historians to start attempting to piece a narrative together, it’s impossible to do the same with Hārūn al-Rashīd. Until extremely recently in 2019, historians believed that no contemporary Arabic-language sources even vaguely referenced Hārūn al-Rashīd’s diplomatic trade missions with Charlemagne. Ottewill-Soulsby discovered a mention in an Arabic copy of the Tiburtine Sibyls, of all places.³⁶ These apocalyptic texts include both actual prophecy and history “made intentionally obscure and framed as prophecy,”³⁷ with the variants Arab III and Arab IV, dating roughly to 811-813 and 811-826 respectively,³⁸ containing the lines of interest. They read:

"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-Ifranjīyya, 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.”³⁹

³³ Notker, “The Deeds of Charlemagne”, 92-93

³⁴ Notker, “The Deeds of Charlemagne”, 93

³⁵ Notker, “The Deeds of Charlemagne”, 96

³⁶ Ottewill-Soulsby, “‘Abbāsīd-Carolingian Diplomacy,” 217

³⁷ Ottewill-Soulsby, “‘Abbāsīd-Carolingian Diplomacy,” 217

³⁸ Ottewill-Soulsby, “‘Abbāsīd-Carolingian Diplomacy,” 221

³⁹ Ottewill-Soulsby, “‘Abbāsīd-Carolingian Diplomacy,” 222

In which Ottewill-Soulsby identifies the king as Hārūn al-Rashīd due to the source's internal chronology and biographical details,⁴⁰ and *al-Ifranjīyya* as Charlemagne's court, since contemporary Arabic ethnographers used the term *al-Ifranj* to refer to Western Europeans.⁴¹ While this source is extremely limited, only vaguely referencing Hārūn's diplomatic missions with Charlemagne, it helps dispel many of the inferences past historians made using arguments of silence. For instance, Runciman takes this silence to mean that trade with the Carolingians was either inconsequential or shameful to 'Abbāsīd historians, who supposedly omit it because it either wasn't worth mentioning or they didn't want future generations to know of their diplomatic ties to non-Muslim rulers.⁴² Some historians, like Pouqueville and Barthold, even suggested that the missions didn't take place in the first place, and that Frankish sources had fabricated the incident.⁴³ Others, like Buckler, tried to extrapolate Hārūn's motivations or perception of Charlemagne through his gifts—such as the idea that Hārūn's gifts of robes to Charlemagne shows that he considered the Carolingians to be his tributaries, due to the 'Abbāsīds' conception of the Byzantines in the same light, and a tradition of bestowing robes worn by “the lord” being given as a gift of honor to his “vassals.”⁴⁴ This last theory incorrectly applies the very specifically Western European concept of feudal vassalage to a culture that does not conceive of power structures in this way, and is also inconsistent with historical evidence, since 'Abbāsīd historians like al-Ṭabarī do actually mention the Byzantines. The lines within the Tiburtine Sybils, on the other hand, show that these diplomatic missions were somewhat widely-known since its authors were Christians in Syria, living far from Baghdad, and that they were so important to these Christians that they became the defining event of Hārūn's rule.⁴⁵ Ottewill-Soulsby also concludes that, given the potentially widespread knowledge of Hārūn's trade missions with Charlemagne, combined with the extravagance of Hārūn's gifts and al-Ma'mūn's attempt to replicate Hārūn's relationship with Charlemagne with the latter's son Louis the Pious just a few decades later, the 'Abbāsīds didn't see them as particularly taboo.⁴⁶ Additionally, he attributes their lack of documentation to al-Ṭabarī's narrow focus on the 'Abbāsīds, which led him to also exclude Muslim lands like Ifrīqiya and al-Andalus from his historical record.⁴⁷ Therefore, although the lack of sources makes it even harder to know Hārūn al-Rashīd's motivations for conducting diplomacy with Charlemagne, or how the 'Abbāsīds might have seen their Carolingian trade partners, recent scholarship is currently revolutionizing the way historians approach answering these questions.

Examining the details of the diplomatic and trade missions between Charlemagne and Hārūn al-Rashīd reveals several key insights about both rulers, the most important of which being that their political interests could override even the starkest differences, in this

⁴⁰ Ottewill-Soulsby, “‘Abbāsīd-Carolingian Diplomacy,” 220

⁴¹ Ottewill-Soulsby, “‘Abbāsīd-Carolingian Diplomacy,” 223-224

⁴² Runciman, “Charlemagne and Palestine,” 607

⁴³ Ottewill-Soulsby, “‘Abbāsīd-Carolingian Diplomacy,” 214

⁴⁴ Buckler, *Harun al-Rashid and Charles the Great*, 32-33

⁴⁵ Ottewill-Soulsby, “‘Abbāsīd-Carolingian Diplomacy,” 227

⁴⁶ Ottewill-Soulsby, “‘Abbāsīd-Carolingian Diplomacy,” 228

⁴⁷ Ottewill-Soulsby, “‘Abbāsīd-Carolingian Diplomacy,” 216

case religion. In the case of Charlemagne, his biographers and chroniclers interpreted his doing so as a sign of greatness, proof that he was so powerful that even potential enemies could perceive it and want to be his ally. For Hārūn, this is less clear-cut, but Christian communities under his rule similarly used his trading with Charlemagne to demonstrate his magnificence. That Charlemagne and Hārūn overcame the divide between Christianity and Islam just by being far away enough that their political interests lined up instead of clashed also shows that the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable allies was much blurrier than we might imagine, especially since these trade missions weren't the only instances of such contact between the Carolingians and the 'Abbāsids.

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