

The Sino-Arab political relations during the T'ang Dynasty (618-907AD)

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العلاقات السياسية الصينية العربية خلال عهد سلالة تانغ (618-907م)

الملخص:

تعد دراسة العلاقات الصينية العربية خلال عهد سلالة تانغ (618-907م) من المواضيع المهمة في الأبحاث التاريخية، إذ تهدف لإظهار التأثير المتبادل بين الطرفين على الصعيد السياسي، الدبلوماسي والعسكري في الفترة الممتدة من 618م إلى غاية 907م، وهو التاريخ الذي تم فيه أول اتصال سياسي بين العرب والصين، حيث جاء في المصادر التاريخية الصينية والعربية أن بلاد العرب أوفدت إلى

الصين في عهد سلالة تانغ أول بعثة دبلوماسية من قبل الخليفة
عثمان بن عفان، وتلتها بعثات أخرى في عهد الدولة الأموية
والدولة العباسية. وقد تأثرت علاقة الطرفين سلبا وإيجابا بالتطورات
الإقليمية والدولية والدور الذي يمارسه كل منهما على الساحة
السياسية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الدولة العباسية؛ آسيا الوسطى؛ قتيبة؛ طلاس؛ طريق
الحرير.

Abstract:

The study of " The Sino-Arab political relations during the T'ang Dynasty (618-907 AD) " is one of the most important topics that had occupied a large part of the historical researches; it aims to highlight the first contact among Arabs and China which took place during the T'ang Dynasty. According to Chinese and Arabic historical sources, Arab countries sent to China during this period (618-907 AD) the first diplomatic mission by Caliph Othman Bin Affan, followed by other missions during the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties. The relations between the two sides have been negatively and positively affected by regional and international developments and their respective political roles in the region.

Keywords: Abbasid; Central Asia; Qutaiba; Talas; Silk Road.

1.Introduction:

Both Arab and Chinese civilizations were known to have flourished during the Medieval Ages or their so-called Golden Era, especially in the political domain where they have reshaped the geographical map of Asia by their policies and military campaigns. The expansion of these two forces in the region led to a military struggle between them that resulted in a continuous race to bring allies for each of them. However, relations between them have not always been characterized by competition and hostility; their mutual relations went much better occasionally because of some common interests. For example, after the famous An-Lushan rebellion when the Tibetan forces started invading the Chinese territories taking advantage of the weakness of the T'ang military forces of that time, China sought help from the Arabs in 798 AD when Abbasid caliph Haroun Al-Rasheed sent his forces to expel the Tibetans and free the invaded territories.

The Silk Road also played an active role in the Arab-Chinese political relations, where it linked the Chinese political city of Chang'an to Iraq and Syria going through Central Asia. The Silk Road made it possible to establish the first Arab embassies sent by the Caliph Othman Bin Affan to China during the T'ang dynasty (618-907AD).

2. Background: The location of China:

China was referred to in numerous Arab sources, which is an evidence of their knowledge of the Chinese empire and the mutual friction between them.

Below, some of the most important Arab Sources where China was mentioned during the T'ang dynasty:

Al-Idrīsī mentions in his book called: *Nuzhat al-mushtāq fi khtirāq al-āfāq* (Arabic: *نزهة المشتاق في اختراق الأفاق*, lit: Pleasant journey into faraway lands) the Chinese location:

"It's in the tenth part of the first Territory, which is the world's extremity from the east, followed by the Chinese Sea, called: the sea of Thnka (ضنخى) or ElSanf (الصف) ..." (Al-Idrīsī, 2000:87).

Al-Yaqūbī in *Tārīkh al-Yaqūbī* (Arabic: *تاريخ اليعقوبي*, lit: The history of Yaqubi): *"The world was divided into seven territories: the first one is India which is limited easterly by the sea and China ... and the seventh territory extends from China to Morocco..."* (Tarikh al-Yaqubi, 2010:115).

Al-Masūdi in *Murūjadh-dhahabwa-mādin al-jawhar* (Arabic: *مروج الذهب ومعادن الجوهر*, lit: *Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems*):

"The wise divided the world into east and west, north and south. Then, sectioned it into two parts: habited and uninhabited ... As for the seven territories, the first one is the land of Babylon, Khorasan and Persia ... and the seventh is China ..." (Al-Masūdi, 2015: 69-70).

Al-Qalqāshandī in *Sobh al Aesha fi sinaeat al-iinsha* (Arabic: *صبح الأعشى في صناعة الإنشا*):

"... The territory of China is surrounded from the west by the lands between it and India, it is enclosed southward by the Sea (the Sea of India), and eastward by the Sea Ocean,

and from the north by the land of Gog and Magog and other unknown lands ..."(Al Qalqašandī, 1914:479).

Ahmad Ibn Rustah in Kitāb al-A'lāk an-Nafisa (Arabic: كتاب الأعلام النفيسة, lit: Book of Precious Records)referenced the seven territories and defined China as the first one:

" The first territory starts from the east, from the far reaches of China then passes by the shores of the Sea in the south of the Sindh, and crosses the sea to the Arabian Peninsula and the land of Hijaz ...to the Sea of Morocco." (Ahmad ibnRustah, 1892:102-104).

IbnHawqal in Šūrat al-Arḍ (Arabic: صورة الأرض, lit: The face of the Earth):

" ...and the Chinese Kingdom includes all other countries of the Turks and some of the Tibet... the world was divided into south and north, so if taken from the east... there is the land of China..."(Ibn Hawqal,1992:20).

It is perceptible through the past sources, that the Arabs knew about the Chinese geographical location where the Arab historians agreed that China is the seventh territory in the far reaches of the East.

3.Political relations:

The relations between China and the Arabs have increased during the T'ang dynasty when Uthman Ibn Affan, the third Caliph of the Rashidun Caliphate (r.23-35 AH / 644 - 656 AD) sent thirty-seven missions to China, then during the Umayyad Caliphate (60 -132 AH / 661 - 750 AD) named by China: White Tazian, followed by the Abbasid Caliphate

(132- 656 AH / 750-1258 AD) (Black Tazian) other embassies were sent. (Mohamed Hassan Mohamed Hamad, 2006:52).

3.1The relations between Rashidun Caliphate and T'ang dynasty:

A great change took place in the Arabian Peninsula at the end of the 6th century AD since the emergence of the Islamic religion and the launch of the Mohammedan call which would have a very important impact on the world, where the prophet Mohammed established the foundation stone for building a strong Islamic state with vast borders, followed by rashidun caliphs who completed the assignment.(Yousef Saqar, 2011:17)

The diplomatic relationships among the Arabs and China in the medieval era began during the Rashidun Caliphs's rule. In 651 AD, it was a mission sent by the Caliph Uthman ibn Affan to emperor Gaozong of the T'ang dynasty. (Mohammed bin Nasser AlAbboudi: 68) However, the Chinese-Muslim historian Muhammad Mayi Yu (1900 -1961 AD) said in his book "The general history of Muslims in China":

" The connection is likely due to the life of the Prophet Muhammad between 618-626 AD ; whereas the Prophet Muhammad sent four of his companions to China to deliver his call. Waqas was the oldest; he went to Guangzhou (Canton) and built a mosque there. The other three went to Quanzhou (Zaiton)".(Hadi Aleulwi, 2000: 290).

It is mentioned that the Chinese emperor Gaozong sent to the Caliph Othman bin Affan (24-85 AH / 635 - 655 AD)

an ambassador, who was honored by the Caliph Othman. In response, a delegation of Arabs was sent to accompany the Chinese ambassador on his return in 651AD/31AH and was the first Islamic embassy sent to the capital of China, Chang'an. (Mahmoud Ahmed, 2012: 88).

According to the ancient records in the Tang Shu (Book of T'ang) *The caliph sent envoys to the capital city of T'ang, Chang'an (today's Xi'an) in the second year of the reign of the emperor Yonghui (651AD). Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas, the maternal uncle of the Prophet, led the envoys and introduced the emperor to the caliphate, their customs and Islam. The HuaiSheng Mosque was built in Guangzhou (Canton).* (Rohan Guanaratna, 2010: 20). Historians have agreed that Islam entered China with the arrival of this messenger, and due to it, the contacts between China and the Arabs increased. (Mahmoud Yusuf, 1989: 19)

The Chinese history mentioned thirty-three Arab diplomatic missions to keep peaceful relations with the T'ang dynasty between 651 and 750AD. Unfortunately, Arabic sources corroborate very few of these accounts, and we do not know how many of these missions were dispatched by the Islamic rulers. (Hynhee Park, 2012: 53).

3.2 Relations between Umayyad Caliphate and T'ang dynasty:

The first Umayyad caliph Mu'āwiyah Ibn Abī Sufyān (r. 40- 60 AH / 661- 680AD) was an emir on the Levant during Umar Ibn al-Khattābera, until the treaty with Al-Ḥasan Ibn Ali Ibn Abi Ṭalib who handed him the rule (41 AH) then was

succeeded by his son Yazid (r 60 - 64 AH/ 680-683 AD) The last one was Ibrahim Ibn Al-Walid (r 126 - 127 AH/r 744 AD)(Al-Qalqashandi, 1914: 258)

As the Umayyads received the rule (41 AH/661 DA), the political relations between Arabs and China were strengthened. They exchanged gifts and ambassadors. A book from the emperor of China (T'ang Gaozong) was found in the office of the Caliph Mu'awiyah Ibn Abi Sufyan after his death , that says : " *From the emperor of China, who has a thousand elephant hooks, and who builds with gold and silver, and served by the daughters of a thousand kings, to Mu'awiyah...*"(Yousef Saqar, 2011: 22) In 716 AD, a mission from Damascus was sent by the Caliph Sulaiman Bin Abdul Waleed, to provide gifts to the emperor of China, containing cloaks woven of gold threads, perfume sprayers and special Arab objects. In 733AD, another was sent by an Arab Umayyad commander named Junaid. During the reign of Caliph Hisham Al-Amawi when he settled in Samarkand, he sent several embassies to China, one of them in 744AD then two embassies in 745 and 747 AD. (Shams Al-Din Al-Kilani, 2008: 48) The Caliph Al-Walid Bin Abdul-Malik also sent a messenger who received the hospitality from the imperial court. Once again, an ambassador named Soliman was sent by the Umayyad caliph Hisham Ibn Abd Al-Malik to China in 108AH/726 DA and was welcomed by the emperor Xuanzong. (Yousef Saqar, 2011: 17) An Arab settlement appeared in the imperial capital of Chang'an, at a later time of the Umayyad Caliphate, and the first mosque was founded in 742 AD (Hadi Aleulwi, 2000: 295)

4.The invasion of China:

Qutayba(705-715AD) invaded Bukhara, Samarkand, Farghana and Khawarezm, and urged the deputy governor of Iraq, Al-Hajjaj and Mohammed bin Qasim in Sindh to overcome China. Then, he extended his attachments to Kashgar, posing a threat to China.(Henri Cordier, 1920: 456)The emperor of China wrote to him: "*Send me an honest man who will inform me about you and your religion*". Qutayba elected ten men with beauty, eloquence and wisdom,(One of them was Habira Bin Meshmar jKalabi- هبيرة بن مشمر جالكلابي) and said to them: "*If you meet him, let him know that I have sworn that I will not go out until I get their country, kill their kings, and cut their abscess.*" When they arrived to China, the emperor convened them. (Ibn al-Athir, 1407: 289) He was accompanied by his empire scholars, and before they entered, they have already changed their clothes and washed. When they entered, no one spoke to them, so they rose up. The emperor says to his rulers:"*How did you find these people ?*"[They said]:"*No one left of us when we saw them, and found their smell, but spread what they have...*" He convened them on the second day, they came wearing turbans..., and no one spoke to them, so they rose up again. The emperor asked his companions: "*How did you see them?* " [They said] :"*Their looks were more manly than those before.*"On the third day, they entered and took up their arms and swords...and took the spears by their hands, rode their horses but were rejected

again. The emperor asked his companions:"*How did you see them?*"[They said]:"*We've never seen men like that*".

(SibtIbn al-Jawzi, 2013: 112). When the day came, the emperor sent after their leader, so they sent him Habira, he said to him: *"Have you seen my greatness? No one can save you from me. You are in my country, you are like eggs in my palm, and I ask you..."* Habira said: *"Ask"*. So the emperor asked: *"why were you changing costumes on the past days?"* (Al-Tabari, 1964: 502) he replied:

"As for the first day, that is our adornment with our people and women, and the second day we prepared for ourselves, and the third day was for our enemies", the emperor said : *" well done, so return to Qutayba and tell him to leave"* (SibtIbn Al-Jawzi, 2013: 112), *because I have known his lack of companions, otherwise, I'll send to you those who will perish, and destroy you."* Habira replied: *" How could he have a few companions when the first foot of his horse is in your country, and the last one in the countries of olive fields, and how to be careful for the one who abandoned the world, and is able to invade you? and about you scaring us with being killed, so let me tell you that we have our time and when it comes, the best way to die is to be killed with honor. We do not hate it or fear it"* (Mahmoud Shager, ibid: 13) the emperor responded: *"what pleases your friend?"* Habira: *"He swore not to leave until he comes to your land, kill your kings, and take your tribute"*. The emperor [said] : *"We will get him out of his swear, by sending forth dust from our land, so he can lay his foot on it, and we send some of our children to be killed, with a tribute to his satisfaction..."* (Al-Tabari, 1964: 112).

The good relations between China and the Umayyad state have created a place for dialogue and understanding between

them, avoiding them war, the delegation sent by Qutayba to China led by Habira, and the tribute that the Emperor Xuanzong of China sentback, have served to strengthen andenable the relations between the Umayyad and the Chinese.(Yousef Saqar, 2011: 26).

Embassies in the time of the Umayyad were more important than the one in the Abbasid period. We know from the history of T'ang that fifteen embassies were sent in the Umayyad time. Theembassies which came to China from the Arab princes beyond the Transoxiana and Khurasan were more than the ones sent from Damascus. (Shams al-Din al-Kilani, 2008: 47).

5. Relations between the Abbasid Caliphate and T'ang dynasty:

The first Abbasid Caliph after the Umayyad, was As-Saffah (السفّاح) Abu Al-Abbās 'Abdu'llāh Ibn Muhammad Ibn Ali Ibn Abdullah Ibn Abbas, the uncle of the Prophet Muhammad, declared caliph in Kufa in 132 AH. He died in Al-Anbar in 136AH and was succeeded by his brother Al-Mansur Abu Ja'far Abdallah (أبو جعفر عبد الله بن محمد المنصور) ... Al-Musta'sim Billah (عبد الله المستعصم بالله) who was the last caliph. He was killed by Hulaku, the king of Tartars on the twentieth of Muharram in 656 AH. (Al-Qalqashandi, 1914: 47)

There have been friendly relations with China since the days of the Umayyads, and these relations have developed to the best with the ascension of the Abbasids' Caliphate. The embassies witnessed a significant activity in the Arab-Chinese

diplomatic relations. Chinese history records ten embassies of the Abbasids in half a century during the period between(133 AH/750AD-154AH/800AD). (Mahmoud Ahmed, 2012:303). It has taken on a complex network of long-term diplomacy for the Chinese, simultaneously with the territorial competition of Turkish and Tibetan rivals, because the Eastern and Western Iranian breeds of the Himalayas and Pamir were subjugated by the Arabs and dominated them, they were sending their embassies at the same time asking for Chinese aid against the Arabs (Hinrich Biesterfeldt, 2013: 268)

The most important embassies in this era were the envoy of Abi Abbas, founder of the Abbasid state and AbiJa'far Al-Mansur the founder of Baghdad city and Harun al-Rashid.(Mohammed bin Nasser Al – Abboudi: 69). This also means that embassies are unlikely to be trivial for Arabs. In 751DA both Arabs and Chinese sought to intervene in a conflict between the Shash (الشاش) and Tashkent on their common border .As a result, a loyal army of Abbas fought under the leadership of Ziad Bin Saleh (زيد بن صالح الحارثي) d. 752 AD) in a five-day battle with the Chinese army led by the Korean general GaoXianzhi (d.752 AD) in a battle known as Battle of Talas. (Hinrich Biesterfeldt, 2013: 268).

6. The Battle of Talas:

Under the emperor Xuanzong's rule, China was extending its zone of influence westward across Asia. A confrontation with Arab armies that were carrying the Islamic faith eastward was almost inevitable. In July of 751 AD, the Battle of Talas river took place in what is modern day Kazakhstan (R.G Grant, 2017:118). It was caused the

T'ang general Gao Xianzhi (a Korean general) who conquered Tashkent by (750 AD), looted the city, and killed the king. The dead king's son sought aid from the Islamic forces and Samarkand. T'ang and Abbasid armies met at the Talas (Taraz) River in 751AD. (James A Millward, 2013:73) Yaqub Al-Fasawi says:

"Ziad Bin Saleh was in Samarkand ; so he heard that the owner of China has come with the hundred thousand; only those who followed him from the Turk. Ziad camped and wrote to Abi Muslim al-Khorasani and told him about it, so Abu Muslim camped on Merv, and gathered his armies . Khalid Ibn Ibrahim went to him from Tarkhistan. The army of Khorasan went to Samarkand in Shawwal 34 AH and Ziad was rescued by ten thousand soldiers, so he marched through the Shash River with his army"(Yaqub Al-Fasawi, 1410:45)

The Chinese army came and landed in Taraz, so Ziad approached them. Then, they met the day after. Ziad pitted the shooters in front of the army and the lancers behind them. The victory came down and defeated the infidels (Al-Dhahabi, 2003:596).

Contradictory accounts exist of the battle that followed. The Arab army led by Ziyad ibn Salih, was joined by Uighurs and Tibetans, giving it numerical superiority. Gao Xianzhi's army consisted of a small Chinese nucleus aided by numerous locally recruited auxiliaries. The confrontation lasted five days. The decisive moment came when the Chinese were attacked from the rear by a force of Turkic nomad horsemen, the Karluks. (R.G.Grant, 2017:118) In

751AD, the Karluks were the decisive factor in the historic Battle of Talas between Arab and Chinese forces over control of central Asia. The Karluks had originally allied themselves with the Chinese but at the last moment switched their allegiance to the Arabs, leaving most of the Chinese army surrounded with no escape route. The Chinese leader was able to get away but most of his soldiers were not. (Barbare Y West, 2009:394) For China this was a minor border defeat, but it paved the way for the spread of Islam in Central Asia. (Peter Connally, 2016:25) T'ang was forced to withdraw his troops from Central Asia not because of Talas but because a rebellion in China in 755AD led by An Lushan, a half-Soghdian, half-Turkic general, threatened the capital. (James A Millward, 2013:73) The defeat at Talas meant that the Chinese lost control over the land route through Central Asia, known as the Silk Road, and lost the region around the city of Kashgar known as Western Turkestan. However, the Battle of Talas also marked the end of Arab expansion eastward. (Dorothy Perkins, 2013:501) The military results of the Battle of Talas in 96AH/751AD are 50,000 dead and 12,000 detainees of Chinese troops, including a few thousand that fled. (Mohamed Hassan Mohamed Hamad, 2006:76) On the social side, a number of prisoners, including experts in the paper industry, had taken advantage of them to establish the first paper factory in Islam. It was located in Samarkand. This shows the Chinese art transition to Muslims. (Hadi Aleulwi, 2000:297). Two years later, a Chinese delegation arrived in Anbar (in Iraq), where Abu Abbas, the first Abbasid Caliphate was based. The delegation appeared to have been discussing the

issue of the Chinese prisoners in the Battle of Talas. (Hadi Aleulwi, 2000:297)

7. Arab - Chinese alliances:

Under the T'ang dynasty, the Arabs gained a significant importance in 756AD when Calif Al Mansur lent some of his troops to emperor Suzong (756-762AD) These Muslims later became Hui(Jeon A. Berlie, 2004:30)In 754 AD / 136 AH, China was exposed to the An-Lushan Rebellion, in the late era of emperor Xuanzong who stepped down from his throne to his son Suzong(139AH/756AD)where he was expelled by the rebels. Suzong was forced to appeal to the Abbasid Caliph Abu Jaafar al-Mansur (136-158AH/ 753-744M), and was answered by the Abbasid caliph who sent to him armies. (Mahmoud Ahmed, 2012:302). The rescue came in 762AD and was made up of an elected force of 3,000 to 4,000 fighters. It did not say whether they were from Baghdad or Central Asia. They divided the force into the imperial guard and fought the rebels.(HadiAleulwi, 2000:298). After many battles between the rebel army and the alliance of the Chinese emperor's army, the Abbasid and Uighur forces, the latter managed to retrieve the western part of the capital, weakening the Lushan's power, enabling the caliphs to destroy Lushan, then the emperor Suzong returned to the capital in 757 AD / 139 AH.(Yousef Saqar, 2011:48).Without the aid of Caliph al-Mansur and the Uighur's contribution to its repression, the Lushan revolution would not have been suppressed in 757AD.

Emperor Suzong then left them to choose between returning or staying in China. Some left, and others remained. (Fawzy Darwish, 1977:24). The Chinese broadcast the news

of the Arabian swords that came from the Abbasid corps and was characterized by its intensity and patronage. (Hadi Aleulwi, 2000:298). Du Fu, the great Chinese T'ang poet in its similarities, used it. He was the one who witnessed the event, he pointed to something sharp: *"do not equivalent it in intensity only the Arab Swords."* (Hadi Aleulwi, 2000:298).

The studies of Zhang Riming, published in French in 1980 and in Chinese (Ningxia) in 2002, give some details. Those Arab Muslims were integrated into the cavalry of the T'angdynasty, and their ancestors were descendants of the Arabs who helped emperor Xuanzong (712-756AD) to push the barbarians from the western provinces. (Jeon A. Berlie, 2004:61). In 787AD, the Chinese demanded the help of the Arabs against the Tibetans; in 798AD, the famous Abbasid caliph Haroun Al-Rachid sent three ambassadors to China who seem to have completed cooperation without difficulty. (Heneri Cordier, 1920:466)The Tibetans threatened western China in the second half of the eighth century, and the borders of the Islamic state in Central Asia which led Harun Al-Rashid to send an envoy to Chang 'an, and ended up with an Arab-Chinese alliance against the Tibetan threat.(Hadi Aleulwi, 2000:299).

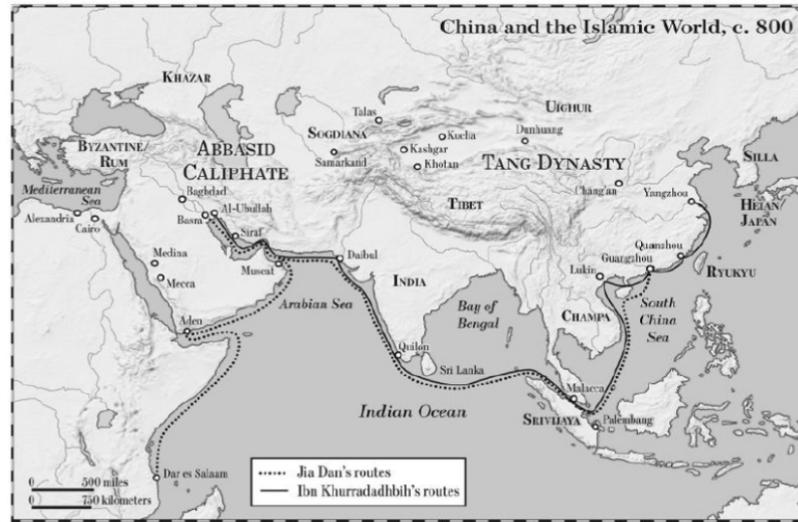
Thus,the diplomatic relations continued in the reign of the Abbasid caliphs, who came after Abu Jaafar al-Mansur. There is a story that says that the kings of China respected the Abbasid caliphs(Mahmoud Ahmed, 2012:50):

" In Basra there was a man from the son of Habbar Ibn Aswad (هبار بن الأسود) When the Zinj entered Basra, he rode the sea, fleeing them, was still moving from sea to sea until he

arrived to China, to a city called Khanfu (خانفو). The Chinese emperor knew about it, and called him ... he asked him: "What is the status of your Kings?" he says : " I do not know".(Al-Jawzi, 2013:363) The emperor replied : "We count five kings, the wider of them is the king who reigns Iraq (the Abbasids), because he is in the middle of the world, and kings are surrounding him, we find his name King of the Kings, and after that comes our kingdom..." .(Al-Masudi, 2015:111)

8. Conclusion:

It can be said that the Sino-Arab relations were friendly and harmonious, and this is what we witnessed through the exchange of diplomatic missions, military alliances and embassies. It was a good political relationship despite the collision between China and the Arabs in the Battle of Talas. But, it opened a great door for relations which continue until this day.



MAP 1 China and the Islamic World, circa 800.

(JeonA. Berlie, 2004: 27)

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