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An Examination of the Political, Social, and Cultural Functions of Punishments during the Early Abbasid Period (750–847 CE)

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the political, social, and cultural functions of punishments during the early Abbasid period (750–847 CE). During the first century of Abbasid rule, methods of punishment and the administration of justice were influenced by Islamic teachings, Arab traditions, and the legal and cultural systems of the conquered territories. In general, punitive practices during this period represented a combination of Islamic principles, Arab customs, and pragmatic policies intended to preserve political power. These punishments had profound effects on society, the political order, and the formation of Abbasid identity. Although some punitive measures contributed to the consolidation of the caliphate, others generated widespread dissatisfaction and provoked successive revolts in various regions. The findings demonstrate that punishment during this period was deeply intertwined with politics, society, and culture and played a fundamental role in shaping and perpetuating the structure of the Abbasid Caliphate. At the political level, punishments served an essential function in consolidating the newly established Abbasid regime. At the social level, they played a decisive role in maintaining order, regulating public conduct, and reproducing social structures. At the cultural and psychological levels, punishments profoundly influenced political culture, historical memory, and the public moral consciousness of Abbasid society. Punitive practices also contributed to reproducing the concept of caliphal awe and authority, constructing an image of political power that was simultaneously fearsome and sacred.

Keywords: *Abbasid Caliphate; punishment of political opponents; torture; confiscation of property.*

Introduction

The emergence of the Abbasid Caliphate in 750 CE did not merely represent the transfer of power from one dynasty to another; rather, it marked the beginning of a new phase in the political, social, and cultural history of the Islamic world. The Abbasids, who had risen to power by invoking slogans of justice and capitalizing on widespread social discontent, faced a fundamental challenge after establishing their rule: how could the authority of the nascent caliphate be consolidated and sustained against political, religious, and social opponents?



One of the Abbasids' most significant practical responses to this challenge was the development and application of a complex, multilayered system of punishment. Its function extended beyond penalizing individual offenders, as its principal objectives were the management of society, the consolidation of authority, and cultural and political engineering. Historical sources indicate that punishments during the early Abbasid period were not merely responses to crime or misconduct; rather, they functioned instrumentally within the structure of power. They formed part of the caliphate's official policy for displaying power, producing legitimacy, and exercising social control. Punishments such as execution, imprisonment, exile, public shaming, confiscation of property, and even covert punitive measures each conveyed specific political and cultural messages (1). In Islamic history, examining modes of punishment makes it possible to understand the concealed layers of Abbasid politics, because what was not expressed through sermons or official documents was often revealed through the nature of punishments and the manner in which they were administered. As al-Mas'udi observes, "The policies of states must be sought in the punishment of their enemies and their treatment of the disobedient" (2).

This article seeks to demonstrate how punishments during the early Abbasid Caliphate (750–847 CE) became instruments for consolidating political authority, exercising social control, and shaping political culture and public consciousness. Although classical Islamic sources generally reported information concerning punishments in a scattered manner and on the margins of historical narratives, they rarely analyzed their multilayered functions.

Al-Tabari largely confined himself to recording events and avoided direct analysis (1). By contrast, al-Mas'udi occasionally adopted a critical perspective and highlighted the social and moral consequences of punitive practices during the Abbasid period (2). In contemporary scholarship, historians such as Hugh Kennedy have also examined the relationship between organized violence and political power. Their primary emphasis, however, has been on the structure of the caliphate, with less attention devoted to analyzing the penal system as an instrument of social control (3).

Accordingly, by focusing on the social and political history of Islam, the present study seeks to address the existing gap in research on the functions of punishment during the early Abbasid period.

Theoretical Framework: Punishment as an Instrument of Power

Punishment in Political Historiography

In the classical approach to political history, punishment is generally regarded as the natural consequence of crime or rebellion and is examined as a judicial response to individual or collective criminal conduct. In modern sociopolitical historiography, however, punishment is understood not merely as a legal response but also as part of the mechanisms through which power and social control are exercised. From this perspective, states govern society not only through law but also by displaying penal authority and publicly administering punishment. This approach is particularly consistent with the characteristics of the early Abbasid Caliphate, because the Abbasids did not initially possess fully consolidated legitimacy and were therefore compelled to reproduce and reinforce their authority through practical instruments, including punishment (4). Consequently, punishment was institutionalized as a political means of demonstrating state power, containing social discontent, and ensuring the survival of the caliphate.

Punishment in Islamic Jurisprudence and Political Custom

Within the Islamic jurisprudential system, punishments are divided into three principal categories: *hudud*, *qisas*, and *ta'zir*.

During the Abbasid period, although *hudud* and *qisas* possessed explicitly religious and relatively fixed frameworks, *ta'zir* provided rulers with the greatest scope for political maneuvering. The concept of *ta'zir* authorized the ruler to determine the type, severity, and method of punishment on the basis of public interest, an authority frequently invoked in dealing with political or religious opponents (5).

Over time, Abbasid political custom occasionally moved beyond jurisprudential frameworks and justified the logic of punishment by reference to the preservation of the state. This divergence between theoretical jurisprudence and practical politics was one of the prominent features of the early Abbasid period and demonstrates that political power frequently reinterpreted penal rules to serve political objectives.

Punishment and Social Control

From a sociological perspective, punishment is not directed solely at the offender; in reality, it addresses society as a whole. Penal spectacles such as public shaming, exile, and public execution were intended less to punish the offender than to communicate warnings and intimidation to other members of society. In Abbasid society, which was structured around tribal, religious, and urban affiliations, such messages spread rapidly and contributed significantly to the formation of a culture of obedience, fear, and submission to authority. Punishment thus extended beyond the judicial sphere and became an effective instrument for maintaining social order and consolidating political domination (6).

Punishment and Political Legitimacy

One of the most prominent functions of punishment within the Abbasid power structure was the reconstruction of caliphal legitimacy. By publicly punishing corrupt officials or opponents accused of corruption and irreligion, the Abbasids sought to portray themselves as defenders of justice and the religious law. This binary opposition between the “just state” and the “corrupt enemy” enabled the caliphate to justify violence and political repression under the guise of religious justice (2). In practice, the display of punishment was not merely a deterrent measure but also constituted a political narrative of “Abbasid justice,” one that reinforced the religious legitimacy of the caliphate and established the state’s role as the guardian of the religious law.

The Political Functions of Punishments during the Early Abbasid Period (750–847 CE)

Punishment as an Instrument for Consolidating Political Power

Following the establishment of the Abbasid Caliphate, the caliphs’ foremost political concern was to consolidate their nascent authority against a broad spectrum of opponents, including Umayyad survivors, the Alids, the Kharijites, influential military commanders, and even dissatisfied elements within the Abbasid family. In such a context, punishment was not regarded merely as a legal response to crime; rather, it was considered an active instrument for engineering the political arena.

Historical accounts indicate that the Abbasids, particularly during the caliphate of al-Mansur, applied punishment in a manner in which its political message was more important than the punitive act itself. Al-Tabari states that al-

Mansur prioritized the “awe of the state” over all other considerations and regarded the punishment of opponents as an inseparable component of statecraft (1). Within this framework, punishment was not only a means of penalization but also a public declaration of caliphal authority and an explicit warning to other political actors.

The Political Elimination of Rivals through Punishment

With the establishment of the Abbasid Caliphate in 750 CE, a new political order emerged. Despite its early slogans, including *al-rida min Al Muhammad*, and its reliance on social groups dissatisfied with Umayyad rule, the new regime rapidly entered a phase of consolidating power and eliminating its rivals. One of the Abbasids’ most important instruments for managing this stage was the political use of punishment. Such punishments were generally imposed not to administer criminal justice but to eliminate opponents physically, socially, and symbolically. Although no formal concept corresponding to “political crime” existed during this period, any actual or potential threat to the caliphate—particularly from the Alids, Umayyad survivors, the Kharijites, and even certain Abbasid propagandists—was regarded as an offense warranting punishment. Al-Mansur, who ruled from 754 to 775 CE, may be considered the principal architect of the policy of political elimination through punishment. Fully aware of the fragility of the nascent caliphate’s foundations, he transformed punishment into an instrument for intimidating and eliminating rivals (3).

One of the clearest examples of political elimination was the Abbasids’ treatment of the Alids. Although the Alids had indirectly contributed to the Abbasid victory, they became serious competitors in the contest for legitimacy after the establishment of the caliphate. The uprisings of Muhammad al-Nafs al-Zakiyya and his brother Ibrahim during al-Mansur’s reign were violently suppressed, and their leaders were killed. Moreover, many Alids, even those who had not directly participated in the rebellions, were imprisoned or executed on the grounds of preventing potential sedition (1). These measures demonstrate that punishment was not necessarily a response to a proven offense but rather a preventive instrument for eliminating rivals before they could become actual threats.

The Umayyads constituted another principal target. To prevent any revival of the political legitimacy of their longstanding rivals, the Abbasids adopted a policy of organized repression against them. (If the continuation of this section is provided, it will also be rewritten in an integrated form.)

Punishment and the Containment of Protest Movements during the Early Abbasid Period

With the rise of the Abbasid Caliphate in the second half of the eighth century CE, a new political structure emerged in the Islamic world. From its inception, however, it faced serious challenges arising from protest movements and political and intellectual opposition. These movements originated among diverse groups, including the Alids, the Kharijites, Umayyad survivors, and various social and intellectual currents, compelling the Abbasids to adopt restrictive and deterrent policies in order to preserve political stability.

Within this context, punishment became one of the most important instruments for containing protest and exercising political control over society, playing a central role in the establishment of political order. The early Abbasid period, particularly under caliphs such as al-Saffah, al-Mansur, and al-Mahdi, was an era of power consolidation and the centralization of political authority. Under these conditions, any protest, rebellion, or even independent intellectual or religious tendency could be regarded as a threat to the caliphate. Punishments were therefore often imposed not within the framework of criminal justice but with an explicitly political and cautionary

function (7). The principal objective of these punishments was to prevent the spread of protest movements and create a deterrent and intimidating social environment.

Treatment of Alid Movements

Alid movements were among the most significant and persistent currents of opposition during this period. The Alids, who possessed considerable religious and genealogical legitimacy, repeatedly rebelled against the Abbasids. In response to these threats, the caliphate employed severe punishment and organized violence. The suppression of the revolts led by Muhammad al-Nafs al-Zakiyya in Medina and his brother Ibrahim ibn Abdullah in Basra are prominent examples of the decisive use of punishment to contain protest movements. After these revolts were defeated, not only their leaders but also numerous supporters and individuals associated with them were punished (1).

This approach indicates that punishment was not merely retaliatory; rather, it was intended to eradicate the social foundations of opposition and sever the popular connections of dissident movements. Through this policy, the Abbasids sought to weaken the Alids' religious legitimacy within society and eliminate the symbolic threat they represented.

Suppression of the Kharijites and Other Opposition Currents

The Kharijites constituted another political and religious opposition group that challenged the legitimacy of the Abbasid Caliphate through a stringent interpretation of Islam. The Abbasids responded by adopting a decisive and violent policy. Execution, exile, and the imprisonment of Kharijite leaders were among the principal methods used to contain these movements (2). In this context, punishment not only physically eliminated dissidents but also conveyed a warning to other dissatisfied groups. It thus constituted a "display of political power" intended to consolidate caliphal authority in the public consciousness.

The Role of Imprisonment in Containing Protest

Alongside execution and exile, imprisonment became an effective instrument for the gradual removal of opponents and the containment of intellectual movements during the Abbasid period. Abbasid prisons, particularly under al-Mansur, held political opponents, jurists, and thinkers who maintained critical views of the caliphate. Many were imprisoned without trial or on the basis of general accusations such as "corruption" and "creating sedition" (3). In addition to controlling individual opponents, imprisonment disrupted their communicative and organizational networks and thereby undermined the continuity of protest movements. Overall, punishment during the early Abbasid period constituted a multidimensional instrument of power that extended beyond the legal and penal spheres and became a political mechanism for managing opposition, intimidating society, and consolidating caliphal authority. Through the deliberate use of punishment, the Abbasids not only suppressed existing protests but also weakened the social conditions necessary for the emergence of new movements.

The Symbolic and Spectacular Functions of Punishments during the Early Abbasid Period

Following the establishment of the Abbasid Caliphate in the second half of the eighth century CE, the new regime confronted a fundamental question: how could the political authority and legitimacy of the caliphate be consolidated

in a diverse and conflict-ridden society still permeated by memories of the preceding government? One of the Abbasids' practical responses was to employ punishments with symbolic and spectacular functions. During this period, punishments were not merely instruments for administering justice or legal responses to crime; rather, they operated as a political language through which power was displayed, social fear was generated, and caliphal authority was reproduced. During the early Abbasid era, particularly under al-Saffah and al-Mansur, the caliphate remained in a phase of consolidation and faced multiple threats from protest movements, dynastic rivals, and intellectual opponents. Under such conditions, public and symbolic punishments became effective means of communicating political messages. The public administration of punishment addressed not only the offender but society as a whole, and its purpose was to convey the absolute power of the governing authority (7).

The Public Administration of Punishment: A Stage for Displaying Authority

One of the most important manifestations of the spectacular function of punishment was its public administration. The Abbasids deliberately punished certain individuals, particularly political and religious leaders, in public spaces in order to intensify the deterrent effect. This practice elevated punishment beyond the level of a judicial act and transformed it into a symbolic stage for displaying caliphal authority (3).

Within this framework, the body of the punished individual became a form of "political medium," transmitting messages of power, threat, and domination to society.

The Symbolic Elimination of Legitimate Rivals and the Shaping of Public Opinion

The symbolic function of punishment was especially apparent in the treatment of prominent and influential opponents. Publicly punishing individuals who possessed religious legitimacy or high social status communicated an explicit message to society: the Abbasid Caliphate constituted the ultimate authority and would tolerate no alternative. The treatment of certain Alids and the display of their fate were intended not only to eliminate them physically but also to destroy their symbolic standing in the public imagination (1).

Spectacular punishments also played an important role in constructing the "criminal other." By emphasizing alleged offenses and publicly displaying punishment, the Abbasids represented their opponents as seditious elements, disruptors of order, and enemies of society. This symbolic process increased the legitimacy of repression and psychologically aligned society with the caliphate (2). Punishment thereby became an instrument for engineering public opinion.

The Historical Representation of Punishment: Narrative as Spectacle

The spectacular character of punishment was also reflected in the manner in which it was represented in historical narratives. Abbasid historians, particularly those affiliated with the court, often described punishments in precise and elaborate detail in order to emphasize the magnitude of caliphal power. These narratives themselves formed part of the symbolic system of punishment and contributed to reproducing Abbasid authority within historical memory (8).

The Concealed Symbolism of Nonspectacular Punishment: Imprisonment

Even imprisonment, which at first appears to be a nonspectacular form of punishment, performed a symbolic function during the early Abbasid period. The imprisonment of prominent figures communicated a clear message to intellectual and social elites: any departure from the framework prescribed by the caliphate would result in exclusion from the public sphere. The enforced silence of opponents in prison constituted a form of power display—silent, yet highly consequential (9).

Punishment and the Construction of “Caliphal Awe”

The symbolic function of punishment may also be analyzed in relation to the concept of caliphal awe. The Abbasids sought to present the caliphate as powerful, invincible, and sacred. Severe and spectacular punishments reinforced this image and created a symbolic distance between ruler and subject (7). This distance was itself an important factor in consolidating the structure of Abbasid political authority.

Imprisonment as an Instrument of Political Containment and Attrition during the Early Abbasid Period

Following the establishment of the Abbasid Caliphate in the mid-eighth century CE, the new regime confronted a series of political, social, and ideological challenges. Having constructed their power upon the ruins of the Umayyad order, the Abbasids were compelled to confront a broad spectrum of actual and potential opponents in order to consolidate the caliphate. In this context, imprisonment played a fundamental role in the controlling policies of the early Abbasid period as one of the most important instruments of political containment. Prison was not merely a place for detaining criminals; rather, it constituted a deliberate mechanism for gradually eroding the power, influence, and political will of opponents.

During the early Abbasid period, particularly under al-Saffah and al-Mansur, the boundary between legal crime and political opposition was not clearly defined. Many individuals were imprisoned not because they had committed a specific offense but because of their social position, intellectual influence, or potential to pose a political threat. This demonstrates that imprisonment performed a preventive function and formed part of the caliphate’s policy of “risk management” (3). Its principal objective was to prevent political action before it occurred. One of the most important functions of imprisonment was the physical containment of opponents without provoking the intense social reactions that might follow execution or public punishment. By imprisoning prominent opponents, the Abbasids removed them from the public sphere without directly transforming them into “martyrs” or symbols of resistance. This approach was particularly calculated in relation to religious and Alid figures (1).

Imprisonment also served as an instrument of political and psychological attrition. Prolonged confinement, uncertain conditions, severance from social networks, and ignorance concerning one’s future gradually undermined prisoners’ intellectual, psychological, and organizational capacities. In this framework, prison was not a place of rehabilitation but a space for the gradual silencing of dissenting voices (7).

A significant point is that imprisonment during the early Abbasid period often lacked transparent judicial procedures. Many prisoners were detained without a formal trial or on the basis of general accusations such as “sedition,” “corruption,” or “disruption of public order.” This legal ambiguity itself generated political fear within society, because it demonstrated that no one was beyond the reach of caliphal power (9).

From a social perspective, imprisonment played a crucial role in severing opponents' connections with their popular bases. The imprisoned individual was gradually removed from social memory, and their ability to influence political and intellectual currents diminished. This social erosion was one of the principal objectives of the policy of imprisonment, and the Abbasid Caliphate utilized it effectively (2). Imprisonment was also an instrument for controlling elites. By suddenly incarcerating officials, commanders, or influential personalities, the Abbasids created a condition of permanent insecurity among political elites. This policy reinforced compulsory loyalty and prevented the formation of independent networks of power (8). In such an environment, prison became less a place for holding criminals than a permanent threat directed at elites.

The symbolic function of imprisonment must likewise not be overlooked. News of the imprisonment of a prominent personality, even in the absence of public punishment, communicated an explicit message to society: the caliphate exercised control over individual destinies. In a predominantly oral and news-oriented society, this message had a profound psychological impact and contributed to the internalization of political fear (7). It may therefore be argued that imprisonment during the early Abbasid period was a multidimensional instrument of political containment and attrition. Through imprisonment, the Abbasids removed opponents from the public sphere, weakened their psychological and social capacities, and simultaneously created an environment of fear and political discipline. Although this policy contributed to consolidating the caliphate in the short term, in the long term it deepened the divide between state and society and perpetuated a cycle of repression and discontent.

Imprisonment during the early Abbasid period constituted an instrument for the gradual attrition of political opponents. Unlike execution, which brought conflict to a rapid conclusion, imprisonment facilitated long-term control and the progressive neutralization of an individual's influence. Individuals could remain incarcerated for years without the announcement of a final judgment. This legal suspension was itself a form of political punishment that maintained the individual in a state of uncertainty (1). Al-Mas'udi describes this method as a form of "gradual political death," in which the individual remains alive but is deprived of all social and political roles (2). From this perspective, imprisonment offered the caliphate a relatively low-cost yet highly effective instrument.

The Social Functions of Punishments during the Early Abbasid Period (750–847 CE)

The initial phase of Abbasid rule from 750 to 773 CE was a period in which the consolidation of power and the administration of society presented the new rulers with serious challenges. Following the overthrow of the Umayyads, the Abbasids gradually expanded their political authority and legitimacy and employed punishment as a multifunctional instrument for controlling society and preventing the emergence of opposition.

These punishments included execution, imprisonment, exile, and confiscation of property and had extensive effects on elites, the middle strata, and the general population. The purpose of this study is to analyze the social functions of these punishments in the formation and continuity of Abbasid society.

Punishment and Social Order

The Symbolic and Deterrent Functions of Punishment

One of the prominent characteristics of the early Abbasid period was the symbolic and deterrent function of punishment. The public punishment of certain opponents and elites communicated to society that the caliph possessed the capacity to maintain social order and that any conduct outside the prescribed framework would be

punished (7). This message was particularly significant for elites and potential leaders of rebellions, because it demonstrated that the caliph's authority was not limited to personal power but was supported by extensive instruments of containment.

Imprisonment and Exile

Imprisonment and exile were two principal forms of punishment during this period and played crucial roles in the administration of society and the creation of political fear. In addition to physically removing opponents, imprisonment produced the social and psychological attrition of elites and separated them from their social constituencies and networks of power (9).

Exile, through the compulsory displacement of individuals from politically sensitive regions, reduced the possibility of independent local powers and organized protest movements emerging (1).

Effects on Social Structures

Political punishments affected not only elites but also broader social structures. By observing the fate of opponents and witnessing public punishment, ordinary people were encouraged to accept the social order and practice self-censorship.

By combining military power, bureaucracy, and spatially organized punishment, the Abbasids created an environment in which compliance with laws and social hierarchies became a necessity (2).

The Role of Religion and Religious Legitimacy

Religion and religious legitimacy played an important role in consolidating social order. By securing the support of religious scholars, jurists, and religious institutions, the Abbasids presented punishments within a legitimate framework. Consequently, society came to perceive punishment not merely as an act of violence but also as a guarantee of order and justice (8). Punishment and social order therefore operated in a reciprocal relationship: punishment guaranteed social order, while social order reinforced the legitimacy of punishment.

Public Exemplification

Punishment as an Exemplary Instrument

One of the most prominent social functions of punishment was public exemplification. Historical sources repeatedly emphasize that punishments were administered "as a lesson to others." This expression indicates that the principal audience of punishment was not the offender but the other members of society.

Al-Mas'udi states that numerous public punishments were designed to "remain in the people's memory" and prevent the repetition of similar conduct (2).

Methods of Public Exemplification

One of the common methods of public exemplification was the public administration of punishment. Executions, amputations, and the punishment of prominent political offenders were usually carried out in public places in order to maximize their psychological impact on the population. Imprisonment and political exile were also employed as

nonlethal but effective methods of exemplary punishment. Political exile separated leaders and elites from their social constituencies and taught society that no individual was exempt from caliphal authority.

Public Shaming and the Control of Public Morality

In addition to its political function, public shaming played an important role in controlling public morality. In Abbasid society, where reputation, religious standing, and social position were highly significant, public shaming could render an individual socially "ostracized."

Al-Dinawari observes that public shaming not only punished the individual but also deprived them of support networks, commercial relationships, and social connections (4). From this perspective, public shaming may be understood as an instrument of society's moral discipline through which the Abbasid state defined and consolidated the boundaries of acceptable conduct.

Punishment and the Containment of Social Violence

Society during the early Abbasid period, particularly in major cities such as Baghdad, Kufa, and Basra, was confronted with various forms of social violence. Punishments performed a deterrent function in this context. Al-Tabari reports that in certain instances the rapid and decisive administration of punishment caused unrest to subside (1). This policy was not invariably successful, however. Al-Mas'udi observes that excessive punishment occasionally intensified dissatisfaction and latent violence (2).

Punishment and Social Classes

The social functions of punishment cannot be analyzed without considering social class. Historical sources indicate that punishments produced different effects depending on the social position of individuals. For subordinate classes, public punishment primarily served as an instrument for generating fear and obedience. For elites and officials, however, punishments such as public shaming, dismissal, and confiscation of property had more profound social consequences. Al-Jahshiyari emphasizes that the punishment of elites communicated a clear message to other holders of power and reinforced the hierarchical organization of society (6).

The Reproduction of Social Obedience

One of the most significant social consequences of punishment was the reproduction of obedience. In an environment characterized by severe and public punishments, many individuals preferred to refrain from any form of protest or even criticism. Kennedy describes this condition as a form of "disciplinary obedience" arising not from sincere conviction but from a calculation of costs and benefits (3). Consequently, punishment contributed to the formation of a cautious, silent, and politically inactive society.

Punishment and Social Solidarity: A Contradiction

Although punishment contributed to order and obedience, it occasionally weakened social solidarity. The elimination or public humiliation of individuals, particularly when perceived as unjust, could deepen social divisions.

Al-Mas'udi observes that certain punishments, particularly those imposed on the Alids, generated concealed public sympathy for those being punished (2). This demonstrates that the social functions of punishment were not invariably unidirectional or predictable.

Punishment and Urban Life during the Early Abbasid Period

With the establishment of Baghdad and the expansion of major cities, Abbasid society became increasingly urbanized. This transformation also affected the methods and functions of punishment. Owing to population density and the rapid circulation of news, the city provided an appropriate environment for the public and social administration of punishment. Al-Tabari reports that many punishments were carried out in squares, marketplaces, or heavily frequented thoroughfares in order to maximize their social impact (1). As the economic and social center of the city, the marketplace was one of the most important spaces for public shaming and the proclamation of judicial decisions. Within this urban context, punishments performed a dual function: on the one hand, they reinforced urban order; on the other, they transformed public space into an arena for displaying state power. Al-Mas'udi states that the constant presence of punishment in urban life contributed to the emergence of a form of "everyday discipline" in public conduct (2).

Punishment and Its Effects on the Family and Kinship Networks

In early Islamic society, family and kinship played fundamental roles in individual identity. Consequently, the punishment of an individual did not target that person alone but also affected the surrounding family and social network. Al-Dinawari observes that punishments such as public shaming and exile reduced the social status of the punished individual's family and even disrupted their marriages and economic relationships (4). Punishment thus became an instrument of informal collective penalization.

These familial effects were particularly significant from a social perspective, because families encouraged their members to comply with the political order in order to preserve their position. Punishment thereby extended beyond the individual level and contributed to social control at the micro level.

Punishment and Religious and Intellectual Groups

Society during the early Abbasid period was religiously and intellectually diverse. The Alids, Kharijites, Mu'tazilites, traditionalists, and other currents each occupied distinct social positions. Punishments performed sensitive and at times ambiguous functions in the state's interaction with these groups.

Al-Tabari reports that punitive action against certain groups was undertaken with greater caution because severe punishment could transform them into symbols of victimhood (1). Consequently, imprisonment, exile, or public shaming was sometimes employed in place of execution.

Al-Mas'udi observes that although this policy prevented the expansion of opposition in the short term, it contributed in the long term to strengthening the collective identities of certain groups (2). From this perspective, punishments were simultaneously instruments of containment and inadvertent contributors to the internal cohesion of opposition groups.

Punishment and the Formation of a Culture of Fear and Caution during the Early Abbasid Period

The initial phase of the Abbasid Caliphate from 750 to 773 CE was a period in which the consolidation of political power and the control of society constituted the government's principal priorities. Having witnessed the fall of the Umayyads, the Abbasids were fully aware that Islamic society remained marked by political and social tensions and discontent and that elites and local leaders could potentially threaten central authority. Within this environment, political and penal punishments were systematically employed both to contain direct opponents and to institutionalize a culture of fear and caution among social classes and elites (7).

One of the principal instruments for creating a culture of fear was the public administration of punishment. Executions, prolonged imprisonment, confiscation of property, and political exile were commonly carried out or publicly announced in order to maximize their psychological impact on the population. These measures communicated that no one, including influential elites, was exempt from the power and authority of the caliphate (8). Public punishment functioned both as an exemplary instrument and as a means of consolidating the political hierarchy.

Imprisonment and political exile also played important roles in shaping fear and caution. In addition to physically removing opponents, imprisonment severed their social and political networks and produced a deterrent effect on other elites (9). Exile likewise removed influential leaders and officials from their bases of power and demonstrated to others that independent activity or opposition to the caliphate could entail severe consequences (1). These instruments created an environment in which elites adopted caution and unconditional loyalty to the government in order to preserve their positions.

Political punishments also eroded the social power of elites. By observing the fate of individuals who had previously occupied comparable positions, influential persons increasingly practiced self-censorship and avoided independent political activity (3). In this manner, the culture of fear regulated elite conduct.

The Unintended Social Consequences of Punishment

Although punishments were imposed to create order and exercise social control, they did not invariably produce the intended consequences. In some instances, severe or unjust punishments increased concealed dissatisfaction and public distrust.

Al-Mas'udi explicitly states that excessive punishment turned the people's hearts away from the state (2).

Although such dissatisfaction did not necessarily lead to open rebellion, it weakened the caliphate's social capital.

From the perspective of social history, these consequences are particularly important because they demonstrate that punishment was not a neutral or entirely controllable instrument; rather, it acquired meaning within its social context.

Punishment and the Reproduction of Social Inequality

Another social function of punishment was the reproduction of inequality. Historical sources indicate that punishments were not administered equally and that the social status of individuals affected both the type and severity of punishment.

Al-Jahshiyari notes differences in the treatment of high-ranking officials and ordinary individuals and demonstrates that the punishments imposed on elites were generally more symbolic and less corporal (6).

This distinction reinforced social hierarchy and taught society that the prevailing order was unequal but stable.

Overall, the social functions of punishment during the early Abbasid period may be summarized under several principal dimensions: the creation and consolidation of social order within a diverse society; the regulation of public morality and everyday conduct; effects on families, kinship networks, and social groups; the formation of a culture of fear, caution, and obedience; and, simultaneously, the production of unintended consequences such as concealed dissatisfaction and the weakening of social solidarity. Punishments were therefore not only instruments of political power but also decisive factors in shaping the social fabric of the early Abbasid period.

The Cultural and Psychological Functions of Punishments during the Early Abbasid Period (750–847 CE)

Punishment and the Political Culture of the Abbasid Caliphate

During the early Abbasid period, punishments were not merely legal or social instruments; they also played a decisive role in shaping political culture. Political culture, understood as the totality of society's beliefs, values, and expectations concerning power and governance, was profoundly influenced during this period by the manner in which punishments were administered.

Historical sources demonstrate that by employing public and symbolic punishments, the Abbasids constructed a distinctive image of political power: a vigilant and authoritative power possessing the right to intervene in all spheres of life. In his accounts, al-Tabari repeatedly indicates that punishments, particularly in Baghdad, became part of the everyday manifestation of the caliphate (1). Punishments consequently represented the caliphate in the public consciousness not merely as a religious institution but as the ultimate source of order and authority.

Punishment and the Reproduction of Caliphal Awe

One of the most important cultural functions of punishment was the reproduction of caliphal awe (*hayba*). The concept of *hayba*, which occupies a significant position in Islamic political literature, refers to fear combined with reverence toward the ruler.

During the early Abbasid period, punishments were among the principal instruments for producing and preserving this awe.

Al-Mas'udi states that the Abbasid caliphs, particularly al-Mansur, regarded the "awe of the state" as a prerequisite for its survival and considered any weakening of this awe dangerous (2).

Punishments were therefore not merely reactions to transgressions but also preemptive actions intended to preserve the mental image of power.

The initial phase of the Abbasid Caliphate from 750 to 773 CE was marked by extensive political and social transformations. After the overthrow of the Umayyads, the Abbasids employed various instruments to consolidate their power and legitimacy. Political and penal punishments were among the most important of these instruments and played a significant role in reproducing caliphal awe. Punishments were not merely means of penalizing opponents or suppressing rebellions; through their symbolic and public administration, they also reminded society of the authority and legitimacy of the caliphate (8).

One of the central dimensions of this phenomenon was the public administration of punishment. Executions, prolonged imprisonment, amputations, and political exile were frequently carried out in public places in order to maximize their psychological impact on society and elites. The public display of punishment communicated an

unequivocal message concerning the state's power and capacity to preserve order and security and thereby contributed to consolidating caliphal awe (7).

Imprisonment and political exile were other nonlethal but influential instruments that played important roles in reproducing caliphal awe. In addition to physically removing opponents, imprisonment separated them from their social and political networks and reduced their influence. Exile likewise removed leaders and influential personalities from their bases of power and reminded others that no one, including prominent individuals, was exempt from caliphal authority (1). These measures institutionalized a culture of fear and respect for central authority among both elites and the general population.

Punishments also possessed deterrent and exemplary functions. Observing the fate of those who had engaged in opposition or disobedience encouraged elites and government officials to exercise caution in maintaining loyalty and obedience to the central government (9). This culture of fear and caution not only consolidated caliphal power but also contributed to reproducing its official awe and grandeur, because society witnessed that no act of disobedience would remain unanswered.

Another important dimension was the role of punishment in consolidating the caliphate's religious and moral legitimacy. In cooperation with religious scholars, the Abbasids interpreted punishments as manifestations of divine justice, encouraging society to regard such measures not merely as exercises of power but as the realization of divine order and justice (2). This religious legitimacy increased confidence in and respect for the caliphate and reinforced its awe throughout society.

The general population, as well as elites, was directly affected by punishments. Public punishment communicated a clear message concerning compliance with legal, social, and political hierarchies and demonstrated the caliphate's ability to control society and establish order (8). This process reproduced caliphal awe in the public consciousness and consolidated the government as the institution of absolute authority.

Punishments could also reinforce caliphal awe economically. The confiscation of opponents' property and the weakening of their economic position strengthened the ruling class and its dependents and demonstrated that the caliphate possessed the capacity to control the resources of power and wealth (7). This control over resources, together with its exemplary effects on others, contributed to consolidating caliphal awe.

In summary, punishments during the early Abbasid period were principal instruments for reproducing caliphal awe. Through public administration, the creation of a culture of fear and caution, religious legitimation, and economic control, punishments reinforced the authority and grandeur of the central government. Although the emphasis on caliphal awe contributed to consolidating Abbasid power in the short term, its long-term consequences included an increasing distance between government and society and a reduction in political and social dynamism.

Punishment and the Discourse of Justice and Oppression

Within Islamic culture, political power has consistently been evaluated through the binary opposition between justice and oppression. Punishments during the early Abbasid period played a central role in shaping this discourse. The caliphate sought to represent punishment as evidence of the administration of justice, even when such punishments were political in character.

Al-Tabari demonstrates that punishments were frequently accompanied by speeches and proclamations intended to provide religious and moral justification for the caliphate's actions (1). This effort at legitimation indicates that the Abbasids were aware of the cultural effects of punishment.

Al-Mas'udi, however, refers to divergent social responses and observes that some segments of society regarded certain punishments not as manifestations of justice but as examples of oppression (2).

This divergence in cultural perception constituted one of the Abbasid Caliphate's serious challenges.

Punishment and Society's Historical Memory

One of the important cultural functions of punishment was its role in shaping the historical memory of Islamic society. Many events recorded in historical sources were narrated in direct association with punishments.

Punishments consequently became focal points in historical narratives.

Al-Dinawari observes that the memory of certain punishments endured among the people for generations and was transmitted through oral or written narratives (4).

This historical memory played an important role in shaping later attitudes toward the Abbasid Caliphate.

From the perspective of cultural history, it is significant that punishments produced meaning not only in their immediate context but also through their subsequent representations.

Punishment and the Culture of Obedience

Punishments during the early Abbasid period contributed to the development of a culture of obedience. This culture was based on the belief that resistance to political authority entailed not only worldly consequences but also moral and religious repercussions.

Al-Jahshiyari reports that numerous administrative and political texts of this period associated obedience to the caliph with concepts such as order, security, and religiosity (6).

Punishments provided the practical foundation for this discourse and transferred it from the theoretical domain into the lived experience of the population.

Consequently, obedience became not merely a rational choice but a cultural norm whose violation was considered both undesirable and dangerous.

Punishment and the Boundaries of Religious and Intellectual Discourse

One of the less frequently examined cultural functions of punishment was the determination of the boundaries of religious and intellectual discourse. During the early Abbasid period, punishments played an important role in defining what was regarded as "permissible" and impermissible.

Al-Tabari refers to instances in which punitive responses to particular ideas or expressions restricted the space available for dialogue (1).

This indicates that punishments served not only to regulate conduct but also to constrain thought.

Kennedy regards this condition as part of a process of "cultural standardization" within the Abbasid state, through which the government sought to consolidate a particular interpretation of religious and political order (3).

Punishment and the Duality of Fear and Sacredness during the Early Abbasid Period

The initial phase of the Abbasid Caliphate from 750 to 773 CE was a period in which the caliphate needed to create a combination of fear and sacredness in society in order to consolidate its political power and religious legitimacy. Political and penal punishments were among the principal instruments used to achieve this objective

and simultaneously performed deterrent, exemplary, and legitimizing functions. These instruments were designed both to discourage society and elites from opposition and to demonstrate that caliphal authority was absolute and worthy of respect in both religious and political terms (10).

One important manifestation of this duality was the public administration of punishment. Executions, imprisonment, and political exile were generally carried out in public places in order to produce psychological effects on society and elites. In addition to generating fear, these public spectacles of punishment represented the sacredness and legitimacy of the caliphate, because the population witnessed punishments administered under the supervision of the religious and political ruler. They simultaneously communicated an explicit message concerning state authority and the necessity of legal compliance (11).

Political punishments directed against elites produced two simultaneous effects. On the one hand, they compelled elites to exercise caution and obedience; on the other, they reinforced the legitimacy and awe of the caliphate in the public consciousness. In other words, the same measure that produced fear among elites also manifested the sacral power of the caliphate (10). This duality was especially apparent in cases involving the exile of dissident scholars or the confiscation of property.

Imprisonment and exile were additional instruments that reinforced this duality. In addition to containing opponents, imprisonment contributed to constructing an image of divine order and justice, because society observed that even influential individuals could not evade accountability. Exile communicated a similar message by demonstrating both that the caliphate was capable of suppressing opposition and that it could publicly affirm its religious and moral legitimacy (12).

Public and dual-purpose punishments also contributed to creating a culture of fear and reverence among the general population. By witnessing the punishment of opponents and observing social hierarchy, people were encouraged to comply with laws and obey central authority. In addition to preventing rebellion and disobedience, such conduct contributed to reproducing the sacredness of the caliphate and increasing its religious and political legitimacy (11).

Another manifestation of this duality was the combination of punishment and moral legitimacy. By securing the support of religious scholars and jurists, the Abbasids presented punishments as implementations of divine justice. Consequently, society experienced not only fear of punishment but also acceptance of the sacredness and authority of the government. Punishments thus acquired simultaneous psychological, moral, and political dimensions and contributed to consolidating a culture of obedience and respect for central authority (11).

The economic dimension of punishment also contributed to reproducing the duality of fear and sacredness. The confiscation of opponents' property and the restriction of their economic position enabled the ruling class to display its economic and political power and communicated to others that obedience and loyalty to the state were essential. This process not only generated fear but also contributed to reproducing the sacredness and legitimacy of the caliphate (12).

In summary, punishments during the early Abbasid period were principal instruments for creating and reproducing the duality of fear and sacredness. Through public administration, the creation of a culture of caution and fear, religious and moral legitimation, and economic control, these punishments consolidated caliphal authority and increased the awe and reverence associated with central power. Although these policies contributed to consolidating Abbasid authority in the short term, their long-term consequences included an increasing distance between government and population and diminished social dynamism.

One of the cultural characteristics of punishment during the Abbasid period was the simultaneous presence of fear and sacredness.

On the one hand, punishments generated fear; on the other, when presented through the language of religious law and justice, they acquired an aura of sacredness.

Al-Mas'udi observes that this duality complicated the relationship between the people and the caliphate—a relationship based neither entirely on faith nor exclusively on fear (2).

This condition was one of the distinctive features of the political and religious culture of the early Abbasid period.

This section demonstrated that punishments during the early Abbasid period played a profound role in shaping political culture, collective consciousness, and historical memory. Punishments reproduced caliphal awe, influenced the discourse of justice and oppression, reinforced the culture of obedience and caution, and defined the boundaries of religious and intellectual discourse.

The Representation of Punishments in Historical and Literary Sources

One of the most important methods for examining the cultural functions of punishment is to analyze how punishments were represented in historical sources. Abbasid historians, particularly al-Tabari, al-Dinawari, and al-Mas'udi, recorded punishments not merely as events but as indicators of the condition of power and political morality.

Employing a relatively neutral approach, al-Tabari generally reports punishments through event-centered narratives. Nevertheless, the selection of these narratives itself demonstrates the importance of punishment within the conceptual structure of his historiography (1).

By contrast, al-Mas'udi occasionally adopts a more critical language in addressing the moral and cultural consequences of punishment and regards them as evidence of power's departure from its original commitment to justice (2).

In certain later literary and ethical texts, Abbasid punishments were reinterpreted as exemplary cases. These representations indicate that punishment had become part of a cultural discourse concerning power and morality.

Differences between Elite and Popular Perceptions of Punishment

The cultural function of punishment must also be examined through the distinction between elite perceptions and the experiences of ordinary people. Political and intellectual elites often analyzed punishments within the framework of state interest and the preservation of order, whereas ordinary people experienced them as concrete features of everyday life.

Al-Jahshiyari demonstrates that administrative texts justified punishments as rational necessities for preserving the state (6).

Al-Mas'udi, however, observes that among the general population certain punishments were transmitted as narratives of oppression and intensified perceptions of injustice (2).

This divergence of perception indicates that the cultural function of punishment was not uniform and produced different meanings depending on the social position of its audience.

Punishment and the Formation of Political Ethics

One of the long-term cultural consequences of punishment during the early Abbasid period was the formation of a distinctive political ethics in which the preservation of the state and public order took precedence over numerous other moral considerations.

Al-Dinawari explicitly observes that certain narratives justified severe punishments on the grounds that they served the welfare of the Muslim community (4).

This form of reasoning gradually became part of the prevailing political ethics and continued into later periods.

From the perspective of the history of Islamic political thought, this point is significant because it demonstrates how the historical experience of punishment contributed to the development of concepts such as public interest, necessity, and preservation of the state.

Punishment and the Redefinition of the Relationship between Religion and Power

During the early Abbasid period, punishments played an important role in redefining the relationship between religion and political power. The Abbasid Caliphate sought to justify punishment within the framework of the religious law and thereby associate political authority with religious legitimacy.

Al-Tabari demonstrates that the administration of punishment was frequently accompanied by references to Qur'anic verses, traditions, or the practice of the Prophet (1). This association transformed punishment from a purely political act into a religious and cultural practice.

Al-Mas'udi, however, notes the tensions arising from this association and observes that punishments inconsistent with the public conception of religious justice generated doubts concerning the sincerity of the caliphate's religious claims (2).

This tension formed part of the complexity of Abbasid political and religious culture.

Punishment and the Critical Memory of Opposition Groups

Alongside official memory, punishments also contributed to the formation of a critical memory among opposition groups.

Groups subjected to punishment preserved these experiences as components of their collective identities.

Among the Alids in particular, the memory of punishment was transmitted as a narrative of victimhood and assumed a significant place in their religious and political culture (2).

In later periods, this critical memory continued to reproduce opposition to the Abbasid Caliphate.

From a cultural perspective, this demonstrates that punishment did not invariably operate to the advantage of the ruling power; at times, it also planted the seeds of cultural resistance.

The Long-Term Cultural Consequences of Punishment

The cultural consequences of punishment during the early Abbasid period were not confined to that era. Many behavioral and psychological patterns formed during this period continued throughout subsequent phases of Islamic history.

Kennedy observes that by institutionalizing punishment, the Abbasid state created a model of governance in which the exercise of penal power came to be regarded as a natural component of statecraft (3).

This model also influenced the political cultures of subsequent states.

Overall, the cultural and psychological functions of punishment during the early Abbasid period may be summarized under several principal dimensions:

1. Punishments contributed to shaping a political culture founded on awe and authority.
2. They redefined the discourse of justice and oppression in Islamic society.
3. They played a central role in historical memory and subsequent narratives.
4. They contributed to the formation of a political ethics based on the interests of the state.
5. At the same time, they reinforced critical memory and a culture of resistance.

Punishments during the early Abbasid period were therefore not merely instruments for exercising power but also cultural factors that shaped the consciousness, values, and narratives of Islamic society.

Conclusion

Employing an analytical and interdisciplinary approach, this article examined punishment not merely as a penal response to crime but as a multidimensional instrument of power during the early Abbasid period. The findings demonstrate that punishments operated in complete interconnection with politics, society, and culture and played a fundamental role in shaping and sustaining the structure of the Abbasid Caliphate.

At the political level, punishments performed a foundational function in consolidating the nascent Abbasid Caliphate. Following the overthrow of the Umayyads, the Abbasids confronted a diverse and unstable society marked by tribal, religious, and class rivalries and employed punishment as one of the most effective instruments for exercising authority.

An examination of historical sources demonstrated that punishments during this period frequently possessed symbolic and spectacular characteristics and were primarily intended to communicate state power to society. Execution, imprisonment, exile, public shaming, and confiscation of property were all employed within the caliphate's preventive strategy for containing opponents and creating political fear (1, 2).

From this perspective, punishments were less legal responses to misconduct than political actions intended to reproduce caliphal authority. This policy was pursued systematically, particularly during the reign of al-Mansur, and contributed to the development of a distinctive Abbasid model of statecraft.

At the social level, punishments played a decisive role in establishing order, controlling public conduct, and reproducing social structures. The findings demonstrated that punishments were designed to address not only the offender but society as a whole.

Public punishments, particularly public shaming, were administered in urban public spaces and performed a communicative function. They rapidly disseminated the state's message throughout society and contributed to the formation of a form of "disciplinary order" in everyday life (1, 2).

Punishments also produced consequences extending beyond the punished individual and affected their family, relatives, and social networks. This characteristic transformed punishment into an instrument of indirect social control (4).

At the same time, the social analysis of punishment demonstrated that these policies did not invariably produce favorable consequences. In certain instances, excessive punishment weakened social solidarity, intensified concealed dissatisfaction, and created divisions between state and society (2).

At the cultural and psychological levels, punishments played a profound role in shaping the political culture, historical memory, and public morality of Abbasid society. They contributed to reproducing the concept of caliphal awe and constructed an image of political power that was simultaneously fearsome and sacred (2).

An examination of historical discourses demonstrated that the Abbasid Caliphate sought to justify punishments within the framework of religious justice and thereby associate political power with religious legitimacy.

Divergent social responses, however, indicate that this effort was not invariably successful and that certain punishments entered collective memory as examples of oppression (1, 2).

From a cultural perspective, punishments also contributed to determining the boundaries of religious and intellectual discourse and restricted the space available for criticism and independent thought. This process contributed to the formation of a culture of caution and silence among both elites and the general population (3).

One of the article's most important findings is the duality inherent in the functions of punishment. On the one hand, punishments contributed to consolidating power, establishing order, and controlling society; on the other, they produced unintended consequences.

In certain cases, the punishment of political or religious opponents strengthened their collective identity and contributed to the formation of a critical memory. Among the Alids in particular, memories of punishment became part of a culture of victimhood and were reproduced in later periods (2).

This demonstrates that punishment was not an entirely controllable instrument and that its meaning and function were continuously reinterpreted within social and cultural contexts.

In conclusion, the early Abbasid period constituted an important stage in the institutionalization of punishment as an instrument of statecraft in Islamic history. During this era, punishments moved beyond isolated responses and became part of the logic of governance.

The patterns developed during this period—from symbolic and public punishment to the association of punishment with religious legitimacy—continued throughout later phases of the Abbasid Caliphate and influenced other Islamic states (3).

Punishments during the early Abbasid period therefore performed functions extending far beyond the sphere of criminal law and operated simultaneously at political, social, and cultural levels.

Punishments served as instruments for consolidating and displaying political power.

They provided mechanisms for social control and organization.

They also played significant roles in shaping political culture, collective consciousness, and society's historical memory.

The study of punishment therefore offers an important perspective for understanding the nature of the Abbasid state, the relationship between power and society, and transformations in political culture throughout Islamic history.

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All authors equally contributed to this study.

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The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

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Transparency of Data

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