



**They tried  
to whitewash their fortunes with poets' propaganda**

## Persian Barmakids' Financial Corruption in Abbasid State's Era

Some Persian families and personalities reached a prominent position in the era of the Abbasid state, with the support of the caliphs. From those families are the Barmakids. Their dramatic end was at the hands of Caliph Harun al-Rashid. The main problem of the Barmakids and the Persians who were influential in the Abbasid state was their attempt to support their Shu'ubi tendency by passing it on with their authority granted thereto by the Abbasid caliphs. Naturally, this tendency was supported by Persian historical legends, including that Barmak, the grandfather of the Barmakids, had converted to Islam, while the majority of historians confirm the opposite. However, the opposite direction was supported by his descendants who were influential in the Abbasid state.

One of the key matters that prompted Harun al-Rashid to overthrow the Barmakids was the personal relationship between Al-Rashid and Ja'far ibn Yahya Al-Barmaki, as well as the romantic look of Al-Barmaki to Al-Abbasa, Al-Rashid's sister. However, there is another important reason, which may be the strongest and most prominent among all the reasons that historians dealt with about the Barmakid disaster, which is the Barmakids' connection with the "Alawites", who turned into enemies of the Abbasids for their ambition to the caliphate. This connection was due to the influential power that the Barmakids reached in the Abbasid caliph, so that some believed that the Abbasid state was run by two heads: the Abbasid caliph and a person from the Barmakids. This is what prompted Al-Rashid to reject that perception and its continuation.

Among the reasons that were discussed about the Barmakids' disaster issue is the economic factor that historians consider to be one of the key reasons. In the beginnings of the Abbasid state, when the Abbasid call succeeded and the Abbasid caliphs came to power, they lacked administrative experience and did not have any supporters in administration and governance. The Abbasids refused to use the Arab element in administration, given the loyalty of the majority of Arabs to the Umayyad state. Here, the Persian role appeared in administration and governance, which culminated in the rise of the Barmakids.

Because Khaled Al-Barmaki took over the reins of administration after Abu Salama Al-Khalal crisis, he became a supervisor of land tax affairs and recording the proceeds therefrom in special records, in addition to other critical tasks; the most important of which is the management of the financial affairs of the Abbasid army. However, Khaled Al-Barmaki created an evil procedure that was followed by the Barmakids after him, which is not separating between state funds and their own money. Here the signs of sudden wealth appeared on Khaled Al-Barmaki, which was evident in the amount of subsidies and gifts he granted to some people.

Barmakids' outrageous wealth outraged several Arabs, so they complained to the Caliph, Abi Ja'far Al-Mansur, who obliged Khalid to pay a large fine as a penalty for the embezzlement of state funds. However, the Barmakids were soon able to overcome this crisis and returned to administration and governance, especially with the rise of Yahya ibn Khalid al-Barmaki and his sons, al-Fadl and Ja'far. The increasing administrative influence of the Barmakids led to an unpalatable increase in their wealth and they had the upper hand in the financial affairs of the Abbasid state. Ahmed Amin summarizes this financial authority they had even over the affairs of the caliph's palace himself, saying: "They put their hands on all the state's funds, to the extent of their free disposal of anything, while Harun al-Rashid, and his palace, had to back to them whenever they wanted to take any action".

When the fortunes they collected increased extravagantly, they wanted to protect them with "propaganda campaigns" to improve their image in front of "public opinion" and, at the same time, deter any attempt by their enemies to overthrow them, for fear of people's revolution against them. At this point, the Barmakids were extravagant in giving gifts to poets, seeking to obtain their support, and several poems in praise of the Barmakids were written at that time. In this regard, it was said that Ja'far al-Barmaki ordered to mint a special gold coin with his name thereon and it was dedicated to the most prolific poets and the best of them in praising the virtues of the Barmakids.

**Ja'far Al-Barmaki minted a coin in his name and dedicated it to poets praising him and his family**

That illicit enrichment was reflected in the aspects of the daily life of the Barmakids, including that Ja'far ibn Yahya built a new palace that costed twenty thousand dirhams. Ja'far advised some of his close associates that this might provoke Al-Rashid and those around him, prompt him to question the source of these funds and suspect that the funds were obtained from illegal operations by exploiting influence to embezzle state funds.

That illegal wealth and manifestations of luxury and extravagance in the Barmakid palaces were also attributed to Umm Ja'far al-Barmaki, after the Barmakid disaster, as "Um Ja'far was seen begging from a rich man on the day of Eid al-Adha, who asked her about her condition, and she said: "In a did like this day, I had four hundred maids (servants) and used to slaughter sacrifices and distribute meat. Today, I only have two furs, one to sleep on and the other to cover myself with. This is how days go!".

Several complaints were also received at the gates of Al-Rashid about the misbehavior of the Barmakid officers in the tax collections assessment and the extent of corruption in that regard. There is no evidence for the violations of the Barmakids in public funds affair as what is stated in the introduction to the famous book "Al-Kharaj" by Abu Yusuf, in which he said: Harun al-Rashid knew of the transgressions that affected Islamic law in managing the financial bureaus and that he had no doubt that the Barmakids caused the largest part thereof".

Here, Harun al-Rashid was no more satisfied with eliminating Ja'far al-Barmaki and imprisoning the rest of his family. He insisted on confiscating all their real estate and property. Al-Khudari stresses the importance of the economic factor and that the punishment of the Barmakids was due to their financial corruption and their misuse of the treasury. This is evidenced by the fact that Harun al-Rashid issued his order to pardon Muhammad ibn Khalid ibn Barmak, his son, his family and servants once he knew of his innocence from what other Barmakids committed.

Thus, it becomes clear that one of the most important causes of the Barmakids' disaster was their corruption and abuse of the Muslims' treasury.

### References:

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