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# *Samāğa* performances in third/ninth-century Abbasid courts

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**Abstract**
Literary sources from the Abbasid period record few descriptions of courtly masquerades and plays called *samāğa*, which closely resemble *sumozhe* plays from eighth-century China. On the basis of these *samāğa* descriptions, the present paper argues that it is possible to understand how *samāğa* plays were carried out. Moreover, I argue that *samāğa* performances were a Central Asian custom imported to the Abbasid court with the establishment of the Turkish corps, and that its disappearance after the caliphate of al-Muʿtaḍid signals a substantial shift in the nature of the Turkish presence in the Abbasid heartland, marked by the establishment of the *mamlūk* system.
**Keywords:** Abbasids, Turkish troops, Samarra, Tang China, Iranian festivals, Farghana, Central Asia, Masquerades

The findings presented in this paper[1] stand at the crossroads between three growing fields of study: Abbasid court practice, Turkish presence at the heart of the Abbasid empire, and Eurasian cultural interconnectedness. In this paper I hope to offer a new look on the practice of *samāğa* performances at the presence of the Abbasid caliphs and a better understanding of the few Arabic sources on these masquerades that, in some cases, fittingly lent themselves to misunderstanding and confusion.

One such case is a description by Abū al-Faraǧ al-Iṣfahānī of a group of dancing *farāġīna* in al-Muʿtaṣim's (r. 218–227/833–842) court. In his study, *Live Theatre and Dramatic Literature in the Medieval Arab World*, Shmuel Moreh reads the collective name of this group of performers as *ṣafāʿina*.[2] To understand why, we must reconsider how *samāğa* performances were introduced to the Abbasid courts.

## Abbasid *samāğa* and Tang *sumozhe*

Abbasid sources record in a handful of passages a small number of *samāğa* performances, a custom falling into the category of "semi-theatrical and semi-

1 I sincerely thank the anonymous reviewers for their invaluable corrections and bibliographical indications, which significantly expanded the horizons of the present article and even opened new avenues for future research. I am also indebted to Kelly Carlton for her comments and proofreading on an earlier version of this paper. All errors are, of course, my own.
2 Shmuel Moreh, *Live Theatre and Dramatic Literature in the Medieval Arab World* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992), 45–54.

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carnivalesque phenomena" characterized by the presence of grotesque elements and socio-political meanings.[3] The details of this practice are not clear in the sources, nor does modern scholarship offer much insight into its precise features. Nevertheless, a few studies provide brief descriptions. M.M. Ahsan, in his monograph on social life in the Abbasid age, holds *samāğa* to be "something like a masquerade".[4] A more in-depth explanation can be found in Shmuel Moreh, "Performing artists", in *Medieval Islamic Civilization.*[5] Moreh's main study on *samāğa* performances, however, comes in a chapter in *Live Theatre and Dramatic Literature in the Medieval Arab World.* Moreh relates the entirety of the information available on *samāğa* performances from Arabic sources, as well as situating the performances within the broader context of masquerades in the pre-modern Near Eastern Islamic world.[6]

The history of this practice in the central lands of the Abbasid empire has received even less attention, in spite of the fact that most – if not all – *samāğa* performances in the caliphal age seem to have taken place there. Chronologically, it is safe to say that *samāğa* performances enjoyed a period of popularity among sectors of the Abbasid entourage in the third/ninth century, since the term cannot be found in reference to theatrical, farcical, masquerade, or otherwise playful performances in earlier or later centuries in the Abbasid context.

The research presented in this paper stems from the working hypothesis that this eclipse of the term reflects either the disappearance of *samāğa* performances among Muslim elites, or that similar practices had come to be known under a different name. However, before dealing with the question of why the Abbasid courts ceased hosting *samāğa* performances, we should ask ourselves why they began in the first place. In other words, who brought this practice to court?

On the basis of Arabic literary sources, we can argue that *samāğa* performances came to the central lands of the Caliphate by means of Turkish slave imports from Central Asia. At the time, *Nawrūz* celebrations were gradually becoming an integral component of both the cultural background of Muslim elites and Abbasid political discourse on imperial legitimacy.

I should note in this regard that *ʿirāqī Nawrūz* celebrations, of whose existence we have knowledge already from under the Umayyads,[7] did not

3 Mas'ud Hamdan, *Poetics, Politics and Protest in Arab Theatre: The Bitter Cup and the Holy Rain* (Brighton and Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2006), 32–46.

4 Muhammad Manazir Ahsan, *Social Life under the Abbasids* (London and New York: Longman Group, 1979), 270.

5 Shmuel Moreh, "Performing artists", in J. W. Meri (ed.), *Medieval Islamic Civilization: An Encyclopaedia*, vol. 1 (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 599–601.

6 Moreh, *Live Theatre*, 45–54.

7 See, for instance, the description of a *Nawrūz* gift-giving celebration in first/seventh-century Kaskar related by al-Tawḥīdī. According to this report to the Umayyad governor ʿAmr b. Saʿīd al-Ašdaq (3–70/624–690), received on the day of *Nawrūz*, a highly symbolic gift from a local: a dome plate under which a few small birds where entrapped. The local man, after reciting a few verses inviting ʿAmr al-Ašdaq not to devour the birds, proceeded to set them free, arguably in an apt comparison with the ambition of political freedom of the governor himself, who was later to revolt against the caliph in Damascus. Al-Tawḥīdī, *Kitāb al-Baṣāʾir wa-l-Ḏaḫāʾir* (Bayrūt: Dār Ṣādir, 1408/

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immediately become part of courtly customs after the so-called Abbasid revolution. Instead, the celebrations gained momentum in the first half of the third/ninth century, paralleling a macroscopic shift in the lifestyle of the new Muslim elite, who had begun to move from the countryside to the cities as their main source of income shifted from direct land ownership to the control of taxation.[8]

In a recent article Norman H. Rothschild lays new ground for the study of Abbasid *samāğa*,[9] allowing us to trace an ideal arc connecting *samāğa* performances in Abbasid Iraq to Chinese *sumozhe* 蘇摩遮 in East Asia.[10] In his study, Rothschild engages the complex history of the "Cold-splashing Sogdian plays" that took place during the Tang dynasty in the first half of the eighth century. He provides context for the opposition of Confucian dignitaries, who held such customs in contempt and ultimately succeeded in having them banned.

Rothschild's work evaluates two words employed in Chinese sources in relation to "cold-splashing plays": *huntuo*, originally the name of a peculiar kind of skin or felt hat, which was later extended to a dance and song performed while wearing said hat; and *sumozhe*. According to Rothschild, the latter term's etymology may be traced back to Sanskrit, "to the term *samāğa* (in Brahmi) that appears in the first Asokan Rock Edict".[11] However, as he does not fail to

1988), 9, 110; Michael G. Morony, *Irāq after the Muslim Conquest* (Athens, GA: Georgia University Press, 2006; reprinted from Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 454.

8 Hugh Kennedy, "Great estates and elite lifestyle in the fertile crescent from Byzantium and Sasanian Iran to Islam", in Albrecht Fuess and Jan-Peter Hartung (eds), *Court Cultures in the Muslim World: Seventh to Nineteenth Centuries* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011). While correlation does not imply causation, it is noteworthy that *Nawrūz* had long been an important date for the empire as the day of *iftitāḥ al-ḫarāğ*, or the "opening of the fiscal year". Simone Cristoforetti, *Izdilāq: miti e problemi calendariali del fisco islamico* (Venice: Cafoscarina, 2003); and A. Shapur Shahbazi, "Nowruz i. In the Islamic period", in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, online edition (2009): http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/nowruz-i. It is plausible that the growing relevance of *Nawrūz* celebrations is linked to these socioeconomic developments.

9 Norman H. Rothschild, "Sumozhe suppressed, Huntuo halted: an investigation into the nature and stakes of the Sogdian festal dramas performed in early eighth century Tang China", *Frontiers of History in China* 12/1, 2017.

10 The pivotal role played by Sogdia in connecting East and West Asia in Late Antiquity is not new. See, for instance, Matteo Compareti, *Samarkand the Center of the World: Proposals for the Identification of the Afrāsyāb Paintings* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 2016); Nicola Di Cosmo and Michael Maas (eds), *Empires and Exchanges in Eurasian Late Antiquity: Rome, China, Iran, and the Steppe, ca. 250–750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316146040; Étienne de la Vaissière, *Sogdian Traders: A History* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2005).

11 Scholarship offers a few descriptions of *samāğa* performances on the Indian subcontinent that allow us to connect them with Abbasid *samāğāt*. Most notably, Arthur Berriadale Keith describes it as a "festival on a hill-top" marked by a drama featuring, among others, a buffoon (Vidūsaka). Regarding this character, he further notes that the name of Vidūsaka is not only "connected with a real Brahminic family, but it obeys the rule that the name of the character should indicate a flower, the spring &c., for it means literally the offspring of the Lotus-smelling" – Arthur Berriadale Keith, *The Sanskrit Drama in Its Origin, Development, Theory, and Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 84–5. Varadpande defines *samaja* (or *saman*) as a "festive gathering,

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note, the word *samāğa* also appears in Arabic lexicography [12] where it is defined as both an abstract concept meaning "foul, unseemly, or ugly" – in a word, grotesque – and a kind of mask or masquerade. *Sumozhe*, therefore, is most likely a Chinese transliteration, referring to "a tune accompanying theatrical amusements from Kutcha", a region in modern-day Xinjiang. These theatrical amusements lasted for several days and featured "dancers wearing animal masks".[13] According to the Tang official Zhang Yue (663–730), this practice, meaning *sumozhe*, "originated in Persia" as a New Year custom and had strong ties to the imperial traditions of that land; it involved dances, the spattering of water, and beautiful – if not boisterous – masks. In truth, the aesthetic quality of such masks was debatable: they are sometimes described as a thing of beauty, other times as fantastic, representing "ghosts or hoary ancients" or "demons and animals", but always as infectious and frenetic.[14] Be that as it may, *sumozhe* performances were part and parcel of Sogdian "cold-spashing plays" in Tang China.

Less than two centuries later, *samāğa* performances made their appearance in Abbasid courts on the other side of the Eurasian continent. The earliest *samāğa* known to Arabic sources took place at the court of the Abbasid caliph al-Muʿtaṣim (r. 218–227/833–842). The performance is described in the *Kitāb Maqātil al-Ṭālibiyyīn*, a 313/923 work by Abū al-Farağ al-Iṣfahānī.[15]

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dramatic performance, place of entertainment, theater, pavilion erected to watch games, etc." that is at least as old as the Vedas (M.L. Varadpande, *Ancient Indian and Indo-Greek Theatre* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1981), 84–7, 135). In these festivals, "men and women used to participate in gay abandon. Poetry recitation, archery and horse races were held and winners were honoured with suitable rewards. Beautiful courtesans used to visit the carnival to earn money by exhibiting their skill in dancing and singing while bashful but alert eyes of young maidens searched for prospective grooms" (Varadpande, *Ancient Indian and Indo-Greek Theatre*, 8). While *samaja* festivals were deemed necessary to lift the spirits of the subjects, they were banned by Asoka on a rock edict because the king saw "many evils in such gatherings", probably referring to "provocative dances in near nude and semi-nude conditions" (Varadpande, *Ancient Indian and Indo-Greek Theatre*, 39–40). This concern resembles later objections by Tang Confucian officials and Abbasid Muslim men of law. I owe these references to Rothschild.

12 The word appears in al-Ṭabarī's *Taʾrīḫ*, to describe the "grotesque figures" (ar. *ṣuwar al-samaja*) owned by al-Afšīn at the time of his arrest. Al-Ṭabarī lists these figures, or possibly paintings, among more or less incriminating items found at al-Afšīn's residence, such as books of his "majūsī" faith, idols and some rafts made of inflatable skin that he had prepared as part of a plan to escape arrest. De Goeje translated the term as *imagenes obscenes*, and it may be that they had some connections to the masks worn during *samāğa* performance, but the possibility that the term is here used in its literal sense should not be discarded. Abū Ğaʿfar Muḥammad b. Ğarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīḫ al-rusul wa-l-mulūk: Annales quos scripsit Abu Djafar Mohammed ibn Djarir at-Tabari*, vol. 3, ed. M. J. de Goeje, Photo-mechanical Reproduction of Leiden: 1879–1901 edition (Leiden: Brill 1964), 1318.

13 Charles Hartman, "Stomping songs: word and image", *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 17, 1995, 22 n. 63.

14 Rothschild, "Sumozhe suppressed, Huntuo halted", 281–2.

15 Abū al-Farağ al-Iṣfahānī, *Maqātil al-ṭālibiyyīn,* ed. Aḥmad Ṣaqr (Cairo: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Kutub al-ʿArabiyya). As the title transparently suggests, the *Kitāb maqātil*

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According to this report, on *Nawrūz* of 219/834, al-Muʿtaṣim had the Zaydī imām Muḥammad b. al-Qāsim (also known as Ṣāḥib al-Ṭalaqān) brought before him.[16] Al-Muʿtaṣim celebrated the New Year's Day with a *samāğa* performance, which al-Iṣfahānī vividly describes as follows:

> [...] the *aṣḥāb al-samāğa* were performing [*yalʿabūna*] in front of him, and the *farāġina* where dancing [*yarquṣūna*]. When Muḥammad saw all this, he cried and then said, "Oh God! You know that I would always want to change all this and remove it." The *farāġina* began throwing dirt and rotten meat on the common people. Al-Muʿtaṣīm was laughing, and Muḥammad b. al-Qāsim glorified God and asked for His forgiveness, moving his lips, preaching. Al-Muʿtaṣim was sitting in the palace in Šammāsiyya,[17] while [Muḥammad b. al-Qāsim], looking at them, was standing still.[18]

The *aṣḥāb al-samāğā*[19] of al-Muʿtaṣim do not exactly dance, but rather seem to engage in some sort of playful performance. Dance proper is a job left for a different group: the *farāġina*, who then proceed to throw disgusting waste on the public. This is surely unusual, given al-Iṣfahānī's clear disdain for this mockery of the *nawrūzī* water-sprinkling custom, known in Arabic sources as *ṣabb al-māʾ*.[20] Of course, it is not surprising that al-Muʿtaṣim is represented here in such a negative light; some of the most extreme details of the story may well be counterfeit or exaggerated better to convey the image of a wicked

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*al-Ṭālibiyyīn* is a collection of anecdotes and notices on descendants of ʿAlī killed or otherwise oppressed under the Umayyads and the Abbasids. The short book covers individuals up to the caliphate of al-Muqtadir (r. 295–320/908–932). Sebastian Günther, *Quellenuntersuchungen zu den* Maqātil aṭ-Ṭālibiyyīn *des Abū 'l-Faraǧ al-Iṣfahānī (gest. 356/967)* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1991), 13–16.

16 Al-Iṣfahānī writes that it was *Nawrūz* of 219/834–5. Since we know that *Farwardīn* 1st fell on 27 April between 832 and 835, the exact date of Muḥammad b. al-Qāsim's ordeal, according to al-Iṣfahānī, is *Rabīʿ* II 13 219/27 April 834. See Simone Cristoforetti, *Forme* neopersiane *del calendario* zoroastriano *tra Iran e Transoxiana* (Venice: Grafiche Biesse, 2000), 125.

17 An area of Baghdad, located on the east bank of the Tigris River, northeast of the Madīnat al-Salām. See Jacob Lassner, *The Topography of Baghdad in the Early Middle Ages: Text and Studies* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970), 200, 203.

18 Al-Iṣfahānī, *Maqātil*, 389–90.

19 Literally, the *aṣḥāb al-samāğa* are its companions or leaders, so they should be understood as the main performers.

20 *Nawrūz* celebrations in the Abbasid period consisted of bonfires and water games – as they still are today in countries of Iranian culture. Sources on this important Abbasid festival are countless. See Massimiliano Borroni and Simone Cristoforetti, *An Index of Nayrūz Occurrences in Abbasid Literary Sources* (Florence: Phasar Edizioni, 2016). Here it will suffice to cite Kušāğim's (d. about 360/970–1) verses describing the effect these practices had on himself: "When I saw *Nawrūz*, whose custom are the sprinkling of water and the sparking of fire | I celebrated it too; and excitement shook me, as fire was in my heart and water incited me" Kušāğim, *Dīwān*, ed. Al-Nabawī ʿAbd al-Wāḥid Šaʿlān (Cairo: Maktabat al-Ḫanğ, 1405/1985), 386.

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oppressor of the Alid family. Nevertheless, some other details that do not necessarily play into the hands of al-Muʿtaṣim's critics remain noteworthy.

## The *aṣḥāb al-samāğa*

First, a few words should be allotted to the *aṣḥāb al-samāğa*. As al-Iṣfahānī says little about their appearances or their contribution to the performance, we must resort to later sources for a description of their features. A few years later, Ibn al-Muʿtazz (247–296/861–908) describes them as similar to a group of *ğinn*:

> Drink on the morning of *Nayrūz* a pure cup! / May the days happily pass
> The *Ğinn* appeared to us in daytime, / some of them in line, others holding hands
> Dancing, their bodies sway / as cypresses do in the wind
> Ugliness covers their beauty / but in their *samāğāt* lies grace.[21]

That the *aṣḥāb al-samāğa* wore masks has already been noted by Shmuel Moreh, who further states that Ibn Sīnā employed the term *samāğāt* as a translation of Greek comical masks, while a fourth/tenth century commentator chose the term *samāğā* to gloss a verse by Ğarīr mentioning the *kurrağ*, a hobby-horse.[22] Caliphs themselves occasionally enjoyed this popular and courtly custom. Its origins, however, are highly disputed. According to Arabic lexicography, the term is derived from Persian, meaning young horse or mule. A. van Gepp argues for a Western European origin, while Gaudefroy-Demombynes disagrees. More recently, Moreh proposed to link the *kurrağ* with Central Asian shamanism, concurring with the general hypothesis of J. Baumel, who sees in the *kurrağ* "l'homme qui agite une tête de cheval au bout d'un bâton ou qui anime le corps du masque continue en effet à traduire inconsciemment un des plus anciens rites qu'ait connu l'humanité".[23]

21 Ibn al-Muʿtazz, *Dīwān*, ed. Karam al-Bustānī (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, without date), 120.

22 Moreh, *Live Theatre*, 52. The term deployed by Ğarīr was meant to mock his fellow poet al-Farazdaq, with whom he had a well-studied social and professional rivalry.

23 See Moreh, *Live Theatre*, 27–37, 44; Shirley Guthrie, *Arab Women in the Middle Ages: Private Lives and Public Roles* (London: Saqi, 2000), 62–3; M. Gaudefroy-Demombynes, "Sur le Cheval-Jupon et Al-Kurraj", in *Mélanges offerts à William Marçais par l'Institut d'études Islamiques de l'Université de Paris* (Paris: G.-P. Maisonneuve, 1950), 155–60; Jean Baumel, *Le Masque-cheval et quelques autres animaux fantastiques: étude de folklore, d'ethnographie et d'histoire* (Paris: La Grande Revue, 1954), 138; Amnon Shiloah, "Muslim and Jewish musical traditions of the middle ages", in Reinhard Strohm and Bonnie J. Blackburn (eds), *Music as Concept and Practice in the Late Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 11–12. Amnon Shiloah, who revised scholarship on the *kurrağ* until the early 1960s, mentions that "La transformation des chevaux en Kurrag est le résultat tout à la fois d'un raffinement et d'une simplification de la représentation dans les palais. À ceci s'ajoute un autre élément de divertissement, celui de la participation de danseuses. D'autre part, l'adoption d'un vocable persan pour désigner les jeux et les danses du masque-cheval permet de supposer une influence persane. Certains indices nous laissent croire à l'existence d'une danse ou d'un jeu équivalent pendant la fête du printemps (Newrûz). Si nous arrivions à confirmer cette hypothèse, le problème serait résolu, et nous rejoindrions les conclusions de J. Baumel" (Amnon Shiloah, "Réflexions sur la

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From these elements we can assume that the masks worn by the *aṣḥāb al-samāğa* could be described as grotesque, possibly with animal-like features, working towards a comical effect. These masks clearly resembled those employed in the *sumozhe* customs resented by Tang Confucian officials: possibly animal-like; surely wondrous, if not ugly; and intended to catch the eye.

For a better understanding of the role played by the *aṣḥāb al-samāğa*, we may turn to al-Šābuštī's (356–386/975–996) record in the *Kitāb al-Diyārāt* of a *samāğa* performance for the Abbasid caliph al-Mutawakkil (r. 232–247/847–861). According to the Fatimid-period littérateur, Al-Mutawakkil's celebration of New Year's Day was interrupted by a very concerned chief of the guards, Abū al-Ḥūsayn Isḥāq b. Ibrāhīm:[24]

> On a *Nawrūz* day, Isḥāq b. Ibrāhīm came to al-Mutawakkil as the *samāğa* was [being performed] in front of him. He was wearing a heavy, multi-coloured robe. The *aṣḥāb al-samāğa* had gathered around him in great numbers, so as to catch the dirhams he was scattering on them; they were so close that they could pull edges [of his robe]. When Isḥāq b. Ibrāhīm saw all this, he became angry and left, saying, "Why do we waste money paying for guards in this reign?!" Al-Mutawakkil saw him and said, "Bring back to me Abū al-Ḥusayn [*scil.* Isḥāq b. Ibrāhīm], who just left in anger". The gatekeeper left [to do as he had been ordered], followed by the attendants. [Isḥāq b. Ibrāhīm] returned, speaking very harshly to Waṣīf and Zurāfa until he was in front of al-Mutawakkil, who asked him, "Why did you get angry, and why did you leave?" [Isḥāq b. Ibrāhīm] then answered, "Commander of the Faithful, do you think that the enemies of this reign are not as numerous as its friends? You stay in the company of such dogs, who even dare to pull the edges of your robe, each and every one of them disguised by a horrid mask! What if an ill-intentioned, evil-minded enemy of yours, having renounced his faith, hides himself among them, thus making his way to you? When will all this stop? When will you free the earth of such people?" Al-Mutawakkil answered, "Abū al-Ḥusayn, do not get so angry. I promise that you will not see me like this again". Afterwards, he had a higher structure built for himself, so that he may safely enjoy the *samāğa*.[25]

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danse artistique musulmane au moyen âge", *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale* 5, n. 20, 1962, 474, https://doi.org/10.3406/ccmed.1962.1248. I believe the Abbasid *samāğa* to be the answer to Shiloah's question.

24 Isḥāq b. Ibrāhīm al-Ṭāhirī is usually described by al-Šābuštī as a very strict man, especially with Abbasid princes and caliphs. For example, he imparted a flogging upon prince Abū ʿAlī b. al-Rašīd when he found the latter still drunk near a monastery not far from Baghdad. He received praise for the harsh punishment from the then caliph al-Muʿtaṣim, who exhorted him to keep an equally severe eye on other members of the caliphal family. See al-Šābuštī, *The Shabushti's Book of Monasteries: Al-Diyarat*, ed. George Awwad (Piscataway, NJ: Georgia Press, 2008), 34–6.

25 Al-Šābuštī, *Al-Diyarat*, 39–40.

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The anecdote probably conveys a wider concern for al-Mutawakkil's safety by some sections of the Abbasid establishment, perhaps in response to the somewhat cavalier attitude of the caliph in choosing his closest companions.[26] Nevertheless, what matters here is the description of the *aṣḥāb al-samāǧa* and their performance. Apart from the confirmation that the performers wore "horrid" masks, the unruly, almost wild, nature of this performance emerges from al-Šābuštī's writing. Al-Mutawakkil's *samāǧa* bears much resemblance to what happened at the court of al-Muʿtaṣim – quite different from the idealized image conveyed by Ibn al-Muʿtazz's verses. Notably, the showering of money on the *aṣḥāb al-samāǧa* corresponds to the less pleasant throwing of rotten meat and dirt described by al-Iṣfahānī.

Al-Mutawakkil's pivotal role in the performance deserves a few words. In each of the three prose descriptions of *samāǧāt* recorded in Abbasid sources, the sitting caliph is present. This is true for al-Muʿtaṣim, for his son al-Mutawakkil, and for al-Muʿtaḍid, as we will see shortly. In fact, the caliph emerges as the central figure of the Abbasid *samāǧāt.* This is consistent with the general purpose of courtly *Nawrūz* celebrations: a moment of recognition and renewal of political authority and imperial order.[27] In principle, we cannot exclude that *samāǧāt* may have been performed outside the context of *Nawrūz* celebrations, but the only known Abbasid *samāǧa* performances took place, without fail, during courtly *Nawrūz* celebrations.

## The *farāġina*

Let us now consider the second group mentioned by al-Iṣfahānī, the dancing *farāġina*. Moreh contends that the text should be read as *ṣafāʿina*, i.e. slapstick actors. Even though he does not explain his decision, the reason is still quite clear: it makes more sense to have slapstick actors participating in grotesque, even comical, performance than people or masks from Farghana, whose presence awaits explanation. Nevertheless, the report contained in *Kitāb Maqātil al-Ṭālibiyyīn* may well be correct and reliable, provided that

26 The image of an absolute sovereign scolded by his own official for his participation in such an unruly performance bears a fascinating resemblance to the objections of Han Chaozong to the behaviour of his Crown Prince, who put himself in danger by enjoying the Sogdian "cold-splashing plays". Rothschild notes that Han Chaozong was concerned "that the rulers of the empire were not mere spectators, but participants in the wild festivities". This is his translation of Han Chaozong's grievances: "Your Majesty, please reconsider: think of all that this matter entails. Also, the roads and thoroughfares are abuzz with rumours of the Crown Prince going to watch the festival incognito. The common people place their trust in him. If casually allowed to gallop abroad recklessly, might he not stumble and fall? Moreover, the residence's high officials are teeming with barbarians (Xiongnu 匈奴). They have secretly sent out assassins (*cike* 刺客). Why further imperil matters by courting danger? They could ambush him unprepared and waylay him with a surprise attack. The danger, then, lies in not fathoming their designs. Like the white dragon who took the guise of a fish and was caught by Yu Qie 豫且." Rothschild, "Sumozhe suppressed, Huntuo halted", 273.

27 Massimiliano Borroni, "Iranian festivals and political discourse under the Abbasids", *Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie Orientale* 51, 2015, 5–24, https://doi.org/10.14277/2385-3042/15p.

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we can elucidate the link between Farghana and *samāğa* performances. This latter option would be preferable, not just for philological reasons, but also because it would provide context for a later source on the *samāğa* performed for al-Muʿtaḍid, described in the *Kitāb al-Ḏaḫāʾir wa-l-Tuḥaf* as follows:[28]

> On *Nawrūz*, in the year 282[/895],[29] Qaṭr al-Nadā, the daughter of Abī al-Ğayš Khumārawayh, presented to al-Muʿtaḍid bi-l-llāh a gift containing twenty gold trays, [. . .] The cost of the masks for the *samāğāt* she had provided for *Nawrūz* amounted to thirteen thousand dinars. Thirty maids of honour came out of the palace and danced with the *farāʿina*.[30]

The term *farāʿina* found in this description, which would literally translate as "Pharaohs", is puzzling. Moreh proposes to correct the *Kitāb al-Ḏaḫāʾir wa-l-Tuḥaf* in the very same way as he did for the *Kitāb Maqātil al-Ṭālibiyyīn*, reading *farāʿina* as *ṣafāʿina*. This remains unconvincing due to the graphic distance between the two words (فراعنة and صفاعنة).

In her English translation, Qaddumi transcribes the Arabic word as is, suggesting that the presence of masks inspired by Ancient Egyptian lore among the gifts Qaṭr al-Nadā presented to her husband may be explained by her Egyptian

28 Muḥammad Ḥamīdullāh, editor of the 1959 Arabic edition based on the only extant manuscript of *Kitāb al-Ḏaḫāʾir wa-l-Tuḥaf*, identified the author in the Egyptian *qāḍī* al-Rašīd b. al-Zubayr, but more recently Ghada al-Hijjawi Qaddumi, who published an annotated English translation of the text, questioned this attribution and the book title. Scholarship on the matter agrees that the anonymous author belonged to high Egyptian society in the fourth/tenth century. Ghāda al-Ḥijjāwī Qaddūmī, *Book of Gifts and Rarities (Kitāb al-Hadāyā wa-l-Tuḥaf)* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1996), 5–20.

29 It may well be that this passage is not referring to a traditional *Nawrūz* falling on the first day of *Farwardīn*. In 282/895 *Farwardīn* 1st fell on April 12th, too early for a celebration that marked the "opening of the fiscal year as well". This was due to the lack of an intercalary system in the traditional Iranian calendar – at least in its form known to caliphal administration. The complexity of the subject cannot be exhausted here. For a recent and detailed treatment, see Simone Cristoforetti, "Cycles and circumferences – the tower of Gonbad-e Kāvus as a time-measuring monument", in *Borders: Itineraries on the Edges of Iran*, ed. Stefano Pellò, *Eurasiatica Quaderni di studi su Balcani, Anatolia, Iran, Caucaso e Asia Centrale* 5 (Venice: Edizioni Ca' Foscari, 2016), 99–101, n. 21–24. This meant that *Nawrūz* in the caliphal age regressed through the solar seasons so that even though Muslim conquest found it falling on 9 June, at the end of the third/ninth century it was already in early spring. In *Muḥarram* 282/March 895, caliph al-Muʿtaḍid, in Mosul during a military campaign to reassert direct Abbasid control over Ğazīra al-Ṭabarī, sent word to Baghdad for dispatches to be sent to the provinces, permanently delaying *Nawrūz* from *Farwardīn* 1st to June 11th. Since the reform was issued before *Farwardīn* 1st, we can safely assume that al-Muʿtaḍid would have preferred to receive gifts on *his Nawrūz*, rather than celebrating a festival he was trying to reform. *Taʾrīḫ*, vol. 13, 2134; Rainer Glagow, *Das Kalifat des Al-Mu'tadid Billah (892–902)* (Bonn: Unpublished PhD Thesis, 1968), 37–54; and Cristoforetti, *Izdilāq*, 130–40.

30 Pseudo-Ibn al-Zubayr, Al-Qāḍī al-Rašīd, *Kitāb al-ḏaḫāʾir wa-l-tuḥaf*, ed. Muḥammad Ḥamīdullāh (Kuwayt: Al-Turāṯ al-ʿArabī, 1959), 38–9.

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origins.[31] It is a weak connection – and Qaddumi is not fully convinced of her hypothesis – because, while Qaṭr al-Nadā's father Khumārawayh did in fact rule over Egypt and the Šām, he was a Turkish military commander born and bred in Samarra. Moreover, while we know of Egyptian *samāǧa* performed during the Coptic *Nayrīz* of 364/974–5, we have no mention of Pharaonic masks.[32]

On this matter, Muḥammad Ḥamīdullāh, the editor of the 1959 Arabic edition of the *Kitāb al-Ḏaḫāʾir wa-l-Tuḥaf*, seems to be correct. He suggests amending *farāʿina* to *farāġina*, since a mere dot distinguishes the two Arabic spellings. Ḥamīdullāh was probably unaware of al-Iṣfahānī's passage on the *samāǧa* performed by dancing *farāġina* for al-Muʿtaṣim – a passage that gives much strength to his argument.

The role of men or masks relating to Farghana in Abbasid *samāǧāt* could be explained by taking into account the Sogdian origin of Tang *sumozhe*, thus positing Sogdiana, which encompassed the Farghana Valley, as the epicentre of the diffusion of *samāǧa* from Central Asia into China and later into Iraq. In fact, customs similar to those of the Abbasid *samāǧā* performances at *Nawrūz* and those of the Tang "cold-spashing" *sumozhe* can be found in Central Asian contexts, for example the Turkic *Kūsa* ritual of *Saya*/*Saḍaq*, particularly in relation to the customs of the New Year King.[33] Krasnowolska, in her study of Iranian calendrical mythology, writes that "the elements that *Kuse* and *Mir-e Nouruzi* share are numerous and, although the origins of both ritual units are apparently distinct, the borderline between them is, sometimes, obliterated".[34] We know from the work of Pūr Karīm on Central Asian festivals

31 Her father was Ḫumārawyh b. Aḥmad b. Ṭulūn, who ruled over Egypt and al-Šām after his father, the founder of the Ṭulūnid dynasty. He led the army that defeated a young al-Muʿtaḍid in the Battle of the Mills, even though both commanders had fled the battlefield. He rose to power after his father was unsanctioned by al-Muʿtamid, who was caliph at the time, in 270/884. Nevertheless, he opted for a rapprochement policy towards the Abbasids. The marriage of his daughter Qaṭr al-Nadā, first proposed to the al-Muʿtaḍid's son ʿAlī, then given to the caliph himself, was probably part of this long-term strategy. U. Haarman, "Ḫumārawayh", in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., ed. P. Bearman et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1960): http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_4328.

32 On the history of Egyptian *Nawrūz*, or *Nayrīz,* see Michel Cuypers, "Le Nowrūz en Egypte", *Luqmān* 10, n. 1, 1993, 9–36. His main sources are al-Qalqašandī (m. 821/1418), al-Maqrīzī (m. 845/1442), and the lesser-known fourth/tenth-century author Ibrāhīm b. Wāṣif-Šāḥ, who traces the origins of this festival back to ancient Egypt, adopting it as an element of his own (specifically Egyptian) *šuʿūbī* claims. A few clarifications concerning the relation between the Iranian *Nawrūz* and its Egyptian Nilotic counterpart were presented by Cristoforetti in *Izdilāq*, 66–70 and by Simone Cristoforetti, *Persiani intorno all'Africa e vicende calendariali* (Venice: Cafoscarina, 2003), 20–23. Mention of an Egyptian *samāǧa* that would have taken place in Cairo's streets, despite the ban on 364/975 *Nawrūz* celebrations issued by Fatimid caliph al-Muʿīzz li-l-dīn Allāh (r. 341–365/953–975) from Maqrīzī (actually a quote from Ibn al-Zūlāq), is taken into account by Moreh, *Live Theatre*, 48–9. In the present article we will focus on Abbasid *ʿirāqī* performances.

33 Simone Cristoforetti, *Il natale della luce in Iran: una festa del fuoco nel cuore di ogni inverno: ricerche sul sada: occorrenze, rituali e temi mitologici di una celebrazione cortese tra Baghdad e Bukhara, secc. 9.–12* (Milan: Mimesis, 2002), 244–5.

34 Anna Krasnowolska, "Some heroes of Iranian calendar mythology", in B.G. Fragner et al. (eds), *Proceedings of the Second European Conference of Iranian Studies Held*

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that Turkish *Saya* celebrations revolve around a clash of opposites, characterized by black and white, beautiful and ugly, old and new.[35] Of course, *Saya* celebrations are closer to *Saḏaq* than to *Nawrūz*. Nevertheless, as Cristoforetti notes in his study on *Saḏaq* customs, *Saya* celebrations feature an "element that, in light of an Iranian influx that seems to us undeniable, can be said to be *nawrūzī*. It is the relation that this festival entertains with the descent of the souls of the Dead."[36] Moreover, there was a strong influx of *nawrūzī* elements in the *Saḏaq* festival during the third/ninth century, most likely due to the calendrical proximity of the two festivals at the end of the eighth century of the Common Era.[37]

The participation of the dancing *farāġina,* therefore, gives strength to the hypothesis of a Central Asian origin for Abbasid *samāğa* performances. This does not mean that the dancers called *farāġina* were necessarily from Farghana Valley, as the association with the Farghana Valley could be read as general brand, rather than precise geographical origin. First, Arabic sources tend to present significant discrepancies with regard to referent terms like *maġāriba* (Arabs from the Maghrib),[38] *farāġina,* and *turk*, that can assume both an ethnic and/or a military meaning.[39] Secondly, we should not discard the hypothesis that the term *farāġina* did not have the same meaning here as it did in military contexts. Instead, it could be used to indicate a particular set of costumes and moves: a character with its own role in a structured play.[40] Nevertheless, it is surely plausible that these dancing *farāġina* were indeed part of the *farāġina* corps established by al-Muʿtaṣim.[41] Given the paucity of available sources, it does not seem possible to provide a clear-cut answer on the matter.

At least from a chronological point of view, the adoption of these Central Asian masks in caliphal *Nawrūz* celebrations coincided with the growing

*in Bamberg, 30th September to 4th October 1991 by the Societas Iranologica Europaea* (Rome: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1995), 245.

35 Cristoforetti, *Il natale della luce*, 249–50.

36 Cristoforetti, *Il natale della luce*, 249.

37 Cristoforetti, *Il natale della luce*, 253–4.

38 Hugh Kennedy, *The Armies of the Caliphs: Military and Society in the Early Islamic State* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 125–6.

39 Osman Sayyid Ahmad Ismail, "Muʿtasim and the Turks", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 29/1, 1966, 14–15.

40 In this respect, the *farāġina* would be to Abbasid *samāğāt* what "Arabs" and "Turks" are to some European Carnival masquerades, where such characters traditionally take part in parades without any correspondence to the provenance or personal background of the interpreter. Julio Caro Baroja, *Il Carnevale* (Genoa: Il Melangolo, 1989), 275–8.

41 The *farāġina* corps were an elite troop of the Caliphal army. Sources frequently lump them together with Turks and we know from al-Yaʿqūbī that they enjoyed a similar position in the military. Hugh Kennedy identifies them as "clearly distinct from the Turks", probably speaking "an Iranian language" even though "some at least of the Turks may have been obtained from the Farghāna valley". According to Matthew Gordon, they "were perceived to stand, like the "steppe" Turks, at a sociocultural remove from the surrounding society". Kennedy, *The Armies of the Caliphs*, 124–5; Matthew S. Gordon, *The Breaking of a Thousand Swords: A History of the Turkish Military of Samarra, A.H. 200–275/815–889 C.E.* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), 58–60.

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presence of Turkish elements in Iraq.[42] This well-studied phenomenon had already begun during the reign of al-Maʾmūn (r. 196–218/812–833), and al-Muʿtaṣim (r. 218–227/833–842).[43] The fact that they retained cultural elements, such as customs and rituals, of their Central Asian forefathers, is clearly discussed by Gordon in his analysis of an anecdote (which also serves as the title of his book): the breaking of a thousand swords performed at the Funeral of the Turk Amir Abū Naṣr Muḥammad by his troops.[44] According to a brief account provided by al-Ṭabarī, this anecdote was performed by Turkish troops in Samarra. Al-Ṭabarī writes that it was common among Turks to perform the ceremony "when a chief died".[45] Further, as noted by Gordon, the ceremony bears resemblance to a practice in which the guard corps committed collective suicide following the death of a military leader.[46] In other words, the relocation of Turkish men and women to Iraq led, to some extent, to the introduction of Central Asian cultural patterns to the Abbasid capitals. *Samāǧā* performances may have been among such traditions, which subsequently merged with pre-existing Abbasid celebrations of *Nawrūz* and, in turn, became common ground between the newcomers and the customs of the Abbasid court.

Even though *Nawrūz* celebrations remained an Abbasid courtly custom well into at least the fourth/tenth century, there are no explicit references to *samāǧa* performances after the caliphate of al-Muʿtaḍid. Even conceding that the few verses by Ibn al-Muʿtazz could, in principle, be dated later than al-Muʿtaḍid's death, *samāǧa* performances did not survive the third century Hijri. This begs the question of what shifts occurred in the social settings that used to harbour Abbasid *samāǧa* performances.

42 As noted by Pelliot, the iranicized Turkic Tokharians "living in Turfan and Kuča performed a so-called Pomozhe festival known under other names, such as Poluozhe (婆羅遮) or Sumozhe (蘇摩遮). The latter name could be compared to Somakusa (蘇莫者), a festival which was introduced from the west through China into Japan to be celebrated by musicians and dancers wearing animal and monster masks" (cited in Matteo Compareti and Simone Cristoforetti, *The Chinese Scene at Afrāsyāb and the Iranian Calendar* (Venice: Cafoscarina, 2007), 19). In this regard, Matteo Compareti further noted that "The annual festival among the Iranians and the Tokharians could have coincided with the New Year's celebration, when people played music and danced while actors performed wearing animal masks", Compareti and Cristoforetti, *The Chinese Scene at Afrāsyāb*, 19–20. Moreover, he identified a depiction of these Tokharian *sumozhe* on a Buddhist Kuchan casket from Subashi. Matteo Compareti, "The painted vase of Merv in the context of Central Asian pre-Islamic funerary tradition", *The Silk Road* 9, 2011, 30–1.

43 Gordon, *The Breaking of a Thousand Swords*, 26–66; and Étienne de la Vaissière, *Samarcande et Samarra: Élites d'Asie centrale dans l'empire abbasside* (Paris: Association pour l'avancement des études iraniennes, 2007).

44 Abū Naṣr Muḥammad, son of the great leader Buġā, was a pivotal element in Samarran political life as a member of one of the most important Turkic military families. In 256/870 he was called upon by al-Muhtadī to answer the accusation that his brother, the well-known Mūsa b. Buġā, had not upheld his duties. His angry reaction prompted the caliph to punish him; Mūsa b. Buġā was incarcerated, beaten, and then executed.

45 al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīḫ al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, vol. 3, 1833.

46 Cristopher I. Beckwith, "Aspects of the early history of the Central Asian guard corps in Islam", *Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi* 4, 1984, 29–43.

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## The Samarran system

A possible answer lies in the history of the Abbasid family's management of the Turkish military. In his *Samarcande et Samarra*, Étienne de la Vaissière rejects the thesis espoused by Patricia Crone and others that the Mamluk system had already been created and planned under al-Maʾmūn and al-Muʿtaṣim.[47] Instead, de la Vaissière argues that the period from the first purchases until al-Muwaffaq's regency (261/875–278/891) and al-Muʿtaḍid's caliphate saw a different relationship between the royal house and its Turkish corps. He further posits that the Mamluk system arose from the ashes of the so-called "anarchy" that followed al-Mutawakkil's assassination, precisely as an effort to fix the shortcomings of the Samarran system.[48] A specific feature of this Samarran system is the isolation of the Turkish military community, which may well have allowed for the persistence of Central Asian Turkish customs – including the aforementioned funeral rite and *samāğa* performances – within the city of Samarra.[49]

According to de la Vaissière, the nature of the arrangement in Samarra differed from the later Mamluk system.[50] Whereas the Mamluk came to be based on slavery to enforce obedience in young boys, the Samarran system relied "sur l'utilisation des hiérarchies pré-islamiques qui s'étiolent loin de l'Asie Centrale face aux hiérarchies du pouvoir ou de l'argent au coeur de la vie politique abbasside".[51] Accordingly, under the Samarran system every opportunity to strengthen loyalty between the caliph and its Central Asian Turkish troops was considered all the more precious. *Nawrūz* celebrations, specifically serving as festivals of the Iranian winter cycle, provided such occasions. The Central Asian contribution was the introduction of *samāğa* performances in which the caliph acted as a pivotal participant. It does not seem far-fetched to imagine that *samāğa* performances may have lost their function, and even their potential performers, because the last generation brought up under the Samarran system acquiesced to the Mamlūk system after the rule of al-Muʿtaḍid.

In conclusion, a close reading and contextualization of sources available to date on Abbasid s*amāğa* performances allows for the reconstruction of a significant picture of its history. The appearance of *samāğa* performances at the Abbasid court coincided with the rise of the Turkish military at the beginning of the third/ninth century. As a result their features can be traced back to Central Asia, and to the Turko-Sogdian milieu in particular. Such performances came to be associated with courtly *Nawrūz* celebrations, whose presence in Mesopotamia largely pre-dates the Abbasid caliphate, in addition to bearing a striking resemblance to the "cold-splashing days" (*sumozhe*) brought to

47 Patricia Crone, *Slaves on Horses: The Evolution of the Islamic Polity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

48 de la Vaissière, *Samarcande et Samarra*, 270.

49 According to a few sources collected by de la Vaissiére, the founding of Samarra was prompted by constant clashes between the Turkish newcomers and old residents of Baghdad, notably the progeny of early Abbasid supporters (*abnāʾ al-dawla*).

50 de la Vaissière rejects the idea, held most notably by Patricia Crone in *Slaves on Horses*, that the *mamlūk* system was established at the beginning of the third/ninth century.

51 de la Vaissière, *Samarcande et Samarra*, 275.

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eighth-century Tang China by Sogdian merchants. The survival of this custom in the Abbasid heartland can be explained on two levels. On one hand, there is the usefulness of *Nawrūz* as a shared, hierarchy-confirming celebration well known and respected by all of the main parties involved in Abbasid politics, from newcomers from the Turkish military, to the *abnāʾ al-dawla* of mostly Iranian or Arab-Iranian descent, and to the Mesopotamian landed elites. On the other hand, the isolation of the Turkish population (and of the *farāġina* corps) under the Samarran system in the third/ninth century allowed Central Asian customs to survive until the rise of the Mamlūk system.

In short, the appearance and disappearance of *samāğa* celebrations in the Abbasid courtly celebration of *Nawrūz* closely follows the development of the Turkish presence in third/ninth-century Mesopotamia, lending strength to the thesis that the Mamluk system was not in place before the end of the century. Instead, a system based on pre-Islamic Central Asian hierarchies was probably in place. The Turkish military played a major role in the struggle for political legitimacy and a military hold on power in the third/ninth century, notably under al-Muʿtaṣim, al-Mutawakkil, and al-Muʿtaḍid. The history of *samāğa* performances allows us a rare glimpse into the nature of those crucial relations.

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