

John Nawas (Katholieke Universiteit, Leuven), “Abbasid state violence and the execution of Ibn ‘Aī‘isha”

The reign of the seventh Abbasid caliph al-Ma‘mūn (813-833 AD) is generally considered part of the Golden Age of Islam. Despite this image, the caliph had to deal with much political turbulence and even created some himself: a Civil War fought with his brother, the sixth Abbasid caliph al-Amīn, or his appointment in 817 of a non-Abbasid (‘Alī al-Riḍā) as his heir. Amongst these events, in the year 825, an uncle of the caliph, called Ibn ‘Ā‘isha—like al-Amīn and unlike al-Ma‘mūn, an Abbasid on both parental sides—was executed by al-Ma‘mūn. Ibn ‘Ā‘isha’s primary crime had been to call for allegiance to a cousin of his, another uncle of al-Ma‘mūn, Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī. The last-mentioned man had been appointed in 817 by the Abbasids as anti-caliph to al-Ma‘mūn after he had appointed ‘Alī al-Riḍā as heir to the caliphate. However, support for this anti-caliphate did not last very long, especially not after al-Ma‘mūn returned to the capital Baghdad in 819. Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī went into hiding for a number of years before he was captured in Baghdad, dressed as a women, in the very year – 825 AD – in which Ibn ‘Ā‘isha was arrested and executed.

This presentation deals with the events surrounding the execution of Ibn ‘Ā‘isha and how this deed relates to al-Ma‘mūn’s vision of the caliph and the caliphal institution. As such, its aim is to help define “legitimate” state violence in the early Abbasid period.