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ART. III.—*A Greek Embassy to Baghdād in 917 A.D.*
 Translated from the Arabic MS. of Al-Khaṭīb, in the
 British Museum Library. By GUY LE STRANGE.

IN the early years of the tenth century A.D. the Emperor Leo VI, surnamed the Philosopher, gave much scandal to the ecclesiastics of Constantinople by his fourth marriage with the beautiful Zoe; a fourth being naturally a degree worse than a *third* marriage, and this the Eastern Church had lately "censured as a state of legal fornication," for reasons which Gibbon discusses in chapter xlviii of the "Decline and Fall." However, "the Emperor required a female companion, and the Empire a legitimate heir," and so, since he had found himself again a childless widower, Leo the Philosopher promptly celebrated his fourth nuptials, the patriarch Nicholas notwithstanding, who, having refused his blessing, was exiled. The fruit of this marriage was Constantine, surnamed Porphyrogenitus, that is, Born-in-the-Purple, from the porphyry chamber in the palace at Constantinople, where he had first seen the light; and in the year 911 A.D., when of the age of six, Constantine VII succeeded his father on the throne.

During the next forty-eight years the government was carried on in his name, others ruling, and in the first part of the reign it was the Empress Zoe who, with her favourites, struggled against the clergy, and misgoverned the Empire. In those days, war with the Caliphate was chronic on the eastern border; Greek and Saracen in turn attacked, raided, and carried off captives to be held for ransom; but of late the fortune of war had rather favoured the Greek side. The Caliph contemporary with Constantine Porphyrogenitus bore the name of Muḫtadir; he had come to the throne in 908 A.D., at the age of thirteen, through

a palace intrigue, and during his reign of twenty-five years lived entirely under the tutelage either of his Wazir, or of Mūnis, the Commander of the Armies. In the year 917, corresponding in the Moslem reckoning to 305 A.H., the Caliph found himself hemmed in by domestic rebellion, and though the expeditions of his generals over the border had latterly been somewhat more successful, he was in no way disinclined to come to terms with his adversary. The Empress Zoe, on her side, was for the moment equally desirous of peace, for she wished to withdraw many of the Greek troops from the eastern frontier, in order the better to encounter the Bulgarian hordes then threatening the empire in the opposite quarter. To obtain peace, therefore, Zoe despatched two ambassadors, nominally from the emperor, to Baghdād. According to the Byzantine chronicler Cedrenus, the two envoys were named John Rhadinos, the Patrician, and Michael Toxaras; they were commissioned to visit the Caliph, conclude an armistice with him, and arrange for the ransom of captives.

The reception given to the Greek envoys at Baghdād, is, as far as I am aware, nowhere described in the Byzantine Chronicles. The Moslem annalists, however, make much of this embassy from the Greeks, and though they frankly name the great sum which the Caliph paid for the ransom of their captive countrymen—it is nowhere even hinted by them that the Greeks found any Christian captives for whom to pay ransom—the Arab chroniclers enlarge on the fact that it was the Emperor of Constantinople who first begged for peace, and they then proceed to describe the imposing ceremony with which the ambassadors were received by the Caliph. Already, and even before the close of the third century after the Hijra, as is well known, the Caliphate was fast losing all political power; the outlying provinces were becoming permanently independent, and before the next century had run half its course Baghdād itself would be mastered, and the Caliph overshadowed by a succession of tyrannical Captains-of-the-Guard, followed and dispossessed by conquering

Generals out of the East, become sovereigns by the grace of the sword. At the beginning of this century, however, Muḩtadir could still pretend to be the Commander of the Faithful in Islam, and as such also pretended to treat the "King of Rūm," the Chief of Christian monarchs, as a suppliant for peace.

The Greek envoys arrived in Baghdād in Muharram 305, corresponding with July 917, and the following description of the manner in which they were received is translated from the Arabic text, incorporated by Al-Khaṭīb in his "History of Baghdād."¹ This work was composed (451 A.H.) nearly a century and a half after the events described, but Al-Khaṭīb states that the text is derived from a certain Hilāl, who had collected together the various accounts set down by those, "worthy of credit," who had witnessed the event. He thus describes the scene, which affords us a curious picture of the Palace of the Caliphs at Baghdād:—

"Now in the days of Muḩtadir, ambassadors² from the Byzantine Emperor arrived; so the servants spread magnificent carpets in the Palace, ornamenting the same with sumptuous furniture; and the Chamberlains with their Deputies were stationed according to their degrees, and the Courtiers stood at the gates and the porticoes, and along the passages and corridors, also in the courts and halls. The troops in splendid apparel, mounted on their chargers, with saddles of gold or of silver, formed a double line, while in front of these were held their led-horses similarly caparisoned, whom all might see. The numbers

¹ Of the three MSS. of this work possessed by the British Museum (Or. 1,507, 1,508, and Ad. 23,319), the first is by far the best, but unfortunately lacks several pages in the very part describing the reception of the Greek Embassy; the second MS. is a modern transcript of the first, and hence gives no aid at this point; while the third MS., though it supplies the text of these pages, is so carelessly written as to be almost illegible. I have collated this last throughout with the MS. of the *Bibliothèque Nationale* of Paris (numbered in the new *Catalogue Arabe*, 2,128), without the aid of which the following translation could hardly have been made.

² In the text, the singular, dual, and plural forms are used alternately in reference to the ambassador or ambassadors; but at the close *two* ambassadors are mentioned, which agrees with Ibn-al-Athīr and the Byzantine chronicler. I have adopted the plural throughout, for convenience, in my translation.

present, under arms of various kinds, were very great, and they extended from above the gate (at the upper end of Eastern Baghdād) called the Bāb-ash-Shammāsiyya, down to near the Palace of the Caliph. After the troops, and leading to the very presence of the Caliph, came the Pages of the Privy Chamber, also the Eunuchs of the inner and the outer Palace in gorgeous raiment, with their swords and ornamented girdles.

“Now the markets of Eastern Baghdād, with the roads, and the house-tops, and the streets, were all full of the people who had come sight-seeing, and every shop and high balcony had been let for a price of many dirhams. On the Tigris there were skiffs and wherries, barques, barges, and other boats, all magnificently ornamented, duly arranged and disposed. So the Ambassadors, with those who accompanied them, were brought on horseback to the Palace (of the Caliph), which, entering, they passed direct into the palace of Naṣr-al-Kushawi, the Chamberlain. Here they saw many porticoes and a sight so marvellous to behold that they imagined the Caliph himself must be present, whereby fear and awe entered into them; but they were told that here was only the Chamberlain. Next from this place the Ambassadors were carried on to the palace where lived the Wazīr, to wit the Assembly of *Ibu-al-Furāt*,¹ and here the Ambassadors were witnesses of even more splendour than they had seen in the palace of Naṣr, the Chamberlain, so that they doubted not that this indeed was the Caliph; but it was told them that this was only his Wazīr. Thence they conducted the Ambassadors and seated them in a hall, with the Tigris on the one hand and gardens on the other; and the hall was hung with curtains, and carpeted all about, and cushions had been placed for them, while all around stood the Eunuchs bearing maces and swords. But after the Ambassadors had been taken through this palace also, they were called for to the presence of Muḩtadir the Caliph,

¹ The position of one of his palaces is described by *Ibu Serapion*, a contemporary: see *J.R.A.S.* for 1895, p. 283.

whom they found seated with his sons on either side of him, and here the Ambassadors saw a sight that struck them with fear. Then afterwards they were dismissed, and so returned to the palace that had been prepared for them.

“Now the following is another account, given by the Wazir Abu-l-Kāsim ‘Ali-ibn-al-Hasan—surnamed Ibn-al-Maslama, who had heard it from the Caliph K̄āim, he having heard the narration of the Caliph K̄ādir, who related that his grandmother, Umm Abu Ishāk, the wife of the Caliph Muḳtadir, spoke thus in reference to these events. When the Ambassadors of the Emperor of the Greeks arrived at Takrīt (on the Tigris, about a hundred miles above Baghdād), the Commander of the Faithful, Muḳtadir, ordered that they should be detained there during two months. Then at length they were brought to Baghdād, and lodged in the palace called the Dār Šā‘id, where they tarried two months more, before being allowed to come to the presence of the Caliph. Now when Muḳtadir had completed the adornment of his palace and the arrangement of the furniture therein, the soldiers were ranged in double line from the Dār Šā‘id aforesaid to the Palace of the Caliph—the number of the troops being 160,000 horsemen and footmen—and the Ambassadors passed down between them until they came to the Palace. Here they entered a vaulted passage underground, and, after passing through it, at length stood in the presence of Muḳtadir, to whom they delivered the embassy of their master.

“Then it was commanded that the Ambassadors should be taken round the Palace. Now there were no soldiers here, but only the Eunuchs and the Chamberlains and the black Pages. The number of the Eunuchs was seven thousand in all, four thousand of them white and three thousand black; the number of the Chamberlains was also seven thousand, and the number of the black Pages, other than the Eunuchs, was four thousand; the flat roofs of all the Palace being occupied by them, as also of the Banqueting-halls. Further, the store-chambers had been

opened, and the treasures therein had been set out even as is customary for a bride's array; the jewels of the Caliph being arranged in trays,¹ on steps, and covered with cloths of black brocade. When the Ambassadors entered the Palace of the Tree (*Dār-ash-Shajara*, which will be described more fully below), and gazed upon the Tree, their astonishment was great. For (in brief) this was a tree of silver, weighing 500,000 Dirhams (or about 50,000 ounces), having on its boughs mechanical birds, all singing, equally fashioned in silver. Now the wonder of the Ambassadors was greater at seeing these than at any of the other sights that they saw.

“In an account, which has come down written by the hand of Abu Muḥammad, grandson of Muḥtadir, it is stated that the number of the hangings in the Palaces of the Caliph was thirty-eight thousand. These were curtains of gold—of brocade embroidered with gold—all magnificently figured with representations of drinking-vessels, and with elephants and horses, camels, lions, and birds. There were also long curtains, both plain and figured, of the sort made at Basinnā (in Khūzistān), in Armenia, at Wūsiḡ (on the lower Tigris), and Bahasnā (near the Greek frontier); also embroideries of Dabīḡ (on the Egyptian sea-coast) to the number of thirty-eight thousand; while of the curtains that were of gold brocade, as before described, these were numbered at twelve thousand and five hundred. The number of the carpets and mats of the kinds made at Jahram and Darābjird (in Fārs) and at Ad-Dawraḡ (in Khūzistān) was twenty-two thousand pieces; these were laid in the corridors and courts, being spread under the feet of the nobles, and the Greek Envoys walked over such carpets all the way from the limit of the new (Public Gate called the) Bāb-al-‘Āma, right to the presence of the Caliph Muḥtadir;—but this number did not include the fine rugs in the chambers and halls of assembly, of the manufacture

¹ The word in the original is “*ḡalābāt*,” which I can find in no dictionary; I translate it as equivalent to “*ḡalāb*” in the plural.

of Tabaristān and Dabīk, spread over the other carpets, and these were not to be trodden with the feet.

“The Envoys of the Greek Emperor, being brought in by the Hall of the Great (Public Gate called the) Bāb-al-‘Āma, were taken first to the palace known as the Khān-al-Khayl (the Cavalry House). This was a palace that was for the most part built with porticoes of marble columns. On the right side of this house stood five hundred mares caparisoned each with a saddle of gold or silver, while on the left side stood five hundred mares with brocade saddle-cloths and long head-covers; also every mare was held in hand by a groom magnificently dressed. From this palace the Ambassadors passed through corridors and halls, opening one into the other, until they entered the Park of the Wild Beasts. This was a palace with various kinds of wild animals therein, who entered the same from the Park, herding together and coming up close to the visitors, sniffing them, and eating from their hands. Next the Envoys went out to the palace where stood four elephants caparisoned in peacock-silk brocade; and on the back of each were eight men of Sind, and javelin-men with fire, and the sight of these caused much terror to the Greeks. Then they came to a palace where there were one hundred lions, fifty to the right hand and fifty to the left, every lion being held in by the hand of its keeper, and about its head and neck were iron chains.

“Then the Envoys passed to what was called the New Kiosk (Al-Jawsak-al-Muḥdith), which is a palace in the midst of gardens. In the centre thereof is a tank made of tin (Rasās Kālī), round which flows a stream in a conduit also of tin, that is more lustrous than polished silver. This tank is thirty ells in the length by twenty across, and round it are set four magnificent pavilions with gilt seats adorned with embroidery of Dabīk, and the pavilions are covered over with the gold work of Dabīk. All round this tank extends a garden with lawns wherein grow palm-trees, and it is said that their number is four hundred, and the height of each is five ells. Now the entire height of these

trees, from root to spathe, is enclosed in carved teak-wood, encircled with gilt copper rings. And all these palms bear full-grown dates, which in almost all seasons are ever ripe, and do not decay. Round the sides of the garden also are melons of the sort called *Dastabuya*, and also other species. The Ambassadors passed out of this palace, and next came to the Palace of the Tree (*Dār-ash-Shajara*), where (as has already been said) is a tree, and this is standing in the midst of a great circular tank filled with clear water. The tree has eighteen branches, every branch having numerous twigs, on which sit all sorts of gold and silver birds, both large and small. Most of the branches of this tree are of silver, but some are of gold, and they spread into the air carrying leaves of divers colours. The leaves of the tree move as the wind blows, while the birds pipe and sing. On the one side of this palace, to the right of the tank, are the figures of fifteen horsemen, mounted upon their mares, and both men and steeds are clothed and caparisoned in brocade. In their hands the horsemen carry long-poled javelins, and those on the right are all pointed in one direction (it being as though each were attacking his adversary),¹ for on the left-hand side is a like row of horsemen. Next the Greek Envoys entered the Palace of Paradise (*Qaṣr-al-Firdūs*). Here there were carpets and furniture in such quantity as cannot be detailed or enumerated, and round the halls of the *Firdūs* were hung ten thousand gilded breastplates. From hence the Ambassadors went forth traversing a corridor that was three hundred ells in the length, on either side of which were hung some ten thousand other pieces of arms, to wit, bucklers, helmets, casques, cuirasses, coats of mail, with ornamented quivers and bows. Here, too, were stationed near upon two thousand Eunuchs, black and white, in double line, to right and left.

“Then at length, after the Ambassadors had thus been

¹ MSS. corrupt; added from *Yāqūt*, II, 251.

taken round twenty and three various palaces, they were brought forth to the Court of the Ninety. Here were the Pages of the Privy Chamber, full-armed, sumptuously dressed, each of admirable stature. In their hands they carried swords, small battle-axes, and maces. The Ambassadors next passed down the lines formed by the black slaves, the deputy chamberlains, the soldiers, the footmen, and the sons of the Kāids, until they again came to the Presence Hall. Now there were a great number of the Slavonian Eunuchs in all these palaces, who (during the visit) were occupied in offering to all present water, cooled with snow, to drink; also sherbets and beer (fuḳkā'); and some of these Slavonians went round with the Ambassadors, to whom, as they walked, or sat to take rest in some seven different places, water was thus offered, and they drank.

“Now one named Abu ‘Omar of Tarsūs, surnamed Ṣāhib-as-Sultān, and Captain of the Syrian Frontier, went with the Ambassadors everywhere, and he was habited in a black vest with sword and baldric. Thus, at length, they came again to the presence of the Caliph Muḳtadir, whom they found in the Palace of the Crown (Kaṣr-at-Tāj)¹ upon the Tigris bank. He was arrayed in clothes of Dabiḳ-stuff embroidered in gold, being seated on an ebony throne overlaid with Dabiḳ-stuff embroidered in gold likewise, and on his head was the tall bonnet called Kālanṣuwa. To the right of the throne hung nine collars of gems like the Subaj (which keeps off the evil eye), and to the left of the same were the like, all of famous jewels, the largest of which was of such a size that its sheen eclipsed the daylight. Before the Caliph stood five of his sons, three to the right and two to the left. Then the Ambassadors, with their interpreter, halted before Muḳtadir, and stood in the posture of humility (with their arms crossed), while one of the Greeks addressed words to Mūnis the Eunuch, and to Naṣr the Chamberlain, who were the interpreters of the Caliph, saying: ‘But that

¹ See Ibn Serapion, J.R.A.S. 1895, p. 284.

I know for a surety that your Lord desires not that (as is our custom) I should kiss the carpet, I should verily have bowed and kissed it. But behold, I am now doing what your envoys have never been required by us to do, for verily this standing in the posture of humility (with the arms crossed) is also enjoined by our custom.' Then for an hour the two Ambassadors stood thus (before the Caliph), for they were twain, an older and a younger man, the younger being the chief Ambassador, while the elder was the interpreter; but the King of the Greeks had charged the business of the Embassy on the elder also, in the event of death befalling the younger Ambassador.

"Afterwards the Caliph Muḩtadir, with his own hand, delivered to the Ambassadors his reply to the King of the Greeks, which was copious and complete. The Ambassadors, on receiving this, kissed it in honour, after which the two Envoys went out by the Private Gate (Bāb-al-Khāṣṣa) to the Tigris, and together with their companions embarked in various particular boats of the Caliph, and went up-stream to where they had their lodging, namely, to the palace known as the Dār Ṣā'id. Here there were brought to them fifty purses of money, and in each purse there were 5,000 Dirhams (in all about £10,000), while on Abu 'Omar (the aforementioned Captain of the Frontier) was bestowed the Robe of Honour of the Sultan. Then the Ambassadors, being mounted on horseback, rode on their way: and these things took place in the year 305 A.H." Thus ends the account in Al-Khaṭīb.

With the facts recorded in the foregoing pages the chronicles of Ibn-al-Athir (VIII, 79) and of Abu-l-Faraj (Beirut edition, p. 270) closely agree. The Embassy is there reported to have reached Baghdād in the month of Muharram of the year above mentioned, which corresponds to July, 917. As already stated, the Emperor of Constantinople requested, that, after an armistice had been agreed to, the Moslems should send and ransom such of their captive brethren as were in Christian hands. This

was to be done without delay, and Mūnis, the Eunuch who commanded the armies of the Caliph, was entrusted with a sum of 120,000 Dinārs, or gold pieces, equivalent to about half that figure in pounds sterling. Accompanying the two Envoys, Mūnis proceeded to the frontier with a body of troops duly provided with rations and munitions. These troops, it would appear, were needed for making some further arrangements with the various governors of each frontier town in regard to the ransom—in other words, Mūnis forced these governors to supply additional funds. The paragraph in the chronicle ends with the significant phrase, “but as to the ransoming, this was left to the hands of Mūnis,” and he alone doubtless could have told how the sums were spent.
