

Front Matter

Title: Baghdād

Subtitle: From Its Beginnings to the 14th Century

Cover Image:



General View of Baghdād with Cupola of 'Umar al-Suhrawardī's (d. 1234) Tomb (left) by Eugène Flandin, 1861

Dedication: Dedicated to the memory of the late Josef van Ess

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Preface

Jens Scheiner/Isabel Toral

The present handbook is the result of a conference organized by the editors in Berlin in 2013,¹ enriched by the additional contributions of several colleagues to fill remaining gaps. From the beginning, the aim was to produce an exhaustive volume that would cover all possible themes connected to the urban complex of Baghdād, from its origins rooted in Sasanian Mesopotamia up to the Mongol period, and thus to provide the reader with a history of this metropolis and its diverse inhabitants from numerous perspectives.

The guiding principle was to take a spatial approach—that is, to focus on political, social, cultural and economic activities that took place in Baghdād's large urban area, which covered some seven thousand hectares,² as well as its hinterland. By hinterland we refer to the alluvial plain (*sawād*) around the city that is characterized by the channel of the Tigris River, the irrigation canal system connecting the Euphrates and Tigris (west of Baghdād) and the fertile Diyāla Plains northeast of Baghdād, as well as the irrigation canals watering the land east of the city, which is called in some geographical sources the Nahr Būq District (northeast of Baghdād) and the Kalwādhā District (southeast of Baghdād).³ The urban space and the hinterland have always been symbiotically connected, following the general rule that, even when the density of settlement varies over the course of time, a city cannot live without the agricultural production of the hinterland, and, likewise, the hinterland benefits from the urban markets and the goods produced in the city. From a wider spatial perspective, Baghdād and its hinterland lie in the middle of the area dominated by the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers, which is referred to by the imprecise modern term Mesopotamia (derived from Greek *méso potamói* [The Land between Two Rivers]).⁴ The northern region of this riverscape is called al-Jazīra (The Island) in this volume,⁵ following the Arabic terminology employed in geographical and

¹ The late Josef van Ess gave a brilliant inaugural address to this conference, which he later published as part of his *Kleine Schriften*, III, 2148-2170.

² For this figure, see Lassner, *Topography*, 178-183; Lassner, *Middle East Remembered*, 177.

³ For the Arabic names of the eastern hinterland, see Le Strange, *Description*, 281, n. 2.

⁴ This denomination may go back to ancient usage of the term. In Antiquity, Mesopotamia referred either to the region north of today's Baghdād up to the Taurus Mountains (the southern part was known as Babylonia) or from Ptolemy's time onward to the whole area of modern Iraq, i.e. an area ranging from the sources of the two rivers to the Persian Gulf.

⁵ In ancient usage al-Jazīra roughly corresponds to Mesopotamia, sometimes also to Assyria. For the confusing terminology of these geographical areas, see *Brill's New Pauly*, s.v. Mesopotamia (H.J. Nissen/J. Oelsner) and s.v. Babylonia (J. Oelsner).

historical works, and is characterized by mountains and deep valleys. Because irrigation is difficult in this terrain, it is, in contrast to the areas lying south of it, a region with rainfed agriculture. The area of the riverscape, roughly from Takrīt, north of Sāmarrā' and Baghdād, to al-Baṣra, close to the Persian Gulf, is an extraordinarily rich agricultural region, irrigated by a dense system of canals. In this volume (as well as in the Arabic geographical literature) it is called Iraq (Arab. al-'Irāq). It is the region where both riverbeds come closest to each other. Iraq thus includes what was called previously Babylonia or southern Mesopotamia.⁶ The southern area of the riverscape, with its marshland and lakes, is referred to in this book as southern Iraq, again following pre-modern Arabic terminology.⁷ This wider spatial framework exceeding Baghdād's urban space and hinterland will however only be mentioned when relevant.

In terms of chronology, the book's scope extends beyond the time frame of the 'Abbāsīd dynasty's rule. Starting in Late Antiquity (i.e. in the 3rd century), with the rule of the Sasanian dynasty in the just mentioned area, it describes the history of the urban space of Baghdād up to the 14th century. In so doing, we deliberately place Madīnat al-Salām (The City of Peace), as the palatial complex founded by Caliph al-Manṣūr (r. 754-775) in 762 was called, into the late antique and early Islamic context of the urban history of Iraq. We also go beyond the usual tipping point of 1258, in which the Mongols conquered Baghdād and killed the last 'Abbāsīd caliph residing in the city, in order to show the continuity of urban life against the common perception of the coming of a new Islamic order or a societal collapse caused by savage people from the East.⁸ Baghdād did not come into being exactly in 762, but existed, albeit on a much smaller scale, even before al-Manṣūr's palatial city, which was therefore not founded in a vacuum. Nor did it disappear after 1258, but continued as an important regional center and academic hub, as this handbook will show.

We have subdivided the above-mentioned time frame (the 3rd to 14th centuries) into the following six periods: the Sasanian and Early Islamic period, the Early 'Abbāsīd period, the Būyīd period, the Saljūq period, the Late 'Abbāsīd period and the Ilkhanid period. The main criterion for this periodization is the change in the dynasty that effectively ruled Baghdād and its hinterland at the time. Thus, we stick to the following well-known dates of caesura:

⁶ In ancient sources, Babylonia corresponds to the land surrounding Babylon (near modern al-Ḥilla), but often, by extension, it encompasses the entire region of the ancient city states (see *Brill's New Pauly*, s.v. Babylonia [J. Oelsner]).

⁷ The terminology is not always consistently used in the sources, however.

⁸ The last perception is so dominant that it nevertheless can be felt in some of the volume's contributions.

- 224 (The Sasanian King Ardashīr I killed the Parthian King Ardavan (or Arthabanus) IV and succeeded him in the rule of Iran and Iraq);
- 762 (Caliph al-Manṣūr founded his palatial city and thus made the urban complex of Baghdād the capital of the ‘Abbāsīd Empire)
- 945 (The Daylamite commander Aḥmad b. Būya conquered Baghdād and made it one of the centers of the Būyīd Empire)
- 1055 (The Turkmen military leader Ṭughril Beg conquered Baghdād and made it one of the centers of the Saljūq Empire)
- 1150s (Caliph al-Muqtafī gained control over Baghdād and reestablished it as the capital of an ‘Abbāsīd dominion, albeit this time only in Iraq)
- 1258 (The Mongol commander Hülegü conquered Baghdād and made it one of the centers of the Ilkhanid Empire)

Adhering to these geographical and temporal frames, we have grouped the chapters in this handbook into thematic sections that cover the development of the urban topography and building activities in the 8th century (section I, see also the thematic introduction), the political history of Baghdād (sections II and III), social and cultural practices within the political setting, in particular at courts (section IV), the field of education (section V) and the religious realm (section VI).⁹

It must be acknowledged, however, that certain thematic gaps have proved to be inevitable. For instance, it would have been interesting to include numerous other themes: a detailed portrayal of Baghdādī women and children and their role in urban society and women as donors of pious endowments, an in-depth analysis of urban social movements and the reasons for the frequent street violence in Baghdād,¹⁰ a depiction of the Baghdādī underworld, a chapter dedicated to the slave-soldiers, another to the climate history of the city and its hinterland, as well as a detailed history of the urban economy, the financial markets and the *sūqs*—to name just a few examples. We have tried to supplement some of these gaps in our thematic introduction and by adding several shorter More-to-know boxes.

⁹ For a more detailed description of the sections and a summary of the respective contributions, see below and the respective introductory passages before each section.

¹⁰ For a first assessment, see Cahen, *Mouvements*.



Fig. I.1: A Spinstress and Her Child Receiving a Guest

These gaps also have to be placed into the context of the difficulties connected with the primary sources. Particularly unfortunate is the scarcity of material remains, which forces researchers to rely almost exclusively on written sources, in particular for the reconstruction of Baghdād's topography and building history. This results in a high degree of uncertainty about the actual shape of the city during the various periods of its existence. Just to give an example, it is not even certain that the famous palatial city founded by al-Manṣūr was circular.¹¹ The reasons for the scarcity of material remains are manifold: a) the use of fragile building materials (burnt or sun-dried bricks, wood, few stones), b) the numerous natural disasters in and conquests of Baghdād, which sometimes led to the massive destruction of buildings and urban infrastructure, and c) the relatively limited building activity in the Late 'Abbāsīd and Ilkhanīd periods compared to previous centuries. Thus, the very few excavations that have taken place in Baghdād have not brought to light much new evidence.¹² Unfortunately, the same holds true for the archival record and documentary sources. In the period of investigation here, archives had not only seldom been established and, even if they existed, archival material has not survived to the present day. Regarding documentary sources pertaining to Baghdād, we have mostly silver and gold coins, numerous manuscripts, some plates and glassware as well as embroideries (*ṭirāz*) but very few inscriptions. Written texts,

¹¹ For more on this point, see More-to-know box II by Jens Scheiner.

¹² For a thorough discussion of the few architectural remains from the Late 'Abbāsīd period still extant today, see Tabbaa, *Resurgence*.

with all the problems they pose in terms of understanding and interpretation, remain our main source of historical information for these periods.¹³

Finally, there is also the problem that in many texts (primary sources and research bibliography alike) Baghdād is used as a placeholder for the ‘Abbāsīd period as a whole. There are good reasons for this, since the fate of the city was strongly connected to that of the ‘Abbāsīd Caliphate and linked to the ups and downs of the dynasty. Many political actors and cultural agents of the early centuries of the ‘Abbāsīd Caliphate were either Baghdādīs or had spent longer periods of their lives in Baghdād, and cultural and intellectual activities up to the late 10th century were centralized and focused on the ‘Abbāsīd court. However, we have made a strong effort not to transform this book into a general cultural and intellectual history of the ‘Abbāsīd period by extending the scope of the volume to Baghdād’s hinterland and by including actors, institutions and activities that exceeded the boundaries of Baghdād to some extent.¹⁴

Outline of the Handbook

After a thematic introduction that includes a definition of a (palatial) city and an overview of the topography and the social groups of Baghdād, authored by the editors, the first section titled “The Foundation of Madīnat al-Salām and Its Legends” focuses on al-Manṣūr’s palatial city, The City of Peace, which was the heart of early Baghdād. The first contribution by Isabel Toral studies the legends surrounding the foundation of the palatial city in 762 and discusses their cultural resonance. The author argues that these legends, being part of a wider Mesopotamian discourse and symbolizing the birth of a new era, the universal power of the ‘Abbāsīd dynasty and the civilizing program of its founder, may also have influenced al-Manṣūr’s actions at that time. The next chapter by Bernard O’Kane draws an outline of the architectural and artistic legacy of pre-Mongol Baghdād. After a detailed description of Madīnat al-Salām and the first urban structures of Baghdād the author presents extant material remains of the time, such as Qur’ān and illuminated manuscripts as well as textiles that were produced in Baghdād and the architectural remains of the Late ‘Abbāsīd period. The

¹³ For more on the material remains, see Bernard O’Kane’s contribution in this volume; for an overview of the original sources featuring Baghdād’s cityscape, see Appendix I.

¹⁴ As can be expected, some of the contributions are more interpretative and raise new points, while others have a more descriptive take. This is due to the agendas and areas of expertise of the individual contributors, as well as the situation of the sources for a given topic.

remaining contributions Of the first section are two More-to-know boxes. In the first Johannes Thomann analyzes the accounts of the horoscope cast for the foundation of the City of Peace, questioning the historicity of the transmitted texts, but stresses that this and other horoscopes provide important evidence of the practice of astronomy and astrology at the beginning of the 'Abbāsīd period. The second More-to-know box critically reevaluates the evidence from original sources and previous research for the circularity of Madīnat al-Salām. Because both are quite problematic an exact circularity cannot be established beyond doubt. Thus, it has to be taken into account that al-Manṣūr's palatial city may have been of a roundish or even oval shape.

Starting with the Sasanian period, the second section titled "A Historical Overview from Late Antiquity to the Mongol Period" illustrates the history of Baghdād in early 'Abbāsīd, Būyīd, Saljūq, late 'Abbāsīd and Ilkhanid times (8th to 14th centuries). In the first chapter, Parvaneh Pourshariati studies the pre-history of Baghdād by describing the urban complex of Ctesiphon and its surroundings (located ca. 40km south of Baghdād) in the Parthian and Sasanian eras. She argues that this urban complex consisting of several "cities" and various social groups was the precursor to Baghdād's topographical and social composition. Then, Jens Scheiner narrates the history of the early 'Abbāsīd dynasty (749-945) by focusing on the relationship between the caliphs' military activities and their construction of palatial cities. The author argues that starting with al-Saffāḥ a trajectory of caliphal urban constructions for the military up to the first half of the 10th century can be observed. Moreover, the contribution emphasizes caliphal succession, clusters of father-son relationships within the 'Abbāsīd family and individuals that shared power with the caliphs or usurped it from them. Next, Nuha Alshaar covers the political and social events that took place in Baghdād under the rule of the Būyīds (945-1055). She thereby argues that urban rivalry and struggle caused the emergence of a fragmented society in the city with reinforced social boundaries across intellectual, religious and ethnic lines. Vanessa van Renterghem continues the historical overview by describing the developments that occurred after the Saljūqs seized power in Baghdād in 1055 and explains how, in the first half of the 12th century, the 'Abbāsīd caliphs regained some importance and financial and military strength in a busy and still evolving metropolis (1055-1150s). She discovers an increased mobility of the political, military and scholarly elites who moved from Khurāsān to Baghdād and the role particularly women played as patrons in this period. The late 'Abbāsīd Caliphate (1160-1258) as a period of political, economic and cultural

revival is then treated by Hend Gilli-Elewy, who focuses on how Caliph al-Nāṣir li-Dīn Allāh (r. 1180-1225) regained control of the army and how he redefined the administration to center around himself by means of his *futuwwa* ideology. Michal Biran, for her part, sketches the processes that ultimately led to the Mongol conquest of Baghdād in 1258, followed by an overview of the ensuing historical and social developments under Ilkhanid rule (1240s-1330s). She particularly negates the mythical dimensions this conquest acquired and underlines the impact Ilkhanid rulers and their administrations had in rebuilding Baghdād as a striving intellectual center with a viable economy. Finally, Richard Bulliet analyzes Baghdād's and its hinterland's long-term economic development and trade patterns in regard to the agricultural production. He proposes to interpret the evidence as a relocation trend of peasants spurred by their conversion to Islam. Moreover, he argues for the impact of climate change as a central cause for the economic (and demographic) decline that struck Baghdād and its hinterland in the tenth and eleventh centuries.

The third section "Baghdād's Neighboring Empires" focuses on the 'Abbāsīd caliphs' relations to the Byzantine, Carolingian and Chinese Empires from the 8th to the 12th centuries, as reflected in the exchange of embassies and trade missions, as well as in cultural contacts and occasional minor military encounters. Although Baghdād as a city and as the 'Abbāsīd capital scarcely figures in the sources of its most immediate neighbors. In this connection, Olof Heilo draws a colorful panorama of the comparatively intense and continuous contact between the Byzantine Empire and the 'Abbāsīd Caliphate. This was a complex relationship characterized by competition, antagonism and military conflict, but also one defined by interaction, mutual understanding and respect. Moreover, the author stresses that while religious struggle (*jihād*) played a central role from the Muslim point of view, the Byzantines were far more struck by the 'Abbāsīd accumulation of cultural capital through the Greek-Arabic translation movement. The second contribution in this section, by Kirill Dimitriev and Klaus Oschema, analyzes the relationship between the Frankish kings and the 'Abbāsīd caliphs from both perspectives and focus on the representation of Baghdād and western Europe in of Latin sources and Arabic texts. They conclude that although little was known by each society about the other this does not mean that both societies were not interested in the outside world, but only that they set different emphases than we would do today. Finally, Angela Schottenhammer delineates in her More-to-know box the Sino-'Abbāsīd relations in the Early 'Abbāsīd period based on Chinese sources and Arabic travelogues, as well as some

archaeological evidence. She concludes that trade in luxury goods and official missions between the Chinese and Abbāsīd courts created a close connection between both empires, despite the previous military encounter in the Battle of Talas in 751.

The fourth section “The ‘Abbāsīd Court and Its Legacy” describes the impact of ‘Abbāsīd court culture on the literary production in Baghdād from the 8th to the 11th centuries, and how it became a model for other courts in the Islamicate World (including Baghdād) and survived as a powerful icon in Arabic literature. Only thus did Baghdād become the paradigm of the perfect city in a golden age in the Arabic literary *imaginaire*. The section starts with Letizia Osti’s contribution in which she draws a vivid tableau of Baghdādī court culture in the Early ‘Abbāsīd period (9th-10th centuries) and demonstrates how the court was presented as a space of interaction between the caliph and his male and female courtiers. As Beatrice Gruendler shows in her contribution on poetry in Baghdād, ‘Abbāsīd courtly culture also rendered a model for the households of the elite and middle class in the city, who strove to imitate the caliphal court by forming their own poetry sessions and literary salons. Hence, poetry (and literature) became ubiquitous and was cultivated in mosques, courtyards, streets and book markets, making Baghdād, that also served as inspiration for a new type of “urban” verse, a place of publication and reception of poetry. Then, Isabel Toral describes how the development of Arabic belles-lettres and fine artistic prose owed much to the stylistic refinement introduced by the administrative elite in Baghdād, and how the city profited from the influx of intellectuals from elsewhere. She argues that, in contrast to scholars of the Islamic sciences, litterateurs were so dependent on patronage that they left the city gradually left the city when the ‘Abbāsīd court and the elite was unable to support them, leading to a decline of literary production in the city from the 10th century onward. A final More-to-know box also by Isabel Toral provides a critical view on the *topos* of Baghdādī culture as a golden age. The author argues to see this golden age as a back projection from later periods (including the 19th-20th centuries) and to take contingencies into account when speaking about the history of Baghdād.

The fifth section “Institutions of Learning and Fields of Knowledge” comprises a description of the various Islamic and non-Islamic sciences pursued in Baghdād from the 8th to the 14th centuries. Beside the religious fields of knowledge of Sunnī and Shī‘ī Islam as well as the institutions where these sciences were taught, it presents philosophy with all its subfields and the natural sciences. The section starts with the contribution by Sebastian

Günther who focuses on the informal and institutionalized modes of learning in the Islamic sciences, such as Sunnī and Shīī law, Prophetical traditions, Qur’ānic studies, Arabic grammar and lexicography, theology, mysticism and history, and highlights the biographies of important scholars active in Baghdād. Further, he explores the connectedness of these sciences with the cultural ideal of *adab*. Placing the developments of Baghdād into a wider context he argues for a transformation of the Islamicate civilization into a “knowledge society”. A More-to-know box by Mehmetcan Akpinar investigates the contribution Medinan scholars active in the Islamic sciences made to Baghdād’s emergence as the new intellectual center. He argues that the early ‘Abbāsīd caliphs were eager to benefit from Medinan religious and legal expertise in particular, thus causing an influx of scholars from Medina to Baghdād. Finally, the contribution by Damien Janos provides an intriguing overview of the blossoming of philosophical and scientific learning in Baghdād during the Early ‘Abbāsīd and Būyīd periods, as well as the main ideas and scientific approaches of philosophers, astronomers and astrologers and physicians of that time. The author explains the exceptional quality of this interdisciplinary scholarship first by the fact that Baghdād centralized much of the intellectual activity (as well as a fair amount of economic wealth), second by the strong presence of Christian inhabitants and their heritage in the city and third by the administrative elite that resulted in extensive patronage networks.

The sixth and final section titled “The Religious Communities” presents a survey of the religious communities in Baghdād and its hinterland from Late Antiquity to the Mongol period, their social composition, institutions and creeds. In the first contribution, Christopher Melchert introduces traditionalist and rationalist variants of Sunnism and Shīism and outlines the early ‘Abbāsīd caliphs’ diverse attitudes towards Sunnī and/or Shīī scholars and groups in Baghdād. In this context, he argues that the dichotomy between rationalists and traditionalists is too simple and that a third category, i.e. semi-rationalist Sunnīs and Shīīs, should be introduced to correctly describe the situation in ninth- and tenth-century Baghdād. In the last More-to-know box David Bennett highlights the intellectual participation of a different group, the so-called Mu‘tazilites, in the development of theological and philosophical thought in Baghdād from the 8th to the 10th centuries by summarizing the group’s main doctrines and ideas. Thereafter, Pavel Basharin focuses on the phenomenon of the Şūfī school of early ‘Abbāsīd Baghdād. By presenting a set of famous Şūfī scholars, including their works and thought, he illustrates the interactions of individual mystics with other local scholars and

political authorities. The author argues for a transition from renunciation (*zuhd*) to mysticism or Sufism (*taṣawwuf*) and describes the institutionalization of Baghdādī Sufism into a distinct Islamic tradition. Turning to non-Muslim groups, Michael Morony portrays the major Christian communities in Baghdād and its hinterland and sketches their development in the Muslim society from the Sasanian to the Late ‘Abbāsīd periods. The author arrives at the conclusion that government intervention in Christian affairs was a current feature of these times, but that wide-reaching anti-Christian measures and regulations were exceptional cases in the long-lasting peaceful cohabitation of Christians and Muslims in Baghdād. In particular, the so-called ‘Umar’s Stipulations did not play any role in the religious life of the city. Thereafter, Y. Zvi Stampfer illustrates Jewish presence in Iraq and Baghdād in Late Antiquity and under Muslim rule. He shows that, especially after the main Jewish academies moved to Baghdād in the late ninth century, the city became a vibrant center of intellectual and spiritual life for Jews, who joined academic discussions there. Moreover, anti-Jewish activities were rare, thus making Baghdād an important center of Jewry in the world. Finally, Desmond Durkin-Meisterernst portrays the three most important non-monotheistic groups in Baghdād and its hinterland, namely the Zoroastrians, Manichaeans and Gnostics (in particular the Mandeans), stressing that almost nothing is known about the groups’ religious sites and festivals in the city. This has to do, as the author argues, with the groups’ small numbers and their different approaches to urban society: while Zoroastrians and Manichaeans were likely to have been present in cities, including Baghdād, until the 10th century, Gnostics preferred rural areas for their living.

The volume ends with an epilogue, an appendix—a survey of original sources on the topography of Baghdād—and the usual indices.

In the above-mentioned inaugural address, Josef van Ess calls to “forget Baghdād”, because today it is a mere shadow of what it was in earlier times. He then qualifies his appeal by stating to do so only after this handbook project has come to an end.¹⁵ With the end of this academic endeavor we hope to have contributed to Baghdād’s unforgettable eternal fame and that the images we have drawn about the past will enlighten those who live in the present, may it be in Baghdād or in other parts of the world. *Wo kämen wir sonst hin?*

¹⁵ Van Ess: “Also doch „Forget Baghdad?“ Ja, gewiß. Aber erst nach Ablauf des „Projektes“, das hiermit vom Stapel geht. Wo kämen wir sonst hin?” (van Ess, *Kleine Schriften*, III, 2170).

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