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Legends about the Foundation of a Marvelous City

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Section I: The Foundation of Madīnat al-Salām and Its Legends

After the general introduction to Baghdād's urban development and its various social groups the first section 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 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.

Legends about the Foundation of a Marvelous City

Isabel Toral

*Have you seen in all the length and breadth of the earth
A city such as Baghdād? Indeed it is paradise on earth.
Life in Baghdād is pure; its wood becomes verdant,
While life outside of it is without purity or freshness.
The lifespan in it is long; its food
Is healthful; for some parts of the earth are more healthful than others.
Its Lord has decided that no caliph shall die
In it; indeed he determines what he wishes for his creatures.¹*

Introduction

Cities are a dominant theme in communal foundation narratives since they anchor the community's destiny in space and highlight the creativity and civilizing achievements of its inhabitants and rulers. Because cities are artificial spaces, determined by human agency, they symbolize the triumph of humankind over wilderness and of centralized political power over anarchy. Often these communal foundation narratives invoke divine interference and protection to emphasize the unique status of the city and recount marvelous prophecies that announce the city's prodigious fate. They also serve to mark the birth of a new era and the takeover by a different dynasty, and occasionally, they might become foundation myths for entire civilizations (like the mythical foundation of Rome by Romulus, Remus and the Capitoline she-wolf, a story that symbolized the beginning of the Roman World).²

'Abbāsīd Baghdād, the "City of Peace" (Madīnat al-Salām),³ "Mother of the World and Mistress over the Countries" (*umm al-dunyā wa-sayyidat al-bilād*)⁴ was one of those

¹ Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Ta'riḫ Baghdād*, 3-4; tr. Salmon 78 attributed to 'Umāra b. 'Aqīl b. Bilāl b. Jarīr b. al-Khaṭafa, a Baṣran poet from the time of Caliph al-Ma'mūn (r. 813-833); see *Tr. Salmon* 78, n. 1; see also Yāqūt, *Mu'jam*, I, 460b-461a.

² See Wendell, *Imago*, 99-103 and passim; see also L'Orange, *Iconology* about the symbology of cities in the ancient Near East, especially about the idea of round cities, and Azara, *Fundación*, passim.

³ Madīnat al-Salām was the official name of the palatial city, used in coins and weights (referring to the Qur'ānic paradise, see Q. 6:127 and 10:26), but Baghdād, the name of the previous Sasanian village on the site, became the most widely used name among the people. See the explanations of the name Baghdād and further names for the city in al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Ta'riḫ Baghdād*, 1, Yāqūt, *Mu'jam*, I, 456-457 and Duri, *Baghdād*. See also the historical sketch by Jens Scheiner and me at the beginning of this volume.

⁴ Yāqūt, *Mu'jam*, I, 456. Cities were always imagined as female in Arabic culture.

emblematic cities that fired the imagination of the people and gave way to a plethora of legends. After Baghdād's perceived decline in the ninth century,⁵ historical memory transformed the 'Abbāsīd city into the epitome of Islamic glory and converted Baghdād into a veritable *lieu de mémoire* for the remembrance of the 'Abbāsīd past, particularly of its so-called golden age, and eventually into a metaphor for Islamic civilization as a whole.⁶

To explore Baghdād's function as a cultural symbol, this chapter will focus on the main narratives that recount the foundation of Madīnat al-Salām in 762 and the ensuing development of Baghdād by the 'Abbāsīd Caliph al-Manṣūr (r. 754-775) and read them as historical *legends*, leaving aside their value as sources for the reconstruction of the historical events and the early building history of Baghdād, a topic that is discussed in other chapters in this volume.⁷

According to the definition by Timothy Tangherlini, historical legends are historicized narratives that appear to be factual, since they refer to easily verifiable topographic and geographic features and historical persons,⁸ but that do not necessarily reflect historical accuracy. The various reports about the planning and building activities of al-Manṣūr indeed abound in numbers, measures, names and other factual data—a feature that seems to make them appropriate for accurate topographical reconstructions. However, the same accounts are mixed up with many literary *topoi*, romantic clichés, anecdotes and supernatural elements, which are typical characteristics of fictional texts. This holds particularly true for the later versions of these narratives. This feature fits into the typical elasticity of legends, which are characterized by a remarkable tendency to incorporate new elements, thus growing in complexity and fictionalization over the course of time.⁹ Legends do not blossom in a chaotic way, however, but follow certain patterns set by the cultural and historical context. On the one hand, they reflect “on a psychological level a symbolic representation of folk belief and

⁵ The terrible destructions of the Civil War of 813 and the bombardment ordered by al-Ma'mūn are commonly regarded as the beginning of Baghdād's decline (see Sourdel, *Baghdad*, 257-258), although the real dimension of this crisis is still a matter of debate. As Michael Cooperson has pointed out, the elegiac modus of nostalgia is a literary stance inherent to the topic of Baghdād, and does not necessarily reflect the social and economic reality (Cooperson, *Rhetoric*, 99-100; more on this below). For the golden age myth in connection to Baghdād, see my “More-to-know” Box IV in this volume. See also the several chapters in this volume attesting to the thriving economic and intellectual activity of the city beyond 813.

⁶ For modern versions of the Baghdād myth, see Cooperson, *Rhetoric*, 103-105 and *passim*.

⁷ For a reconstruction of al-Manṣūr's palatial city, see Bernard O'Kane's contribution; for a discussion whether this was a round city or not, see Jens Scheiner's “More-to-know” Box II; for the historical development of Baghdād as a metropolis, see the historical sketch at the beginning of the work.

⁸ Tangherlini, *Legend*, 379. Thus legends are often misinterpreted as “true”. A factual appearance or a realistic style does not necessarily indicate factual content.

⁹ Tangherlini, *Legend*, 377.

collective experiences that serves as a reaffirmation of commonly held values of the group to whose tradition it belongs".¹⁰ On the other hand, they are only successful if they meet already existing cultural expectations, and thus they often work with intertextual reference to previous narratives. As will be shown in the following, the foundation legends of Baghdād belong to a typology of city narratives that circulated in Mesopotamia, a historical landscape famous for its centuries-old urban history.

Moreover, these narratives also contributed to shape historical reality, as powerful discourses do. As will be shown in the following, it is indeed probable that al-Manṣūr was familiar with older foundational legends and that he was inspired by them when he planned and built his palatial city. By emulating these forerunners, he deliberately inscribed his new foundation into the urban landscape of Mesopotamia.

The Sources

In the following, I will base my observations mainly on the accounts of the legends we find in the works by al-Ya'qūbī (d. after 908), al-Ṭabarī (d. 923), al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (d. 1071) and Yāqūt (d. 1229), since they were the most quoted and commented upon. Furthermore, because of the particular richness of traditions centered on the city of Baghdād, I will reduce my observations to the core narrative plot of the foundation legend and focus on its central literary motives or narrative *topoi*.

The earliest extensive description of 'Abbāsīd Baghdād that includes an account of the foundation act is found at the beginning of the geographic compendium *Kitāb al-buldān* (The Book of Regions) by al-Ya'qūbī (completed approx. in 891).¹¹ This placement indicates the central status the author-compiler attributes to Baghdād and Iraq as a whole: "I start with Iraq since it is the center of the world and the navel of the earth, and I mention Baghdād since it is in its middle, and the greatest city in it, without comparison in the East or the West".¹² As Michael Cooperson has shown, the *topos* of centrality as expressed here is inherent to the mythology of Baghdād and will be repeated again and again in other accounts.¹³ The text of al-Ya'qūbī was composed ca. 130 years after the foundation of Madīnat al-Salām and Baghdād's development into a metropolis, but seems to be based on an unnamed source by

¹⁰ Tangherlini, *Legend*, 385.

¹¹ Unfortunately, the introduction to the earlier work on Baghdād by Aḥmad b. Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr (d. 893), which might have included another description as well, is lost (see Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr, *Kitāb Baghdād*).

¹² Al-Ya'qūbī, *Kitāb al-buldān*, 232.

¹³ Cooperson, *Baghdad*, 100.

a contemporary witness, and is therefore considered as precious evidence for the reconstruction of the early history of the city.¹⁴ Al-Ya'qūbī's contemporary al-Balādhurī (d. 892), in contrast, gives only a very sober and summarized report on Baghdād's foundation in his work *Futūḥ al-buldān* (The Conquests of the Regions), free from any references to legendary details or to al-Manṣūr's palatial city.¹⁵

The most sophisticated description of Baghdād in terms of topographical detail is preserved in a work that was composed in the 11th century, namely in the extensive introduction to the monumental biographical dictionary entitled *Ta'riḫ al-Baghdād* (The History of Baghdād) compiled by al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī. The passages in this work form the basis of most of our modern reconstructions of 'Abbāsīd Baghdād, including the famous round shape of al-Manṣūr's palatial city. According to Jacob Lassner, al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī took as a basis the text by al-Ya'qūbī and enriched it with information drawn from otherwise lost sources, such as the non-extant parts of Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr's work. Both al-Ya'qūbī and al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī aim to describe the exact topography of the city in al-Manṣūr's time and give details about its planning and building activities. However, they do not elaborate on its actual foundation, which is only briefly mentioned and does not serve as the main focus of their works.

The historian al-Ṭabarī (d. 923), on the contrary, dedicates an extensive section to the foundation act of the city, which he inserts in the chapter corresponding to the year 145 AH (762)¹⁶ of his annalistic universal history *Ta'riḫ al-rusul wa-l-mulūk* (The History of the Prophets and Kings). Al-Ṭabarī has abundant anecdotal material about the circumstances and reasons why the caliph chose that particular location for building his palatial city. Following his usual compositional pattern, he quotes extensively convergent and oppositional versions of traditions. The exhaustive treatment of the foundation act shows that he wanted to emphasize its symbolic meaning in the context of world history, by inserting the event in his interpretative scheme of Islamic salvation history. Whether al-Ṭabarī considered the information as historically trustworthy remains unclear; but certainly, he valued it as

¹⁴ Al-Ya'qūbī does not mention any source, but in the end he indicates that his description is based on Baghdād in al-Manṣūr's time (al-Ya'qūbī, *Kitāb al-buldān*, 254). This statement is confirmed by the limited description of the eastern side of the city, which was mostly built after al-Manṣūr's rule (see Lassner, *Notes*, 460).

¹⁵ Al-Balādhurī, *Futūḥ al-buldān*, 295-300.

¹⁶ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'riḫ*. Ed. de Goeje, III, 271-283; tr. McAuliffe Vol. 28, 237-252. The heading of the respective section reads (shortened) The Reason why Abū Ja'far Built Baghdād (*fī ḥādhiḥi l-sana ussisat madīnat Baghdād wa-hiya l-latī tud'ā Madīnat al-Manṣūr dhikr al-khabar 'an sabab binā' Abī Ja'far iyyāhā*).

meaningful for the history of the Islamic community. Given the emblematic character of al-Ṭabarī's *History* for later generations of historians, his account about Baghdād's foundation would become the most quoted and transmitted in later periods.

In contrast, the geographer and litterateur (*adīb*) Yāqūt al-Hamawī (d. 1229) mainly focuses on amusing details and engaging stories. In his *adab*-style entry on Baghdād¹⁷ he adds many anecdotal details, entertaining episodes and poetry, and expands and reshapes previous motifs. Other later authors, such as Ibn al-Athīr (d. 1233),¹⁸ Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 1201)¹⁹ or Ibn al-Ṭiḡṭaqā (d. ca. 1310),²⁰ merely quote and reshape al-Ṭabarī's and Yāqūt's versions.

The Caliph's Search, the City's Perfect Location and Its Planning

Under the heading The Reason why Abū Ja'far Built Baghdād, al-Ṭabarī, who conflates here the name of the city with al-Manṣūr's palatial city Madīnat al-Salām, begins his foundation narrative with an anonymous tradition that gives a relatively straightforward and unembellished account of the foundation circumstances. According to this testimony, after several uprisings, al-Manṣūr had lost confidence in the loyalty of the people of al-Kūfa, so that he decided to found a new capital at a prudent distance. Therefore, he went out personally to find a convenient location, traveling around for a while in Iraq. The most important factors for his choice were considerations about strategic and economic convenience; hence, when he came to the small village of Baghdād, he declared in a famous speech:

This is a good place for an army camp. Here is the Tigris, with nothing between us and China, and on it arrives all that the sea can bring, as well as provisions from the Jazīrah, Armenia and surrounding areas. Further, there is the Euphrates on which can arrive everything from Syria, al-Raqqah, and surrounding areas.²¹

Since this proved to be the ideal location, "he sketched a plan of the city and put an army commander in charge of each quarter".²²

¹⁷ Yāqūt, *Mu'jam*, I, 456-467.

¹⁸ Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, V, 425-428.

¹⁹ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Manāqib*, esp. 7-8.

²⁰ Ibn al-Ṭiḡṭaqā, *Ādāb*, 217-220.

²¹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*. Ed. de Goeje, III, 272; tr. McAuliffe Vol. 28, 238.

²² Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*. Ed. de Goeje, III, 272; tr. McAuliffe Vol. 28, 238.

The personal search of the caliph, as described in al-Ṭabarī's version, is a recurrent motif in the various versions of the legend, although the exact travel route of al-Manṣūr differs in detail. One cannot exclude the possibility that al-Manṣūr did in fact lead such an expedition. However, it is also a common *topos* that caliphs gave detailed instructions for the cities they founded, and that they occasionally even searched in person for suitable locations.²³ Caliph 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (r. 634-644), for instance, is said to have sent letters with detailed orders to his deputies when he commanded the foundation of the garrison cities al-Baṣra (in 635) and al-Kūfa (in 638).²⁴ The main intention of such narratives is to convey the message of authority and hierarchy, and to emphasize the personal commitment and agency of the caliph, who is portrayed as a responsible ruler attentive to the needs of his people. In some reports, al-Manṣūr is even said to have spent the night in some places to prove their healthy climates²⁵—and in others, ordering someone else to do so²⁶—thus taking into due consideration one of the typical problems of the Babylonian plain, namely, plagues of noisome insects and annoying mosquitos.

Related to this message of centralized authority is the idea of conscious, meticulous planning: according to several reports, al-Manṣūr called for the best craftsmen from all parts of his dominion²⁷ and ordered them to build the city according to his own, very detailed plan, which he commanded be drawn upon the ground using ashes.²⁸ He then walked along the outline to see for himself how it would look.

In al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī's and al-Ya'qūbī's accounts, the urban grid is described extensively, conveying the idea of a well-composed and elaborate order. The resulting city, as noted, is round (*al-madīna l-mudawwara*).²⁹ In addition, the palace of the caliph was built exactly in the city's center, thus emphasizing even more the centrality of the caliph's universal power (because of his position in the center of the center). The palace is described as having

²³ See also later in this chapter the foundation of Sāmarrā' by al-Mu'taṣim (r. 833-842).

²⁴ For a survey of the sources regarding the foundation of al-Baṣra, see Reitemeyer, *Städtegründungen*, 11-28; Denoix, *Foundation Cities*, 119-121; while for al-Kūfa, see Reitemeyer, *Städtegründungen*, 29-40; Denoix, *Foundation Cities*, 121-123.

²⁵ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*. Ed. de Goeje, III, 277; tr. McAuliffe Vol. 28, 246; Yāqūt, *Mu'jam*, I, 458.

²⁶ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*. Ed. de Goeje, III, 274; tr. McAuliffe Vol. 28, 242.

²⁷ Al-Ya'qūbī, *Kitāb al-buldān*, 238; al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*. Ed. de Goeje, III, 276; tr. McAuliffe Vol. 28, 246; Yāqūt, *Mu'jam*, I, 458; al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Ta'rikh Baghdad*, 1.

²⁸ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*. Ed. de Goeje, III, 277; tr. McAuliffe Vol. 28, 245-246.

²⁹ Al-Ya'qūbī, *Kitāb al-buldān*, 238.

a huge green dome—thereby emulating earlier green domes in al-Kūfa and Damascus.³⁰ Furthermore, a fantastic story of a protective talisman is told:

On the top of the dome was a statue of a knight, who had a spear in his hand; and, when the sultan saw that he pointed in a certain direction, he knew that rebels would approach from that side.³¹

Yāqūt dismisses this story as a fanciful tale from non-Muslims, and in fact, the story resembles similar stories about apotropaic talismans in Egypt and al-Andalus. In Alexandria, for instance, Dhū l-Qarnayn (i.e. Alexander the Great) is said to have fixed a marvelous mirror on the top of the Pharos that protected the city against the enemy.³²

The exact shape and function of the legendary “round city” is a contested issue that shall not be discussed here.³³ As long as no archaeological vestiges have been found, the diverse hypotheses, which are based solely on textual evidence, must remain speculative. It should be noted, however, that the tradition of building round or oval cities is well attested in the area by archaeological evidence. This lends these accounts a certain plausibility concerning the general shape of the city, though not in the details. In any case, it is clear that the ideas of exact planning and of a perfect, geometrical, round and harmonic city-grid were appropriate to convey the concept of an ideal city.

The extremely convenient geographic location of Baghdād is a further recurrent theme,³⁴ and indeed Baghdād is well situated for travel within the local road grid and very close to the Babylonian canal network between the Tigris and the Euphrates, favorable and precarious at the same time.³⁵ According to traditions found in al-Ya‘qūbī and al-Ṭabarī, the caliph delivered several speeches in which he praised the advantages of the location. In one report, the narrator has the overlord of the village Baghdād give a detailed exordium of the suitability of the site for a greater urban settlement:

³⁰ For the parallels, see Wendell, *Imago*, 117-120.

³¹ Yāqūt, *Mu‘jam*, I, 459-460; al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Ta’rīkh Baghdād*, 10-11; tr. Salmon 86-87.

³² See Hernández, *Mitos*, 323-327.

³³ For a summary of the major arguments, see Jens Scheiner’s “More-to-know” Box II in this volume.

³⁴ Al-Ya‘qūbī, *Kitāb al-buldān*, 235-238; al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*. Ed. de Goeje, III, 271-275; tr. McAuliffe Vol. 28, 237-242; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Manāqib*, 7-8; Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, V, 426-427.

³⁵ The middle Mesopotamian area is indeed well placed within the network of land and water overland routes, but the exact site of Baghdād is not particularly well suited. I am following Vaumas who regards it as “favorable et précaire a la fois” (Vaumas, *Introduction*, 233-236).

You would be between the Tigris and the Euphrates, where no one could come to you from either the East or West without having to make a crossing. You would be midway between al-Baṣrah, Wāsiṭ, al-Kūfah, al-Mawṣil and the whole Sawād [i.e. the hinterland of Baghdād]. You would be near to land, sea, and mountain.³⁶

Another recurrent topic is the healthiness of the region's climate and air. Al-Ya'qūbī expands especially on the climatic virtues of Baghdād, which provide its inhabitants with the ideal mental and physical conditions for significant cultural and scientific achievements, following thereby a well-known motif in Arabic literature:

The fourth clime³⁷ is the middle one, since the weather is moderate in all seasons, very hot in summer and very cold in winter, and temperate in spring and autumn [...] all this embellishes the character of its people and clears their minds [...] so that they are excellent in sciences, knowledge, literature [...].³⁸

Given the extreme, dry and very torrid continental climate of Baghdād,³⁹ with summer maximum temperatures of up to 50 degrees Celsius and winter minimums down to -7.5 degrees, and with no perceptible intermediate seasons, this statement seems a more than generous assessment.

Monks and Prophecies

Another recurrent narrative *topos* of the Baghdād legend is the miraculous Miqlāṣ story.⁴⁰ The different versions of the report are mostly attributed to the eyewitness Sulaymān b. Mujālid, a man who was apparently among al-Manṣūr's commanders, and reads:

³⁶ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'riḫ. Ed. de Goeje*, III, 274-275; tr. McAuliffe Vol. 28, 242-243.

³⁷ According to the clime theory common in this period, Baghdād was located in the fourth of seven clime zones. Regarding this theory, see Miquel, *Iqlīm*.

³⁸ Al-Ya'qūbī, *Kitāb al-buldān*, 234-235.

³⁹ Vaumas, *Introduction*, 236-238.

⁴⁰ The name Miqlāṣ is attested for a 9th-century Manichean sect leader (Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist*, 334), but I doubt this story is referring to him. The story about a thief called Miqlāṣ is probably much later and secondary to the story told by Yāqūt (see below).

The people of al-Kūfah fomented rebellion against him [i.e. al-Manṣūr] in the Commander of the Faithful's army. Therefore, he headed for al-Jibāl in search of a place to settle. At that time, the road went by way of al-Madā'in [i.e. Ctesiphon]. We left via Sābāṭ, but one of our companions fell behind, afflicted with an eye inflammation. As he stayed there to have his eyes treated, the physician asked him where the Commander of the Faithful was heading. "He is looking for a place to settle", the man replied. To this the physician responded: "In one of our books we find it written that a man named Miqlāṣ will build a city called al-Zawrā' [The Crooked] between the Tigris and the Ṣarāt [Canal]. After he has laid its foundation and built one course of its walls, a problem will erupt for him in the Ḥijāz, and he will interrupt construction of the city and turn his attention to repairing that breach of the peace [...] [After this] he will return to building the city and will complete it. Then he will be given a long life and sovereignty shall remain in his progeny". Sulaymān continued: The Commander of the Faithful was on the outskirts of al-Jibāl searching for a place to settle when my companion reached me and gave me this account. I reported this to the Commander of the Faithful, and he summoned the man, who repeated the story to Abū Ja'far [al-Manṣūr]. At this the caliph turned right around and went back to his starting point, saying: "By God, I am that very man! I was called Miqlāṣ as a lad but then the name for me fell into disuse".⁴¹

This is one of the earliest versions of the Miqlāṣ story, which from then on became a central element of the Baghdād foundation legend. Al-Ṭabarī quotes two other variants: in the first one, the caliph asks a local monk for any prophecy in his books announcing the founding of a city, obviously expecting one to exist.⁴² In the second one, the same Miqlāṣ story is told about al-Rāfiqa, al-Manṣūr's foundation in northern Syria built on the model of Baghdād.⁴³ According to another variant, al-Manṣūr had decided to build the city when a monk interrupted him and told him that the prophecy stated that the name of the prospective founder of a city should bear the name of Abū Dawānīq (The Father of the Two Small Coins). This proved to be another nickname of al-Manṣūr, who was famous for his stinginess.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh. Ed. de Goeje*, III, 272; tr. McAuliffe Vol. 28, 238-239.

⁴² Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh. Ed. de Goeje*, III, 276; tr. McAuliffe Vol. 28, 244.

⁴³ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh. Ed. de Goeje*, III, 276; tr. McAuliffe Vol. 28, 244. For al-Rāfiqa, see Reitemeyer, *Städtegründungen*, 84.

⁴⁴ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh. Ed. de Goeje*, III, 277; tr. McAuliffe Vol. 28, 244-246.

Ibn al-Athīr has a slightly extended version of al-Ṭabarī's tale and mentions a longer text of the prophecy.⁴⁵ His contemporary Yāqūt, in contrast, preserves a very romanticized and fairy-tale-like version of the Miqlāṣ story, which includes a dramatic dialogue between the reporter and the monk:

And there was a wise monk in the monastery, who asked me [i.e. Sulaymān]: “Why is the king coming and going?” I said: “He wants to build a city!” – “And what is his name?” – “Abū Ja‘far.” – “And does he have a nickname?” – “Al-Manṣūr [The One Made Victorious].” – “He is not the one that will build the city.” – “And why [not]?” – “Because we found in our books, transmitted from generation to generation, that the one who will build in this place would be a man called Miqlāṣ [...].”⁴⁶

Sulaymān, who reported this narrative, turns back to the caliph and tells him what happened. To his surprise, al-Manṣūr laughs and immediately calls the engineers and architects to build the city, and then tells him that Miqlāṣ was his hitherto unknown nickname as a child. The story then elaborates on the mysterious and significant nickname Miqlāṣ given to al-Manṣūr in his childhood. Al-Manṣūr tells a curious romantic episode to explain its origin:

We were in the area of al-Ṣarāt [Canal] in the time of the Umayyads, in the state that you know.⁴⁷ And I was together with other cousins of my age, and we used to invite each other. One day, the turn came to me, and I had not a single dirham [to invite them]. So I pondered for a while until by chance I found a honeypot of my nurse—so I stole it and I ran to sell it, and to buy for its price what I needed. So I went to my nurse and told her: “Do this and this!” Thereupon she asked: “From where do you have the [money] that I see?” I said that I had borrowed it from someone of my family. Then she did what I had asked her. And when we had finished with the food and we sat together for a chat, the nurse went to look for the honeypot, and she did not find it. [Then] she understood that I had [stolen] it. And in those days there was a famous thief in this area called Miqlāṣ, famous for his thieving. She came to the door of the house where we lived and called me, and I did not come out because I knew that she had understood

⁴⁵ Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, V, 426.

⁴⁶ Yāqūt, *Mu‘jam*, I, 458-459.

⁴⁷ Al-Manṣūr refers here to the precarious status of the ‘Abbāsīd family before they seized power in 749/750.

what I had done. As she insisted and I did not come, she shouted: “Come out, o Miqlāṣ, the people warn against their Miqlāṣ, but I have a Miqlāṣ at home!” And the name stuck to me and to my cousins in this moment, and I did not hear it again until now from you. So I understood that this city would be constructed by me.⁴⁸

Al-Ya‘qūbī does not seem to know the Miqlāṣ story. However, he already conveys the message that a divine prophecy announced Baghdād’s special destiny: he reports that al-Manṣūr’s father, Muḥammad b. ‘Alī, had told him once to build a capital in a place called Baghdād so that now “the traditions have come true and the signs and hints have cleared”.⁴⁹

The Miqlāṣ story is related to a *topos* that is present also in other Muslim city foundation legends, for which it seems to be a necessary ingredient: a native wise man, often a monk, refers to an old prophecy, sometimes found in ancient books, that announces the foundation of the new city.⁵⁰ This *topos* is found in the foundation legend of al-Wāsiṭ, according to which al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf (d. 714), the famous and disputed Umayyad governor of Iraq and the founder of the city, was pondering the best site for the new city, when a monk, riding on a donkey and crossing the Tigris, came to the place al-Wāsiṭ would occupy. The beast urinated at a certain spot, whereupon the monk collected the urinated soil and threw it to the river. Intrigued, al-Ḥajjāj asked for the reason for this strange behavior. The monk responded that it was written in his books that this would be the future site of a mosque. As a consequence of this prophecy, al-Ḥajjāj marked out the city and built the mosque on that spot.⁵¹ The bizarreness of the story suggests that it might have been intended as a mockery of already circulating “prophecy” stories.

The monk and prophecy motif also appear in the foundation legend of Sāmarrā’,⁵² which echoes the Baghdād story. Like al-Manṣūr, Caliph al-Mu‘taṣim (r. 833-842) searched personally for the ideal location for his new palatial city and capital. During a hunting expedition, he came to a monastery in a desert, where he asked for the name of the place. A monk responded that the spot was called Surra Man Rā’a [The One who Sees It, Becomes

⁴⁸ Yāqūt, *Mu‘jam*, I, 458-459.

⁴⁹ Al-Ya‘qūbī, *Kitāb al-buldān*, 237.

⁵⁰ For this *topos* and other parallels, see Wendell, *Imago*, 111 and O’Meara, *Foundation Legend*, 30-31, 33.

⁵¹ See Wendell, *Imago*, 111-112 with further references; Reitemeyer, *Städtegründungen*, 46.

⁵² Al-Ya‘qūbī, *Kitāb al-buldān*, 257; see O’Meara, *Foundation Legend*, 31; Reitemeyer, *Städtegründungen*, 63-67.

Happy] and referred to a prophecy in “our ancient books” according to which this was the name of Shām b. Nūḥ’s city, which would be reconstructed by some ruler after al-Manṣūr.

A slightly different enactment (without the element of an earlier scripture) appears in the foundation story of al-Kūfa, according to which a certain ‘Abd al-Masīḥ b. Buḡayla, a wise native Christian (and known as a mysterious, long-living personality from other legendary contexts)⁵³ points to the most suitable place to build the city according to the previous Caliph ‘Umar’s instructions.⁵⁴ The foundation legend of Fez also speaks about a monk who found a prophecy in his books that foretold that *imām* Idrīs b. ‘Abdallāh (d. 791) would be the founder of the city.⁵⁵

Simon O’Meara proposes to relate this *topos* with the Baḡīrā legend, as found in the biography of the Prophet. Here the monk Baḡīrā functions as witness and credential of the authenticity of the Prophetic mission.⁵⁶ The idea that it is a representative of the native population who forecasts a city’s destiny might also have served to anchor the city in the autochthonous cultural landscape, thus bridging the gap between the indigenous population and the (newly settled) Muslims. Furthermore, one should take into account that the Mesopotamian landscape at that time was covered with many rural monasteries, a fact that might have inspired these legends.

Astrology and Divine Blessing

Baghdād’s extraordinary historical destiny is also connected to a special astrological constellation governing the foundation act of Madīnat al-Salām. Al-Manṣūr is portrayed as having understood the necessity of a favorable horoscope, in order to confer divine blessings upon the planned city. Therefore, the caliph is said to have consulted a team of astrologers (among them the Persian Nawbakht and the Jew Māshā’allāh) to fix the auspicious moment for its foundation.⁵⁷ Ultimately, Jupiter became the planet that presided over the birth of the city, thus ensuring a very fortunate horoscope.⁵⁸ The horoscope of Baghdād is still very

⁵³ See Pellat, *Ibn Buḡayla*.

⁵⁴ Al-Balādhurī, *Futūḥ al-buldān*, 276; Yāqūt, *Mu’jam*, IV, 322.

⁵⁵ O’Meara, *Foundation Legend*, 28.

⁵⁶ See O’Meara, *Foundation Legend*, 33; Wendell, *Imago*, 111. For the Baḡīrā legend, see Abel, *Baḡīrā*; Roggema, *Legend*.

⁵⁷ Al-Ya’qūbī, *Kitāb al-buldān*, 238; Yāqūt, *Mu’jam*, I 458-459; al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Ta’rīkh Baghdād*, 1; *tr. Salmon* 76.

⁵⁸ One version of the horoscope is preserved in al-Bīrūnī, *al-Āthār*, 262. For the extant versions of the horoscope and the discussion about its historicity, see Johannes Thomann’s “More-to-know” Box I in this volume.

popular among astrologers and circulates on the internet as an example of an electoral horoscope, proving the power of astrology.⁵⁹ It is quite plausible that al-Manṣūr consulted astrologers when he founded his palatial city, as that was a common practice among rulers in the ancient and late antique Middle East when they had to make important decisions. Astrologers played a fundamental role at the Sasanian court,⁶⁰ and the belief in the power of the stars and celestial constellations was deeply rooted in the minds of the people. However, as Johannes Thomann argues in this volume, the preserved horoscope is rather constructed *ex post*.⁶¹



Fig. 2.1.1: Astrolabe of al-Sahl al-Nishapurī, ca. 1180s or ca. 1280s

Probably as an aspect of the divine grace protecting the city, some other prophecies forecast that no caliph would die in the city. The poem cited at the beginning of this contribution refers exactly to this blessing:

*Its Lord has decided that no caliph shall die
In it; indeed, he determines what he wishes for his creatures.*⁶²

⁵⁹ See for instance <https://astrologicalworldmap.com/2018/03/19/astrogeographical-position-baghdad/> (accessed 25 December 2021).

⁶⁰ For the Sasanian astrological and astronomical legacy bequeathed to the ‘Abbāsids, see Damien Janos’s contribution in this volume.

⁶¹ See his “More-to-know” Box I.

⁶² See above.

Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, who had preserved this poem, then enumerates all early ‘Abbāsīd caliphs up to al-Muktafī (r. 902-908), pointing to the marvelous fact that indeed, except for al-Amīn (r. 809-813), none of them died within the city walls.

The Iron Gates

Another important element of the foundation legend is the episode of the iron gates used in Baghdād. According to legend, Solomon, the son of David, had commanded a jinn or demon to build the Pre-Islamic city al-Zandaward, which was protected by five iron gates. These gates were later transferred to al-Wāsiṭ, the Umayyad city built by al-Ḥajjāj in Iraq, and finally appropriated by al-Manṣūr for the City of Peace.⁶³

This narrative indicates that the gates were interpreted as magical, protective talismans, in particular since iron was then a scarce and expensive item, so that it was seen as an enchanted material (*‘ajīb*). In addition, the story might also reflect a common practice in the ancient Near East: city gates (and other *spolia*) were often carried off and reused to symbolize the concepts of conquest, domination and appropriation.

Cultural Context

As shown above, the Baghdād legends seem to accommodate a certain typology of Islamic city foundation legends. Simon O’Meara proposes that these narratives should be interpreted as “a ritual re-enactment of the Prophetic foundation paradigm” and as “a recurring expression of the alleged miracle of Islam”.⁶⁴

However, the legends surrounding the foundation of Baghdād, which are remarkably free from overt Islamic references, might also have been influenced by existing Pre-Islamic models of urban foundation lore circulating in Mesopotamia.

In fact, the Islamic foundation legends appear to correspond to a narrative model developed in the context of the Greek and Hellenized World and were probably transferred to the region in Seleucid times. In ancient Greece, city foundation myths were firmly associated with the emergence of the *polis* as a political entity and with the colonization experience, which was expressed by metaphors of appropriation. The consultation of a divine

⁶³ Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Ta’rikh Baghdād*, 13-14; tr. Salmon 90; Yāqūt, *Mu’jam*, I, 460; Wendell, *Imago*, 113-115.

⁶⁴ O’Meara, *Foundation Legend*, 27.

oracle was also part of the ritual, functioning as a prophecy whose enigmatic language predicted the future of the community.⁶⁵

The epitome of the city-founder became Alexander the Great, who founded many cities (approx. 30) as earthly representations of his divine power and thus re-enacted the circulating Greek city foundation myths. He was also inspired by several debates about the ideal city, whose rigorous mathematical order reflected the order and harmony of the cosmos. Alexandria in Egypt, founded in 331 BCE, became the first so-called king's town and the prototype of a large series of Hellenistic towns (many of them constructed in Seleucid Mesopotamia and Babylonia). As archaeology has shown, the city plan of Alexandria conforms to the orthogonal grid principles and was indeed meticulously designed in all details.⁶⁶ This means that the geometrical plan of Alexandria was not only a *topos* of perfection, but that this ideal was also put into practice. The orthogonal grid was repeated in later Hellenistic town projects and, in particular, in the design of Seleucia on the Tigris, one of the cities of the urban complex of Ctesiphon in Iraq.⁶⁷

An especially important factor for the planning of a city was also astrology. In the case of Alexandria, it has been demonstrated that the axis is oriented to the rising sun on the day of the birth of Alexander the Great. At the time of its foundation, the "king's star" Regulus also rose along the same direction.⁶⁸

There are some narrative motifs in the foundation lore of Alexandria that resemble the Baghdād legends. Plutarch introduces in his *Life of Alexander* the prophecy motif, when he speaks about a semi-divine being who appears as a venerable old man in Alexander's dreams. This figure announces to Alexander where the city is to be founded: the land that looks out to the Island of Pharo. Alexander interprets this as the fulfillment of an omen that was revealed by Homer in the *Odyssey*, and that would enable him to conceive the city as a universal metropolis.⁶⁹ In the *Alexander Romance*, Alexander asks Serapis in a dream about the future of the city. The god predicts that the prosperous city would be at the center of the world, and that people from all over the world would congregate there and forget their origins.⁷⁰ As is

⁶⁵ Azara, *Fundación*, 1; Ferro/Magli, *Alexandria*, 381.

⁶⁶ Ferro/Magli, *Alexandria*, 381.

⁶⁷ Ferro/Magli, *Alexandria*, 383. For a detailed discussion of this urban complex, in many ways similar to that of Baghdād, see Parvaneh Pourshariati's contribution in this volume.

⁶⁸ Ferro/Magli, *Alexandria*, 382 and passim.

⁶⁹ Plutarch, *Life of Alexander*, 26, 1-10.

⁷⁰ Stoclet, *Beowulf*, 193.

known, Alexander did in fact visit the Ammon oracle in Siwa, and this probably occurred just before the foundation, thus complying with ancient rituals, but also consciously creating a new myth.⁷¹

Likewise, al-Manṣūr took over Pre-Islamic and Islamic urban elements with a strong symbolic resonance and combined them innovatively to create a mythical city for the new ‘Abbāsīd era: Madīnat al-Salām.

Conclusion

The legends describing the foundation of the City of Peace convey consistently the message that the foundation of the palatial city was a deeply meaningful act in terms of religion and politics, simultaneously symbolizing the birth of a new era, the universal power of the ‘Abbāsīd dynasty and the colonizing and civilizing program of its founder al-Manṣūr. The idea of a meticulously planned and geometrical round city reflects neatly the establishment of an ideal and civilized order within a former wilderness. Mysterious prophecies, astrological constellations and magic talismans provided the city with a wondrous protection that ensured its providential destiny, transforming the entire city of Baghdād into a marvelous example of divine power—exemplified by the blessing that caliphs would not die in this city. Finally, the allegedly perfect climatic and geographical conditions reigning in Baghdād made the city into a perfect, wealthy and healthy “paradise on earth”.⁷²

Without doubt, the increasing romanticization of the reports about Baghdād’s creation and the idealization of al-Manṣūr’s supreme power, which emerged from the tenth century onwards, reflect a nostalgia for a golden age of authority and glory, at a time when much of ‘Abbāsīd power and splendor had vanished. The gradual addition of narrative details over the course of time is further evidence of the typical “flourishing” evolution of historical legends and the growth of a nostalgic view of the city.

However, one should be cautious in dismissing these stories as mere literary fiction. One cannot exclude the interplay of the legendary elements with historical reality.⁷³ For instance, Pre-Islamic traditions may have served as inspiring models for al-Manṣūr when he decided to construct a “round” city that symbolized perfection at the beginning of a new era.

⁷¹ Ferro/Magli, *Alexandria*, 381.

⁷² See the poem in the beginning of this chapter.

⁷³ As was said in the introduction, the bundle of foundational legends should be conceived as a discourse that was not only shaped by historical reality, but that also constituted reality.

Or, when he insisted on being personally involved in the planning. The alleged timing of the foundation ceremony based on favorable astrological constellations, however, seems to be a post-event construction, though it was usual to consult astrologers in these circumstances.

The foundation of Alexandria is a telling example of a deliberate re-enactment of mythical traditions and ideals of perfection by Alexander the Great, as has been proven by archaeology. Likewise, al-Manṣūr's foundation act might have echoed local traditions about the foundation of earlier, Pre-Islamic "king's cities" in the area, which were merged with Islamic connotations about the foundation of the Islamic community (*umma*). For instance, we do not have the narratives that accompanied the foundation of Vēh Ardashīr, a round city in the vicinity of later Baghdād founded by the Sasanian King Ardashīr in 230 as a counterpart to Parthian Ctesiphon. Such local legends, however, might have reached al-Manṣūr. It is also plausible that al-Manṣūr felt inspired by the striking shape of Vēh Ardashīr and wanted to emulate the founder of the Sasanian dynasty by founding, as he had, a new, round-shaped city that should mark the beginning of a new era.

In conclusion, although many of the narrative motifs of the foundation legends discussed here can be identified as a *topos*, it cannot be ruled out that such motifs circulated in Mesopotamia forming a powerful discourse having an impact on how al-Manṣūr designed the city as intentionally mythical; in any case, the legends certainly reflect the perception of and symbolic significance given to the city by later generations.

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