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Prose Writing in Baghdād—An Overview

Isabel Toral

Introduction

The main focus of this chapter will be on a literary, historical and social contextualization of prominent Baghdādī authors of what has been designated in Western scholarship as belles-lettres or artistic prose,⁸² and to a lesser degree on the oeuvre of philologists, historians and geographers. It will generally exclude theologians, religious scholars and philosophers, who almost always wrote in prose, but whose output is discussed in other chapters of this handbook. Given the rapid blossoming of a highly developed writerly culture in metropolitan Baghdād, which encompassed all fields of knowledge, almost all written in prose, a general chapter on prose-writing in Baghdād risks encompassing a far too broad overview of the cultural landscape in the ‘Abbāsīd period. Nevertheless, the boundaries are difficult to draw, since many of the authors presented here produced works in diverse genres and treated different themes as well; they authored and compiled anthologies, histories, administrative handbooks, epistles, etc. and many of them also composed poetry.⁸³ For this reason, a certain overlap with other chapters in this volume is unavoidable.

The Iraqī Setting

When Caliph al-Manṣūr (r. 754-775) founded Madīnat al-Salām in 762 in central Iraq, some centers of the emerging Arabo-Islamic culture were already situated nearby, namely in the garrison “twin” cities Kūfa and Baṣra in southern Iraq.⁸⁴ In this environment, urban and recently sedentarized tribal Arabs, new Muslims of Iranian, Aramaic and other ethnic background, Zoroastrians, Jews, Christians and members of other religious communities lived side by side, discussing and inspiring each other and communicating in the new transcultural *koine*, the prestige language ‘*Arabiyya* (classical Arabic). It was this multicultural milieu in Iraq

⁸² See the two volumes of the Cambridge History of Arabic Literature that follow roughly the same division: Ashtiany, *‘Abbasid Belles-Lettres*; Young/Latham/Serjeant, *Religion, Learning, and Science*.

⁸³ For a general overview of the topic, see Pellat, *Prose Arabe*.

⁸⁴ Both cities had been founded in the first decades after the early Muslim conquests as garrison cities (Baṣra in 636, Kūfa in 638) and soon attracted people from elsewhere. For the intellectual panorama in Baṣra, see Pellat, *al-Baṣra*; van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, II, 1-429; for Kūfa, see Djāit, *al-Kūfa*; van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, I, 151-456.

that became the birthplace of what would become “classical” Arabo-Islamic culture:⁸⁵ most early Arabo-Islamic poets, ascetics, philologists, legal and religious scholars came either from Baṣra or Kūfa or spent much of their lifetime there. Both cities were at the same time embedded in the late antique Sasanian-Babylonian urban culture and were near the routes leading to the Arabic desert—a combination that became key to their eminent role in the development of Arabic letters and philology. For instance, one of the most emblematic places was the Baṣran Mirbad, a market outside the town where the Bedouins came to sell their camels and sheep and that served as a stopping place for the caravans.⁸⁶ Famous lexicographers gathered there to make linguistic inquiries of their informants, i.e. the Bedouins who were either passing through or who had been recently sedentarized. It was here, during the very first centuries of Islam, that a good part of the Arabic vocabulary was recorded, that the grammatical doctrines adopted by the Baṣran school were formulated and, in a more general fashion, that the “Arab humanities” were put together, since the poetical and historical traditions on which they were based were to a large extent collected here.⁸⁷

Baghdād would profit substantially from its relative vicinity to the twin cities: attracted by the fabulous opportunities offered by the emerging metropolis and the caliphal court, most brilliant Baṣran and Kūfan talents of the later eighth/early ninth century choose either to relocate to Baghdād or to commute between their home city and the new capital, so that the early ‘Abbāsīd culture of Baghdād actually became a fusion containing Baṣran and Kūfan components. The typical career of an intellectual and litterateur (*adīb*) of this period was that of a man who had received his education in one of these cities and then moved in his maturity to Baghdād to attract the favor and patronage of caliphal circles and the courtly elite. For instance, the philologist al-Mufaḍḍal al-Ḍabbī (d. 786) started his education in Kūfa and then became tutor of the prince Muḥammad, the later Caliph al-Mahdī (r. 775-785), in Baghdād (to whom he dedicated his anthology of poetry, the *Mufaḍḍaliyyāt* [Al-Mufaḍḍal’s Anthology of Qaṣīdas]). Finally, he ended his days as a teacher and celebrated scholar in his home city Kūfa.⁸⁸ The Baṣran philologist al-Aṣma‘ī (d. 828),⁸⁹ who together with his contemporaries Abū

⁸⁵ Medina was another center of learning participating in this process. It was also a source of Baghdād’s intellectual flourishing. For Medina, see More-to-Know Box V by Mehmetcan Akpınar.

⁸⁶ Pellat, *al-Mirbad*.

⁸⁷ See Blachère, *Savants Iraquines*; Drory, *Abbasid Construction*.

⁸⁸ Lichtenstädter, *al-Mufaḍḍal*; see also Drory, *Abbasid Construction*.

⁸⁹ For him, see Lewin, *al-Aṣma‘ī*.

'Ubayda (d. 824)⁹⁰ and Abū Zayd al-Anṣārī (d. 813)⁹¹ constitute the triumvirate to which later philologists owe most of their knowledge about Arabic lexicography and poetry, also moved from Baṣra to Baghdād in the later eighth century. There are several traditions about the circumstances that brought him to the court of Caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (r. 786-809), where he became firmly attached to the Barmakids, the favorite vizier family of this caliph.⁹² Ibrāhīm al-Mawṣilī (d. 804),⁹³ the famous musician and al-Aṣma'ī's rival in many anecdotes, was born in Kūfa, spent his formative years in Mosul and Iran and was then called to Baghdād to the court of al-Mahdī, also a great patron of music.



Fig. 5.3.1: An Oud Player in Front of a Courtly Audience That is Listening and Drinking from *Ḥadīth Bayāḍ wa-Riyāḍ* (The Story of Bayāḍ wa-Riyāḍ) in the Codex Vat. Arabo 368, f. 10r, 13th cent.

The celebrated poet Abū Nuwās (d. 815), who in his early years of education had commuted between Kūfa and Baṣra, finally came to Baghdād to gain the favor of the courtly circles; he became first an intimate of the Barmakids and then of Caliph al-Amīn (r. 809-813).⁹⁴ The modernist poet Bashshār b. Burd (d. 784), who was much in favor in the times of al-Manṣūr, was born in Baṣra probably around 714 and then lived in Baghdād from the time of its urban development in 762 onward. However, he also remained in close contact with the milieu of philologists in Baṣra, where he ended his days.⁹⁵ The historian Muḥammad b. Ishāq (d. 767),

⁹⁰ For him, see Weipert, *Abū 'Ubayda*.

⁹¹ For him, see Brockelmann, *Abū Zayd al-Anṣārī*.

⁹² See Sourdél, *Vizirat 'abbāsīde*, 127-182.

⁹³ For him, see Fück, *Ibrāhīm al-Mawṣilī*.

⁹⁴ For him, see Wagner, *Studie*; Wagner, *Abū Nuwās*.

⁹⁵ Blachère, *Bashshār b. Burd*.

born in Medina, spent some years traveling until he finally moved to Iraq to complete his education and ended his days in Baghdād.⁹⁶

As we will see, this pattern—intellectual and artistic education outside Baghdād in the provinces, then a successful career in the metropolis—continues in the Early ‘Abbāsīd period. The new capital attracted all sorts of talented, ambitious young men (rarely women) from other regions. For this reason, Baghdād soon became *the* meeting point for talents eager to learn about new ideas, to access unknown material and to disseminate their own oeuvre and knowledge through teaching and publishing. In short, Baghdād became “the place to go”.⁹⁷

The Eighth Century

At the time when Baghdād was founded, the main vehicle of literary expression in Arabic was poetry: classical poetry was blossoming, and the new modernist poetry was in emergence. This situation continued in the later eighth and early ninth centuries, which was a time of excellent poets, such as Abū Nuwās (d. 815) and Abū l-‘Atāhiya (d. 825),⁹⁸ rather than of fine prosaists.⁹⁹ In subsequent centuries this time was regarded as a golden age of Arabic poetry and culture.¹⁰⁰ Prose writing existed, but was rarely artistic: the few documents preserved from this period were written in plain prose, and some early students of religious and historical studies, such as Ibn Jurayj (d. 768) or Abū Mikhnaf (d. 776), wrote in a very simple style. Probably inspired by the realistic and sober *khabar* style used in records of tribal lore and the *ayyām al-‘arab* (The Battle-Days of the Arabs), as well as in historical *sīra* and *maghāzī* traditions (dealing with the biography and military campaigns of the Prophet) and Prophetical *ḥadīth* were written down without artistic embellishments.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, we can reconstruct the existence of an oral, oratorical style, marked by strong parallelism and “balance” but devoid of rhyme, the so-called *khutba* style, as found in various speeches quoted in later collections; this style would be of great importance for the development of the later Arabic prose style.¹⁰²

⁹⁶ Lecker, *Ibn Ishāq*.

⁹⁷ See Scheiner/Janos, *The Place to Go*.

⁹⁸ For him, see Guillaume, *Abu ‘l-‘Atāhiya*.

⁹⁹ For more on poetry in Baghdād, see Beatrice Gruendler’s contribution in this volume.

¹⁰⁰ For the continuation of this view up to modern times, see my More-to-know Box IV.

¹⁰¹ See Leder, *Literary Use*; Toral-Niehoff, *Talking about*.

¹⁰² See Serjeant, *Early Arabic Prose*; Beeston, *Parallelism*. In addition to speeches, we also have examples of several letters quoted in later collections that announce the epistolary style, but whose authenticity is dubious. Likewise, there are proverbs and other types of short prose texts. See also the survey of early prose genres in Leder/Kilpatrick, *Classical Arabic Prose*.

In the last decades of Umayyad rule artistic written prose made its first appearance and would lay the basis for later developments. ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd al-Kātib (d. 750), secretary in the chancellery of the Umayyad Caliph Hishām b. ‘Abd al-Malik (r. 724-743), authored various epistles (*rasā’il*, sing. *risāla*) written in an artistic style very much inspired by the metaphorical language of poetry, and occasionally obscure and repetitive.¹⁰³ His disciple, the Iranian convert Ibn al-Muqaffa’ (d. 756),¹⁰⁴ was like ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd a state secretary, but also became famous as the translator of numerous books of Indian and Persian origin, the most famous being the classic *Kalīla wa-Dimna* (Kalīla and Dimna), a piece of advice literature in the form of animal fables.¹⁰⁵ He composed two original treatises as well: *al-Risāla fī l-ṣaḥāba* (The Epistle to the Companions), an epistle on statecraft dedicated to Caliph al-Manṣūr, and *al-Adab al-kabīr* (The Great Code of Conduct), which was a mirror-of-princes handbook. These works allow one to appreciate his personal elegant, clear and free prose style. However, though his eminent role in the development of Arabic prose is undisputed, the dimensions of his contribution cannot be evaluated precisely, because of the complicated textual history of his oeuvre.¹⁰⁶

The biographies of ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd and Ibn al-Muqaffa’ are indicative of the importance of the state secretaries and bureaucrats (*kuttāb*, sing. *kātib*) for the development of Arabic letters and belles-lettres.¹⁰⁷ The rise of this social class was connected with the emergence of an increasingly centralized and complicated revenue-collecting state machinery that began in the Late Umayyad period and gained momentum in early ‘Abbāsīd times, when the City of Peace was founded and became the center of the caliphal administration. The members of this administrative elite, often of Iranian background, developed in the chancelleries an increasingly sophisticated and erudite Arabic literary style, and contributed to the establishment of the cultural ideal of *adab*, central to the understanding of Pre-Modern Arabic literature. An *adīb* (who is a person who has *adab*) was expected to combine a superior knowledge of courtly etiquette with a broadness of education in all matters, thus probably emulating Sasanian models. Proficiency in all fields of knowledge, but particularly expertise in writing and the ability to quote, use and produce literature adequately were central elements

¹⁰³ For these letters, see Latham, *Beginnings*, 164-179; Schönig, *Sendschreiben*; al-Qāḍī, *Letters*.

¹⁰⁴ For a biography, see Latham, *Ibn al-Muqaffa’*, 48-50; Gabrieli, *Ibn al-Muqaffa’*.

¹⁰⁵ The text was translated from a Pahlavi version of the Indian Pancatranta with several additions. For an overview of the complex transmission history of this work, see de Blois, *Burzōy’s Voyage*.

¹⁰⁶ Latham, *Ibn al-Muqaffa’*, 76-77 and *passim*.

¹⁰⁷ This administrative elite emerged in later Umayyad times, but gained enormously in power and wealth under the ‘Abbāsīds since they were needed for the increasingly complicated collection of taxes. For a comprehensive view on the *kuttāb*, see Sourdél, *Vizirat ‘abbāsīde*.

of *adab*, which would make anthologies one of the most frequent *adab* genres.¹⁰⁸ The term *adīb* can thus be translated as man of letters, litterateur or man of elegant behavior.

The Ninth Century

The ninth century saw major changes that fueled literary production in Baghdād, with the result that at the end of this period the city had become the undisputed point of reference for a global and vibrant Arabic book culture that reached from al-Andalus to Central Asia. It could be said that although Sāmarrā' became the political capital for more than half a century,¹⁰⁹ it never played a comparable role in cultural history. Baghdād continued to be the most important cultural center of the Islamicate World during the entire ninth century.

On the one hand, technological innovations opened new opportunities for intellectual and artistic talents and broadened and diversified the literary landscape.¹¹⁰ The introduction of rag paper in the middle of the eighth century in Baghdād¹¹¹ and its gradual implementation in the ninth century offered new options for generating income and the possibility for authors of a certain independence from the political elite. This led to the emergence of a vibrant book market due to the significant decrease in production costs and the parallel increase in the number of books available. At the end of the tenth century, there were 100 bookshops in the Sūq al-Warrāqīn (The Booksellers' Market) in eastern Baghdād.¹¹² This process provided new occupations for intellectuals and litterateurs and fostered the growth of a middle class of readers seeking education beyond courtly circles. One could now dispense with patronage and support oneself as a teacher, copyist, author, bookseller (*warrāq*), librarian, editor or publisher or a combination of any of these. This also meant that professional scholars were increasingly able to copy texts. The self-supporting author and book entrepreneur is an early phenomenon and instrumental factor in the growth of Arabic book culture. Furthermore, the mass production of books began to serve a growing lay readership that demanded new

¹⁰⁸ The practice of *muḥāḍara*, i.e. the capacity of knowing when and what to quote adequately in social gatherings, was a core principle of *adab* and explains the "impulse to anthologize" and the intertextual quality that we can detect in so many *adab* works (see Orfali, *Sketch Map*, 31 and passim). For the ideal of *adab*, see Nallino, *Sens*; Fāhndrich, *Begriff*; Bonebakker, *Adaä*.

¹⁰⁹ Sāmarrā', around 135km north of Baghdād at the eastern shore of the Tigris, was founded as a palatial and garrison city in 836. It was very extensive (57 sq. kms.) and was marked by the building activities of various caliphs. The caliphal army of Sāmarrā' departed already in 870, but the city continued to be the official residence of the caliphs until 892, when Baghdād was re-established as the capital. From that time onwards, Sāmarrā' survived as a smaller pilgrimage town.

¹¹⁰ See Osti, *Practical Matters*; Toorawa, *Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr*; Gruendler, *Arabic Book*.

¹¹¹ For the introduction of paper in the Arabo-Islamic World, see Bloom, *Paper before Print*, 30ff.

¹¹² Al-Ya'qūbī, *Works*, 78.

genres, themes and text types, such as anthologies, that were probably used for self-study (on which see below).¹¹³ From the late ninth century onwards, the production of books literally exploded—academics have called it a “book revolution”—and the panorama of those engaged in philological and literary activities increasingly diversified.¹¹⁴



Fig. 5.3.2: Reading Taking Place in a Library or a Book Shop with More than 130 Book, Maqāma 2, *Maqāmāt* of al-Ḥarīrī, painted by Yaḥyā l-Wāsiṭī in 1237

Nonetheless, political patronage continued to be an important option for a successful career as a litterateur. Given the great number of wealthy members of the political elite residing in Baghdād, the city remained attractive for the ambitious who wanted to pursue this traditional path. Viziers, secretaries and other state employees, as well as other wealthy Baghdādī residents, increasingly hosted literary salons and scholarly sessions, and some of them started to build private book collections.¹¹⁵ In imitation of the caliphs, they surrounded themselves with experts in assorted fields of knowledge, in order to enjoy their intellectual services and gain prestige by sponsoring and interacting with them. They also employed the literati as

¹¹³ Toorawa, *Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr*, 124. According to Shawkat Toorawa, the availability of books in ninth century Baghdād made it possible to complete one’s training in *adab* through self-teaching, which resulted in a concomitant decrease in the reliance on oral and aural transmission.

¹¹⁴ See Bloom, *Paper before Print*; Gruendler, *Arabic Book*.

¹¹⁵ For the Salons, see Ali, *Literary Salons*.

tutors to their children, thus giving them the opportunity to mold the minds of their pupils, developing new consumers of their own intellectual production.

At the same time, artistic prose developed further and began to supersede poetry as the preeminent form of literary expression in most functions, and the number and status of producers of elegant and erudite Arabic prose grew enormously. In this process, the writings of the metropolitan secretaries and state employees in Baghdād became the undisputed models for litterateurs in the provinces, and the ideal of the cultivated Baghdādī *adīb* became the fashionable standard to imitate.¹¹⁶ From the ninth century onwards, Baghdādī writers increasingly combined the unrhymed prose style of the late Umayyad and Early ‘Abbāsīd periods with ornamental features derived from poetry, namely rhyming and tropes, thus forming the so-called rhymed or ornate prose (*sajʿ*).¹¹⁷ This form rapidly achieved a tremendous dominance over prose writing, although the simpler, non-ornate prose style continued to be used, particularly by historians and geographers. The latter style would eventually develop into what later came to be known as the chancery style (*inshāʿ*) of the Middle period,¹¹⁸ which was regularly employed for diplomatic and chancery documents and was highly sophisticated and erudite.¹¹⁹ Baghdād stood at the avant-garde of these developments, which would gradually encompass the entire Arabo-Islamic World.

The following section will sketch the biographies and works of the most prominent representatives of fine Arabic prose writing in ninth century Baghdād. The first famous Baghdādī prose author from this period is Sahl b. Hārūn b. Rāhawayh (d. 830). Himself of Iranian background, he attracted attention as a secretary of Caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd’s vizier Yaḥyā b. Khālīd al-Barmakī (d. 803), but survived the fall of the Barmakids.¹²⁰ He then served under the vizier of Caliph al-Amīn. Under Caliph al-Maʿmūn (r. 813-833), he became director of the Bayt al-Ḥikma (The House of Wisdom), the famous royal library that stored Arabic and Persian books.¹²¹ His writings, only fragmentarily preserved, became renowned as models of

¹¹⁶ For instance, Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih (d. 940) in al-Andalus imitated almost perfectly Baghdādī *adab* models in his anthology *al-ʿIqd al-farīd* (The Unique Necklace) (see Toral-Niehoff, *Writing*).

¹¹⁷ Fahd/Heinrichs/Ben Abdesselem, *Sadjʿ*.

¹¹⁸ The term Middle period is usually used by experts for the period between 1000-1500, such as Konrad Hirschler, and goes back to Hodgson, *Venture*. It refers to the eleventh to sixteenth centuries and thus transcends the scope of this handbook. See for instance Hirschler, *Catching*.

¹¹⁹ See Roemer, *Inshāʿ*.

¹²⁰ Zakeri, *Sahl b. Hārūn*; see also Karp, *Sahl b. Harun*. According to some sources, he was even present during the dramatic events of the Barmakids’ murder (see Hamori, *Going down*; Sourdel, *Vizirat ‘abbāsīde*, 151-182).

¹²¹ For the Bayt al-Ḥikma, see Damien Janos’s contribution to this volume; see also Gutas/van Bladel, *Bayt al-Ḥikma*.

elegant and eloquent Arabic prose (among others, he wrote a fable emulating Ibn al-Muqaffa's *Kalīla wa-Dimna*) and were praised by later stylists. Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406) considered his epistles as peerless examples of Arabic composition.¹²²

However, it was Sahl's admirer and student al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 868) who became by far the most excellent prose author of ninth century Baghdād.¹²³ He belonged to those brilliant intellectuals of humble origin who followed the path of political patronage—he climbed up the social ladder, catching the attention of the courtly elites through his talent, and made his career thanks to their protection. Al-Jāḥiẓ grew up and received his intellectual formation in Baṣra, and his intellectual profile was strongly influenced by the Baṣran milieu, where he was a regular spectator of the philological activities conducted in the Mirbad and a frequent visitor of Baṣran Mu'tazilī¹²⁴ circles and salons. In 815, he wrote an epistle on the imamate, with which he won the compliments of al-Ma'mūn, who invited him to Baghdād. Apparently, the caliph considered him an ideal voice for his political agenda—he needed young talents to promote his new policies that were partially based on the thinking of the Mu'tazila. Al-Jāḥiẓ moved to the metropolis, where he earned his living as a scribe, teacher, chancellery assistant and tutor, without completely abandoning Baṣra. He was patronized by diverse secretaries and served under several caliphs, partly in Baghdād, partly in Sāmarrā'. In 847, he fell into disgrace after the fall of his main patron, the vizier Muḥammad b. al-Zayyāt (d. 847), who was deposed and executed by Caliph al-Mutawakkil (r. 847-861), an event that coincided with a complete turn in the official 'Abbāsīd ideology away from rationalist thought. Al-Jāḥiẓ, himself a Mu'tazilī, had to accommodate to the new politics and find other patrons (which he successfully did).¹²⁵ Finally, he became witness to the turmoil following the assassination of al-Mutawakkil in Sāmarrā' in 861. He retired to his hometown Baṣra where he died in 868. The catalog of works attributed to him is tremendous (200 titles, of which 30 have been preserved in their entirety, 50 only partially). His chief work is the *Kitāb al-ḥayawān* (The Book of the Living or The Book of the Animals), a panoramic mixed anthology based on animals, but leading rather unexpectedly into theology, metaphysics and ethics. His other main work is the

¹²² Ibn Khaldūn, *al-Muqaddima*, III, 393.

¹²³ For him, see Pellat, *al-Djāḥiẓ*; Ğāḥiẓ, *Life and Works*; Heinemann, *Al-Jāḥiẓ*.

¹²⁴ The Mu'tazila is a rationalist school of Islamic theology that flourished in the cities of Baghdād and Baṣra, during the 8th to the 10th centuries. Its thinking centered on the concept of divine justice and divine unity. For more on the Mu'tazila and their thought, see van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*; and David Bennett's More-to-know Box VI in this volume.

¹²⁵ See Montgomery, *Al-Jāḥiẓ*.

Kitāb al-bayān wa-tabyīn (The Book of Clarity and Clarification), an inventory of Arab rhetoric and poetry. In terms of content, al-Jāhīz was a rationalist and a firm defender of Greek thought, and although he drew from the many translations already circulating in ‘Abbāsīd Baghdād, he rather opposed the influence of Persian culture. He also broadened the thematic scope for prose and contributed to the establishment of the *adab* ideal that required a combination of didactics and amusement. Al-Jāhīz is said to have given Arabic prose its most perfect form, and his lively and digressive style, balanced by the repetition of the same idea in two different forms (parallelism),¹²⁶ flows harmoniously and is instantly recognizable. He had many prominent admirers and imitators, such as the litterateur and prosaist Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī (d. 1023, on whom see below).

In the introduction to the *Kitāb al-ḥayawān*, for instance, al-Jāhīz praises his own book with the following words:¹²⁷

huwa kitābun yaḥtāju ilayhi l-mutawaṣṣiṭu l-‘ammī ka-mā yaḥtāju ilayhi l-‘ālim
al-khāṣṣī
wa-yaḥtāju ilayhi l-rayyāḍ ka-mā yaḥtāju ilayhi l-ḥādhiq
ammā l-rayyāḍu fa-l-ta‘allumu wa-l-durba wa-li-tartībi wa-l-riyāḍa wa-li-
l-tamrīni wa-tamkīni l-‘āda
idh kāna jalīlūhū yataqaddamu daqīqa wa-idh kānat muqaddimātuhū
muratabbatan wa-ṭabaqāt ma‘āniyahū munazzala

It is a book that is required by the ordinary student mid-way through his studies as it is required by the learned specialist;

It is required by the novice as it is required by the expert;

The novice requires it for study and training for setting his ideas in order and practicing, for exercising and mastering his habits;

Since in it the important precedes the recondite and since its preliminary positions are set in order and the levels of its ideas are set down where they ought to be.

¹²⁶ See Beeston, *Parallelism*.

¹²⁷ Al-Jāhīz, *Kitāb al-ḥayawān*, I, 10, l. 7-12. The translation is by James Montgomery but slightly shortened (see Montgomery, *Al-Jāhīz*, 116-117). I attach the Arabic transcription for better appreciation of the formal elements of the passage.

As can be appreciated, al-Jāhiz's style is characterized by rhythmical balanced, short phrases that frequently rhyme (*al-saj' wa-l-muwāzana*), though not always; it also features abundantly grammatical, syntactical and semantic parallelisms, synonymous and antithetic, so that almost every word is echoed by another word in the following phrase, both in form and meaning. It evidences its origin in the oratorical *khuṭba* style mentioned above. In contrast to the authors of more sophisticated ornate prose of the *inshā'* style already mentioned, however, al-Jāhiz makes no extensive use of figures of speech (*badī'*) nor of repetitive synonymy and prolixity (*al-tadāruf wa-l-iṭnāb*) or brilliant hyperboles, so that the style is elegant, light and fluent.

Al-Jāhiz's younger contemporary, the polymath Ibn Qutayba I-Dīnawarī (d. 889), was equally dependent on political patronage, but represented those intellectuals that profited from the anti-Mu'tazilī turn initiated by al-Mutawakkil from 847 onwards. He was from an Arabized Iranian family in Kūfa and received his education from Sunnī scholars and Ḥanbalī traditionalists. His writings seem to have tallied well with the new trend. His main patron was the vizier Abū I-Ḥasan 'Ubayd Allāh b. Khāqān (d. 877), one of those responsible for the new pro-Sunnī policy, and the one who appointed Ibn Qutayba as judge of Dīnawar in about 851. The latter remained there until around 871. He then settled in Baghdād and devoted himself to the teaching of his works until his death. Ibn Qutayba's concept of Arabo-Islamic culture, which became extremely influential, amalgamates the intellectual trends of his time. On the one hand, he excelled in the so-called Arabic sciences, i.e. the various religious sciences, philology and history, while on the other hand he adopted the Indo-Iranian current of thinking of culture and its administrative culture. To a lesser degree, he also included Judeo-Christian and Greek elements. Basically, he aimed to establish a "domesticated", Sunnī version of *adab* and prose literature. The dominant characteristic of his prose is its ease and facility; his phrases are short and without artifice, rather close to Modern Standard Arabic.¹²⁸

Whereas al-Jāhiz and Ibn Qutayba represent those intellectuals who gained their position through the protection and patronage of the political elite, the litterateur and historian Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr (d. 893) belonged to those "new men" who took advantage of the opportunities offered by the above mentioned "book revolution" of the ninth century and who could make their living almost independently as book entrepreneurs.¹²⁹ Born in Baghdād in 819 or 820 into a family of Persian origin, he started out as a teacher and eventually took

¹²⁸ See Lecomte, *Ibn Qutayba*.

¹²⁹ See Toorawa, *Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr*.

up residence in the Booksellers' Market in eastern Baghdād, where he became a very active copyist, compiler and author. His wide circle of acquaintances helped him to obtain much of the information that went into his books. Around sixty works are attributed to him,¹³⁰ but only a few are preserved. He is particularly famous for his historical work *Kitāb Baghdād* (The Book of Baghdād), which is probably one of the first examples of local Arabic historiography known and of which only the section dealing with the caliphate of al-Ma'mūn in Baghdād has survived. However, it was widely used by the historian al-Ṭabarī (d. 923) and others when mentioning Baghdād. Ibn Abī Ṭāhir's only other surviving texts are the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth parts of his large literary anthology *Kitāb al-manthūr wa-l-manẓūm* (The Book of Prose and Poetry). This was one of the earliest examples of anthologies combining poetry and artistic prose writing, and thus indicates the high status reached by prose authors by the end of the ninth century.¹³¹

One of Ibn Abī Ṭāhir's most famous and successful students was the man of letters Abū Bakr Muḥammad al-Ṣūlī (d. 947), who came from an illustrious Baghdādī family, was a boon companion (*nadīm*) to several caliphs and served as a tutor of princes, which gave him a privileged position. His main works, the *Kitāb al-awraq* (The Book of Leaves) and the *Kitāb al-wuzarā'* (The Book of Viziers) are collections of miscellaneous accounts about 'Abbāsīd caliphs and their poets.¹³²

As the new cultural hub and central book market, Baghdād also became the place where anthologists and philologists would meet colleagues, poets and scholars to collect material. Al-Jumaḥī (d. 845) for instance, the first Arabic philologist to classify poets chronologically in his anthology *Ṭabaqāt al-shu'arā'* (The Classes of the Poets), was of Baṣran origin and had received his education there. However, he traveled regularly to Baghdād, where he had contact with the most important scholars of his time.¹³³

Two of the most famous anthologies of the Early 'Abbāsīd period are the multi-thematic *al-Kāmil fī l-adab* (The Perfection of Cultivated Behavior and Learning) and *al-Fāḍil* (The Exquisite) by al-Mubarrad (d. 898). The author, a grammarian born in Baṣra, had studied the famous grammatical treatise *al-Kitāb* (The Book) by Sībawayh (d. 796)¹³⁴ in his native city and moved to Sāmarrā' in 860 to the court of al-Mutawakkil. After the latter's death in 861,

¹³⁰ For the list, see Toorawa, *Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr*, 62-70.

¹³¹ Until then, most anthologies were mere collections of poetry (*dīwāns*) without any prose pieces.

¹³² Leder, *al-Ṣūlī*.

¹³³ For him, see Pellat, *Ibn Sallām*.

¹³⁴ Ba'labakkī, *Legacy of the Kitāb*.

he continued to Baghdād to teach grammar, where he attracted many students and served as a disseminator of the Baṣran approach to grammar in the city. Among his main students were the grammarian al-Zajjāj (d. 923), who eventually became the tutor of the sons of Caliph al-Mu'taḍid (r. 892-902), and the lexicographer and man of letters al-Washshā' (d. 937), author of a famous handbook on good manners, the *Kitāb al-muwashshā* (The Book of the Embroidered Dress).¹³⁵ The two most famous poets of the ninth century, Abū Tammām (d. 846) and his student and rival al-Buḥturī (d. 897), who both spent significant time at the caliphal courts in Baghdād and Sāmarrā', also composed important prose anthologies, both titled *al-Ḥamāsa* (The Valor).¹³⁶

It must be said that literary anthologies of diverse thematic focus (e.g. encyclopedic, or organized according to literary motives, generations, geographical or historical topics, etc.) became a very popular format in Arabic literature—first, since they suited perfectly the *adab* ideal of *muḥāḍara* (the capacity of knowing when and what to quote adequately in an elegant conversation), second, because they gave the author the opportunity to display his erudition and literary taste (a central aspect of *adab*, as well) and finally, because they could easily be used for self-study. In addition to poetry, anthologies usually contained passages of varying length in prose, either *akhbār* (historical narratives) and anecdotes that served to contextualize verses or thematically related fragments of earlier prose works.¹³⁷ Therefore, most anthologies can be categorized as prosimetric, i.e. mixing prose and poetry.¹³⁸ Furthermore, they are heavily intertextual and quote extensively from earlier works. The latter point means that, depending on the source, the prose style in one of these anthologies might vary within the same collection, although it is to be conceded that some author-compilers intervened and reshaped the original quotes significantly.

Historiography was also a genre of prose writing that soon began to blossom in the new capital, which had become the best place to collect material, meet colleagues, publish works and disseminate one's historic interpretations. Muḥammad b. 'Umar al-Wāqidī (d. 822), born in Medina, was famous as an expert in early Islamic history, *ḥadīth* and the emergent Islamic law (*fiqh*). After spending several years traveling, he finally moved to Baghdād in 796, where he was appointed as a judge and enjoyed the patronage of Hārūn al-Rashīd, the

¹³⁵ For these two scholars, see Versteegh, *al-Zadjdjād*; Raven, *al-Washshā'*.

¹³⁶ For them, see Gruendler, *Abū Tammām*; Pellat, *al-Buḥturī*.

¹³⁷ Orfali, *Sketch Map*.

¹³⁸ For this typical hybridity of the texts, see the survey in Heinrichs, *Prosimetrical Genres*.

Barmakids and later al-Ma'mūn. He is said to have left six hundred bookcases, each one weighing as much as two men, and that he had two slave boys writing down his words day and night.¹³⁹ These numbers are almost certainly exaggerated but indicate the huge amount of written material already circulating in the early ninth century in Baghdād. Al-Wāqidī's disciple and biographer Muḥammad b. Sa'd (d. 845) was born in Baṣra. Like his master, he traveled in his early years in search of traditions (*al-riḥla fī ṭalab al-'ilm*), until he eventually settled in Baghdād and became al-Wāqidī's secretary and transmitter. Ibn Sa'd authored an authoritative history and biographical work about the first two Islamic centuries, the *Kitāb al-ṭabaqāt al-kabīr* (The Great Book of Classes).¹⁴⁰ Al-Balādhurī (d. 897), one of the greatest historians of his age and author of the famous *Futūḥ al-buldān* (The Conquests of the Regions), also spent a great deal of his life traveling, but lived in his years of maturity in Baghdād, where he frequented courtly circles and compiled yet another anthology, the *Ansāb al-ashrāf* (The Genealogies of the Nobles).¹⁴¹ His contemporary, the Shī'ī *kātib*, geographer and historian al-Ya'qūbī (d. after 908) and author of the earliest preserved description of 'Abbāsīd Baghdād,¹⁴² can less easily be connected to Baghdād; though born there, he mainly served as secretary in Khurāsān and Egypt. In contrast, the greatest historian and polymath of the 'Abbāsīd period, the Iranian Abū Ja'far al-Ṭabarī (d. 923), became a central intellectual figure in Baghdād for many years.¹⁴³ From 870 onward, he lived in Baghdād in the Shammāsiyya neighborhood, authoring many books. The amount of material he collected is almost immeasurable, and his universal history and commentary of the Qur'ān form the most extensive of extant early works of Islamic scholarship, preserving the greatest array of citations from earlier and mostly lost sources. From the point of view of his compositional principles and prose style, he represents the *ḥadīth*-oriented approach to history, where the narrative thread is regularly interrupted to add a diverging tradition, complemented with a chain of transmitters (*isnād*). He writes in a plain, simple prose style, as did most historians, like the *khabar* style also found in Prophetical traditions.

¹³⁹ Leder, *al-Wāqidī*.

¹⁴⁰ For him, see Fück, *Ibn Sa'd*.

¹⁴¹ For him, see Becker/Rosenthal, *al-Balādhurī*.

¹⁴² For a summary of this description, see Appendix I in this volume; for an analysis of it, see Isabel Toral's contribution on the foundation legends and Bernard O'Kane's chapter in this work.

¹⁴³ For the life and works of him, see Bosworth, *al-Ṭabarī*; al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'riḥ. Tr. Rosenthal Vol. 1*, 5-134, esp. 31-78.

The Tenth Century

The first half of the tenth century was marked by the dismemberment of the 'Abbāsīd Empire, the weakening of caliphal authority and the shift of effective power to various chief emirs. By 935, the 'Abbāsīd dominion had split into several small states, and likewise, new political and cultural epicenters gradually emerged outside Baghdād in Syria, Mesopotamia, Iran, Egypt and al-Andalus. Places such as the court of the Ḥamdānīd *Amīr* Sayf al-Dawla (r. 945-967) in Aleppo, the salon in Iṣfahān of the Būyīd vizier Ṣāhib al-'Abbād (d. 995), himself a prolific writer, and the caliphal court of the Umayyads in Cordoba (929-1030) competed with Baghdād in attracting young talents and people of culture. Baghdād lost its position as the only political and cultural metropolis of the Islamicate World, though it maintained a status of great cultural prestige as a center of learning until the Ilkhanid period. The ascent of the Iranian Būyīd dynasty, a commander of which entered Baghdād in 946, assumed the title of chief emir and seized actual political power, accelerated this process. In particular, Būyīd rule in Iraq was a period of instability, during which Bedouins dominated the countryside and the cities were increasingly fragmented into a multiplicity of competing ethnic and religious groups.¹⁴⁴ Nonetheless, Baghdād experienced a second period of spectacular cultural blossoming, characterized by the importance of philosophical humanism dominated by Aristotelian thought and by the remarkably liberal atmosphere that prevailed under the Shī'ī Būyīds, so that it has been labeled a "Renaissance of Islam" by Adam Mez and Joel Kraemer.¹⁴⁵ The key figures of this period were no longer the caliphs, but rather cultivated viziers and independent scholars who gathered intellectual and artistic luminaries in their literary salons and informal scholarly circles.¹⁴⁶ Among the most important of these circles in Baghdād were that of the Christian philosopher Yaḥyā b. 'Adī (d. 974) and his disciplines,¹⁴⁷ which was also visited by the famous Ismā'īlī philosopher Abū Sulaymān al-Sijistānī (d. ca. 1000) and the renowned prose author and brilliant essayist Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī; that of Yaḥyā's disciple 'Īsā b. 'Alī (d. 1001), himself an erudite philosopher, to which also belonged the librarian and bookseller Ibn al-Nadīm (d. 998);¹⁴⁸ the circle of the vizier Abū Muḥammad al-Ḥasan al-Muhallabī,¹⁴⁹ who

¹⁴⁴ For a detailed description of these processes in Baghdād during the Būyīd period, see the contribution by Nuha Alshaar in this volume.

¹⁴⁵ See Mez, *Renaissance*; Kraemer, *Humanism*.

¹⁴⁶ See Ali, *Literary Salons*; Kraemer, *Humanism*.

¹⁴⁷ For this circle, see Kraemer, *Humanism*, 104-138.

¹⁴⁸ Fück, *Ibn al-Nadīm*.

¹⁴⁹ See Kraemer, *Humanism*, index.

served from 950-963 and whose salon was also frequented by the *qāḍī* and litterateur Abū ‘Alī l-Muḥassin al-Tanūkhī (d. 994, on whom see below), by Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī, the compiler of the famous multivolume musical anthology *Kitāb al-aghānī* (The Book of Songs)¹⁵⁰ and by the historian, philosopher and librarian Miskawayh;¹⁵¹ and finally, the salon of the vizier Ibn Sa’dān (d. 984 or 985).¹⁵²

Among all these luminaries, Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī is to be extolled as a most excellent prose author and as a brilliant master of Arabic style. He was a great admirer of al-Jāḥiẓ, whom he praised in a special treatise and whose style he emulated. His most famous books, *Kitāb al-imtā’ wa-l-mu’ānasa* (The Book of Delight and Conviviality) and the *al-Muqābasāt* (The Torches of Fire), are examples of his fine writing and provide valuable information about the contemporary intellectual life and the doctrines of the Baghdādī philosophers. Al-Tawḥīdī worked as a professional scribe and librarian, and occasionally as a tutor.¹⁵³ His contemporary al-Tanūkhī (d. 994), a man of letters, judge and secretary (mainly in Baghdād), studied with the anthologist and philologist al-Ṣūlī and continued working with Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī. He is particularly famous for his book *al-Faraj ba’d al-shidda* (*The Deliverance Follows Adversity*), the major representative work of a genre of very popular books containing anecdotes about people who managed to successfully escape from difficult situations.¹⁵⁴ Both authors experienced longer periods of economic hardship and complained about a lack of recognition. This indicates that the career opportunities for litterateurs in Baghdād were decreasing.

In the tenth and later centuries, the dominance of *saj’* in prose writing increased in Baghdād and elsewhere. The most famous preacher of the tenth century was Ibn Nubāta (946-984), who hailed from Mayyafāriqīn but was mainly active in Aleppo.¹⁵⁵ He used *saj’* rhymes for his sermons, and a variety of authors of the administrative elite developed the *risāla* (epistle) into the “ornate epistle”; *saj’* also became the *style de rigueur* for prologues and introductions at this time.¹⁵⁶ A typical example of this artistic type of prose—also known as *inshā’* style—is the beginning of the *Khuṭbat al-manām* (The Sermon on Dreams) by Ibn Nubāta. As can be seen from the example below, he not only uses the rhythmic and parallel

¹⁵⁰ For al-Iṣfahānī and his work, see Kilpatrick, *Making*, 14-34.

¹⁵¹ Kraemer, *Humanism*, 222-232.

¹⁵² Kraemer, *Humanism*, 191-206; 222-232.

¹⁵³ For him, see Bergé, *Abū Ḥayyān*.

¹⁵⁴ See Al-Tanūkhī, *Stories*; Kraemer, *Humanism*, index.

¹⁵⁵ He was Abū Yaḥyā b. ‘Abd al-Raḥīm, the preacher (*khaṭīb*) at the court of Sayf al-Dawla. He is not to be confused with his famous namesake from 14th-century Cairo. See Canard, *Ibn Nubāta*.

¹⁵⁶ See Orfali, *Art*.

prose common among earlier authors, but also adds numerous hyperboles, alliterations and figures of speech. I add a transcription of the first lines of the sermon to convey an approximate idea of this florid style, representing the rhyming syllables in bold type:

al-ḥamdu li-llāhi l-lādhī
‘alā fī irtifā’i majdihī ‘an a’rāḍi l-himam
wa-khalā bi-btisā’i rifdihī min i’tirāḍi l-tiham
wa-jalā qulūba awliyā’ihī bi-yanābī’i l-ḥukam

Praise be to Allah, who

In the height of His glory is above the contingencies of ambition,

And in the breadth of His magnanimity is above suspicion.

He purifies the hearts of saints in the sources of wisdom.¹⁵⁷

Finally, one must mention the famous polymath al-Mas‘ūdī (d. 956), *adīb*, geographer and historian, who was born in Baghdād and was in contact with many of the important Baghdādī scholars of his age without fully participating in the above-mentioned circles. His most famous work is the *Murūj al-dhahab* (The Meadows of Gold), a multi-volume work that contains an impressive wealth of historical information on Muslim and non-Muslim peoples and lands, written in a plain, scarcely rhymed prose.¹⁵⁸

The Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries

In the next two centuries, when Baghdād was under Saljūq and late ‘Abbāsīd rule, the city continued to lose prestige as a center of Arabic literature. It is indicative of this process that Badī’ al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī (d. 1007), considered the inventor of one of the most original prose genres of Arabic literature—the *Maqāmāt* (The Sessions), which included picaresque anecdotes attributed to a fictional character and written in rhymed prose—made his career almost exclusively outside Baghdād, i.e. in Iran. Also his famous follower al-Ḥarīrī (d. 1122)

¹⁵⁷ Translated by de Slane, *Ibn Nubata*, 69 who tries to imitate Ibn Nubāta’s style.

¹⁵⁸ For him, see Pellat, *al-Mas‘ūdī*.

never left Baṣra.¹⁵⁹ His *Maqāmāt* however were first read publicly in Baghdād in 1111 from where they spread through the Arabic World to become one of its cherished classics.¹⁶⁰

In contrast, theology, law, *ḥadīth*, linguistics and rhetoric studies blossomed in Baghdād with the establishment of the madrasa system of higher education, which spread to other regions of the Islamicate World, such as the Maghreb and al-Andalus in the 14th century.

The madrasa system resulted in a systematization of the scholarly curriculum, which, though focused on the religious sciences, soon also included the so-called linguistic sciences (*al-‘ulūm al-adabīyya*), i.e. philology, grammar and rhetoric.¹⁶¹ As a result, many of the madrasa students and teachers were connoisseurs of fine literature, and some of them were not only consumers, but also producers of artful prose (and poetry). Scholarly writings were increasingly written in elegant and rhyming prose, and religious scholars often composed poetry and enriched their sermons with poetic references and verses.

A very telling example of the successful combination of religious knowledge and literary talent in one person is that of the Baghdādī scholar ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. ‘Alī b. al-Jawzī, a Ḥanbalī jurisconsult, traditionist, historian and preacher, who died in Baghdād in 1201. Author of almost 150 works and many sermons on a great variety of themes ranging from theology, law and medicine to linguistics and literature, he is considered as one of the most prolific authors of Arabic letters. The years 1178 and 1179 marked the zenith of his career in Baghdād, when he was director of five madrasas. Ibn Jubayr was deeply impressed by the rhetorical power of Ibn al-Jawzī’s public speeches in rhymed prose and dedicates long passages to them in his travelogue.¹⁶² He describes vividly how the preacher used all sorts of literary devices to emotionally move the audience. For instance, Ibn al-Jawzī embellished his religious sermons with erotic poetry to “fire the hearts with emotion [...] turning from eroticism to asceticism” until the public was shaken to tears.¹⁶³ Apparently, Ibn al-Jawzī was a splendid fighter in favor of Ḥanbalite law, which profited much from his literary talent.

The Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries

¹⁵⁹ See Beeston, *al-Hamadhani, al-Hariri*.

¹⁶⁰ For the best English translation of al-Ḥarīrī’s *Maqāmāt*, see Cooperson, *Impostures*.

¹⁶¹ Heinrichs, *Classification*.

¹⁶² See Ibn Jubayr, *al-Riḥla*, 249-253.

¹⁶³ Ibn Jubayr, *al-Riḥla*, 252.

After the Mongol invasion in 1258 and the end of the 'Abbāsīd Caliphate, Baghdād continued to exist as a mid-sized city at the starting point of the Iraqī pilgrimage road. It was still renowned as a place of learning, since many madrasas and libraries had been restored under Ilkhanid rule. In 1326 the Maghribī traveler Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (d. 1377) attended scholarly sessions at the Maṣṣūr Mosque in western Baghdād, and he mentions in his travelogue the Niṣāmiyya and Mustanṣiriyya Madrasas as working institutions.¹⁶⁴ As argued by Michal Biran in this volume, the myth of the complete destruction of the libraries and madrasas in Baghdād should not be taken literally. It rather is part of a modern narrative that associates the date of 1258 with the loss of a political center of the Arabo-Islamic World and connects it with the beginning of Arabic cultural decadence, and thus with the nostalgia for a lost golden age.

It is true that Baghdād did not play any supra-regional role in Arabic letters until the early twentieth century, when it became the capital of the new nation state of Iraq. Nevertheless, Persian literature and culture experienced a modest heyday in 14th-century Baghdād. The establishment of the court of the Jalāyirids in Baghdād (ca. 1340-1393) had converted the city anew into a center of artistic (particularly known for painting¹⁶⁵), scholarly (the Mirjāniyya Madrasa comes to mind) and literary patronage.



Fig. 5.3.3: The Façade of the Mirjāniyya Madrasa, 1980

¹⁶⁴ Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *Tuḥfat al-nazzār*, I, 172.

¹⁶⁵ For the famous painting school of Baghdād, see the contribution by Bernard O’Kane in this volume.



Fig. 5.3.4: The Interior of the Mirjāniyya Madrasa Showing the Courtyard and the *iwān*

One luminary was the poet laureate (*malik al-shu'arā'*) Salmān-i Sawājī (d. 1376), famous for his splendid panegyric poetry in Persian.¹⁶⁶ Generally speaking, the time after 1258 and the seizure of power by the Mongols and their followers is marked by the rise of linguistic and cultural Persian influence in Baghdād.

Noteworthy Arabic-language litterateurs born in Baghdād, however, usually made their career elsewhere. For instance, the Shī'ī historian Muḥammad b. al-Ṭiqṭaqā (d. 1309), born soon after the Mongol conquest of Baghdād, was the author of a famous and enjoyable historical compendium, entitled *al-Fakhrī* (The Glorious [History]) that he composed during a stay in Mosul; however, he spent most of his life traveling in Iraq and Azerbaijān.¹⁶⁷ Another Shī'ī scholar, Ṣafī l-Dīn al-Ḥillī, is credited as the most famous Arabic poet of the fourteenth century and became a laureate at the court of the Artuqids in Mārdīn in the Jazīra, also spending some time in Cairo. He composed a famous panegyric poem on the Prophet, in which he used 51 rhetorical figures. He spent only his last years in Baghdād, where he died in 1349.¹⁶⁸

It was the Mamluk metropolis Cairo that became “the garden of the universe, the orchard of the world” and the new center of attraction for any cultural activity in the Arab World, followed in prominence by Damascus with its famous mosques, libraries and madrasas.

Conclusion

Baghdād can be said to have been for several centuries one of the most splendid cultural metropolises in Pre-Modern times, and it might seem obvious that as imperial capital it

¹⁶⁶ For him, see Glünz, *Salmān-i Sāwadjī*; Wing, *Jalayirids*, 136-142.

¹⁶⁷ For him, see Rosenthal, *Ibn al-Ṭiqṭaqā*.

¹⁶⁸ For him, see Heinrichs, *Ṣafī al-Dīn*.

attracted talents and scholars of all kinds. However, the city experienced some intriguing asynchronies in its long-term cultural history. The most salient point is that the history of Baghdād as an important place of literature paralleled the ups and downs of its political history. In contrast, Baghdād as a hub of Islamic education remained more stable and seems to have been more resilient to political turmoil and economic decay. Whereas the luminaries in literature (and philosophy and science, as well) gradually left the city after the tenth century, Baghdād remained a “place to go” among Islamic scholars for many centuries, even after 1258.

This confirms that political patronage was the key to the careers of litterateurs in the early centuries of ‘Abbāsīd rule. The establishment of the central administration, the caliphal court and the political elite in Baghdād in the eighth century was seminal for the blossoming of literature. For poets, the new “boomtown” promised the presence of numerous potential wealthy patrons, while for writers and other intellectuals it provided additional opportunities for employment in the state apparatus and for other related positions, for instance, as tutors to the children of the powerful, etc. In addition, the enormous capital surplus that accumulated in early ‘Abbāsīd Baghdād, when the tax revenues from the provinces still reached the capital via the effective state machinery, fueled the urban economy and enabled the successful implementation of technological innovations such as rag paper, resulting in even more opportunities for writers, who could then make a living as independent book entrepreneurs. At some point, the mere concentration of literary talents, libraries and books in Baghdād attracted other people from elsewhere. Having reached this stage, the dynamics of patronage and income continued to function for some centuries, so that literati were still attracted by the fame of Baghdād. However, opportunities began to vanish, as the economic and political situation in Baghdād began to decline, dependent as they were on the continued presence of patrons and salons of the elite. Therefore, although the diversification and multiplication of intellectual circles in the Būyīd period offered opportunities for litterateurs and poets, many decided to go elsewhere, i.e. to the new centers and regional courts in Aleppo, Nishapur, Cairo and Cordoba. Independent authors of the eleventh century, such as al-Tawḥīdī, seem to have encountered increasing difficulties making a living in Baghdād. Luminaries like al-Mutanabbī (d. 965) made their career completely outside the caliphal city. From the twelfth century, Baghdād had lost its brilliance as a unique meeting point for literati, though it remained a romanticized place that evoked nostalgic feelings and survived as a

literary trope for elegies mourning the glory of the past. Only when other rulers decided to establish their court in Baghdād did the city regain some attractiveness as a site for literature, as can be seen after 1258 in the time of the Jalāyirids.

This dependence on the presence of powerful political agents and a court is also discernible if the fate of the literati is compared to that of the Baghdādī religious and legal scholars. Apparently, political patronage was comparably less important for the class of the religious scholars (*'ulamā'*), who preferred to keep their distance from political authorities for ideological reasons. Though they also came to Baghdād from Kūfa, Baṣra and Medina in great numbers in the Early 'Abbāsīd period, this move was prompted less by the prospect of encountering patrons in the booming city than by that of meeting colleagues, with whom they taught, studied, exchanged ideas and disseminated knowledge, i.e. by the quest for knowledge (*ṭalab al-'ilm*). Later, the establishment of the madrasa system in the eleventh century and its expansion in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, financed by pious endowments that survived their donors, provided them with a relatively sustainable structure (and some income) for their activities, and made them less vulnerable to political turmoil and economic crises that the litterateurs had to cope with.

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