



Title:

More-to-Know IV A “Golden Age” in Baghdād?

Author(s):

Isabel Toral

Document type: Postprint

Terms of Use: Copyright applies. A non-exclusive, non-transferable and limited right to use is granted. This document is intended solely for personal, non-commercial use.

Citation:

"Isabel Toral, 2022, Baghdād: From Its Beginnings to the 14th Century; Ed. by Jens Scheiner und Isabel Toral; Brill, S. 466–469 ; https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004513372_020"
Archiviert im Refubium der FU Berlin unter <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/refubium-35613>

More-to-know Box IV

A “Golden Age” in Baghdād?

Isabel Toral

Baghdād was not only a real city, but also a mythical place from its very beginnings. Caliph al-Manṣūr (r. 754-775) planned it exhaustively as a perfect, providential and beautiful palatial city: a paradise on earth and a symbol of the new era that had begun with the seizure of power by the divinely bestowed dynasty of the ‘Abbāsids. For this fabulous and ambitious plan, he asked the wisest astrologers of the age to choose the best constellation for the moment of the foundation, he searched painstakingly and in person to find the optimal site and he recruited an enormous number of experts of all kinds for its construction. It was thought to be a place of superlatives. In fact, his overambitious plan would end in great failure—the City of Peace of al-Manṣūr was soon abandoned. Even though the metropolis of Baghdād indeed had a spectacular birth and several decades of splendor, this brief period was followed by a long decline as an increasingly provincial urban complex scattered with fields of ruins and dispersed settlements as well as with arrogant inhabitants infatuated by their past days of glory. It may be said that the disconnect between great expectations and a disappointing reality provides very productive soil for literary creativity, and thus it came to pass that Baghdād soon became a symbol for a bygone and mythical golden age of Islamic culture, a site of nostalgia and an icon of human impermanence. This is reflected in the following statement of the famous 12th century traveler of al-Andalus, Ibn Jubayr, who came to the city:

In comparison with its former state, before misfortune struck it and the eyes of adversity turned towards it, it [i.e. Baghdād] is like an effaced ruin, a face washed out, or the statue of a ghost.¹⁶⁹

As Michael Cooperson has shown, the myth of an ‘Abbāsīd golden age—and ‘Abbāsīd glory is always tied to Baghdād, like Rome’s fame is tied to the Roman Empire—emerged very early in the Arabic imaginary,¹⁷⁰ probably shortly after the partial destruction of Madīnat al-Salām in the Civil War of 809 to 813. The time of Caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (r. 786-809) became an

¹⁶⁹ Ibn Jubayr, *al-Rihla*. Tr. Broadhurst, 246. For a survey of the literary *topoi* that are connected with Baghdād, see Cooperson, *Baghdad*.

¹⁷⁰ For a recent critical analysis of the golden age *topos*, see Cooperson, *Abbasid ‘Golden Age’*. For its early appearance, see *ibid.*, 50 with references to Cooperson, *Baghdad* and Antrim, *Baghdad’s Centrality*.

idealized time “when everything was as it should be”, which is clearly a back projection of later generations.¹⁷¹ To this, one should add the gradual crystallization of the early ‘Abbāsīd age as the “Classical period” for Arabo-Islamic culture, in the sense of a referential archive of knowledge for future generations. The shaping of this Classical period was a complex process that was achieved already in the 10th century, with varying degrees of success in the next centuries in the Islamicate World. The myth of the “‘Abbāsīd golden age” then experienced a renaissance among European Orientalists in the 19th century and became connected to a “decline and decadence” discourse that partly served to justify colonial aspirations. At the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, Arabic intellectuals and poets of the *nahḍa* (revival) movement took over this myth of the golden age and transformed it into a new icon for Arab nationalism. Moreover, they regarded it as a powerful and inspirational symbol of past Arab glory and as a counter-narrative to a Eurocentric idea of classicism. As Aḥmad Shawqī (1868-1932) said in 1910: “Forget the glories of Rome and Athens—for all the sapphires and the pearls are in Baghdād”.¹⁷²

These reflections are not to denigrate the indisputable high cultural achievements realized during the Early ‘Abbāsīd period, nor to negate the spectacular growth and liveliness of the early buzzing metropolis of Baghdād.



Fig. 5.4.1: Gold *dīnār* from the Time of al-Mahdī (dated 782 or 783 [=166 AH]), Obverse

¹⁷¹ For this topic, see also El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting*.

¹⁷² Quoted in Stetkevych, *Abbasid Panegyric*, 65.



Fig. 5.4.2: Gold *dīnār* from the Time of al-Mahdī (dated 782 or 783 [=166 AH]), Reverse

However, it is important to take this mythical dimension into account when reconstructing the history of this unique city and to be cautious when interpreting the written evidence for these developments. Already the earliest Arabic sources from the late 9th and 10th centuries, such as the histories by al-Ya‘qūbī (d. before 908) and al-Ṭabarī (d. 923), are written from a nostalgic and idealizing perspective—a process that continued for centuries. In fact, this interpretation of Baghdād’s past still colors almost all contemporary popular accounts and many scholarly studies of ‘Abbāsīd culture from the 8th to the 10th centuries. The legend seems to retain quite an attraction for 20th- and 21st-century minds.

Finally, as Cooperson has also pointed out, when studying statements in the sources about Baghdād, it is important “to clear a space for studying them as the products of contingency rather than as points placed along a trajectory of glory and decline”.¹⁷³ Baghdād was an extraordinary city and a place of a high cultural production, but by no means a space of unique achievements or a place of excellence and brightness that was never reached again anywhere else in the Islamicate World. At the same time, urban life in Baghdād after the Early ‘Abbāsīd period was neither a place of continuous architectural decline nor of cultural decadence. Instead, Baghdād (and, more precisely, al-Manṣūr’s Madīnat al-Salām) can also be seen as an example of city planning that spectacularly failed, and as a booming metropolis that fell apart after a few decades of exceptional flourishing. Nevertheless, the city witnessed many centuries as an important regional urban complex until it again became a capital, this time of the nation state Iraq in the early 20th century.

¹⁷³ Cooperson, *Abbasid ‘Golden Age’*, 58.

Bibliography

Antrim, Z., Connectivity and Creativity. Representations of Baghdad's Centrality, 5th-11th centuries, in: Üstün, I.S. (ed.), *İslam Medeniyetinde Bağdat (Medînetü's-Selam) Uluslararası Sempozyum*, İstanbul 2011, 55-74.

Cooperson, M., The Abbasid 'Golden Age'. An Excavation, in: *al-'Uşūr al-Wuṣṭā* 25 (2017), 41-65.

Cooperson, M., Baghdad in Rhetoric and Narrative, in: *Muqarnas* 13 (1996), 99-113.

El-Hibri, T., *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography. Hārūn al-Rashīd and the Narrative of the 'Abbāsīd Caliphate*, New York 1999.

Ibn Jubayr, Muḥammad, *al-Riḥla*. Tr. R. Broadhurst as: *The Travels of Ibn Jubayr. A Medieval Journey from Cordoba to Jerusalem*. Foreword by R. Irwin, London 2019.

Stetkevych, S.P., Abbasid Panegyric. Badī' Poetry and the Invention of the Arab Golden Age, in: *BJMES* 44 (2016), 1-25.