

# Yakut: Baghdad under the Abbasids, c. 1000 CE

The city of Baghdad formed two vast semi-circles on the right and left banks of the Tigris, twelve miles in diameter. The numerous suburbs, covered with parks, gardens, villas and beautiful promenades, and plentifully supplied with rich bazaars, and finely built mosques and baths, stretched for a considerable distance on both sides of the river. In the days of its prosperity the population of Baghdad and its suburbs amounted to over two millions! The palace of the Caliph stood in the midst of a vast park several hours in circumference.... The palace grounds were laid out with gardens, and adorned with exquisite taste with plants, flowers, and trees, reservoirs and fountains, surrounded by sculptured figures. On this side of the river stood the palaces of the great nobles. Immense streets, none less than forty cubits wide, traversed the city from one end to the other, dividing it into blocks or quarters, each under the control of an overseer or supervisor, who looked after the cleanliness, sanitation and the comfort of the inhabitants.

The water exits both on the north and the south were like the city gates, guarded night and day by relays of soldiers stationed on the watch towers on both sides of the river. Every household was plentifully supplied with water at all seasons by the numerous aqueducts which intersected the town; and the streets, gardens and parks were regularly swept and watered ... at night the square and the streets were lighted by lamps. There was also a vast open space where the troops whose barracks lay on the left bank of the river were paraded daily.... The different nationalities in the capital had each a head officer to represent their interests with the government, and to whom the stranger could appeal for counsel or help.

Baghdad was a veritable City of Palaces, not made of stucco and mortar, but of marble. The buildings were usually of several stories. The palaces and mansions were lavishly gilded and decorated.... Both sides of the river were for miles fronted by the palaces, kiosks, gardens and parks of the grandees and nobles, marble steps led down to the water's edge, and the scene on the river was animated by thousands of gondolas, decked with little flags, dancing like sunbeams on the water, and carrying the pleasure-seeking Baghdad citizens from one part of the city to the other. Along the wide-stretching quays lay whole fleets at anchor, sea and river craft of all kinds, from the Chinese junk to the old Assyrian raft resting on inflated skins. The mosques of

the city were at once vast in size and remarkably beautiful. There were also in Baghdad numerous colleges of learning, hospitals, infirmaries for both sexes, and lunatic asylums.

From: William Stearns Davis, ed., *Readings in Ancient History: Illustrative Extracts from the Sources*, 2 Vols. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1912-13), Vol. II: *Rome and the West*, pp. 365-367. Scanned in and modernized by Dr. Jerome S. Arkenberg, Dept. of History, Cal. State Fullerton. This text is part of the *Internet Medieval Sourcebook* located at the Fordham University center for Medieval Studies, [www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/1000baghdad.html](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/1000baghdad.html). The *Sourcebook* is a collection of public domain and copy-permitted texts related to medieval and Byzantine history. Permission is granted for electronic copying, distribution in print form for educational purposes and personal use. © Paul Halsall, January 1996– July 2006

## Essential Questions

### Yakut: Baghdad Under the Abbasids, c. 1000 CE

1. Does Yakut write in the past or present tense? Do you think he is a traveler or historian? Explain why.
2. Using Yakut's description, draw the layout of the city.
3. What role does the Tigris River play in terms of hygiene and trade?
4. List the most prominent buildings in Baghdad and their functions.
5. What services did the city provide for its inhabitants?
6. In what ways did Baghdad function as an international city? Give examples.

# The Caliph Haroun Al Rashid (r. 786-809)

Abul Hasan Ali Al-Masu'di (Masoudi), *The Book of Golden Meadows*, c. 940 CE

Haroun Al Rashid became Caliph in the year A.D. 786, and he ranks among the Caliphs who have been most distinguished by eloquence, learning, and generosity. During the whole of his reign he performed the pilgrimage to Mecca or carried on war with the unbelievers nearly every year. His daily prayers exceeded the number fixed by the law, and he used to perform the pilgrimage on foot, an act which no previous Caliph had done. When he went on pilgrimage he took with him a hundred learned men and their sons, and when he did not perform it himself he sent three hundred substitutes, whom he appareled richly, and whose expenses he defrayed with generosity.

His conduct generally resembled that of the Caliph Mansur [his grandfather and founder of Baghdad], but he did not imitate the parsimony of the latter. He always repaid services done to him, and that without much delay. He was fond of poetry and poets, and patronized literary and learned men. Religious controversies were hateful to him. Eulogy he relished highly, especially eulogy by gifted poets, whom he richly rewarded

The historian Asmai relates the following anecdote: One day the Caliph gave a feast in a magnificently decorated hall. During the feast he sent for the poet Abu'l Atahiyah, and commanded him to depict in verse the gorgeous scene. The poet began: "Live, O Caliph, in the fulfilment of all thy desire, in the shelter of thy lofty palace!" "Very good!" exclaimed Rashid. "Let us hear the rest."

The poet continued: "Each morn and eve be all thy servitors swift to execute thy behests!" "Excellent!" said the Caliph. "Go on!" The poet replied: "But when the death-rattle chokes thy breath thou wilt learn, alas! that all thy delights were a shadow." Rashid burst into tears. Fadhl, the son of Yahya (Haroun's Vizier), seeing this, said to the poet: "The Caliph sent for you to divert him, and you have plunged him into melancholy." "Let him be," said Rashid; "he saw us in a state of blindness, and tried to open our eyes."

This Prince treated learned men with great regard. Abou Moawia, one of the most learned men of his time, related that when he was sitting one day at food with the Caliph, the latter poured water on his hands after the meal, and said to him: "Abou Moawia, do you know who has just washed your hands?" He answered: "No." Rashid informed him that it was himself. Abou Moawia replied: "Prince, you doubtless act in this manner in order to do homage to learning." "You speak truth," answered Rashid.

Medieval Sourcebook: [www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/masoudi.html](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/masoudi.html) (click on "The Caliph Haroun Al Rashid"). This text is part of the *Internet Medieval Sourcebook* located at the Fordham University center for Medieval Studies. The *Sourcebook* is a collection of public domain and copy-permitted texts related to medieval and Byzantine history. Permission is granted for electronic copying, distribution in print form for educational purposes and personal use. © Paul Halsall, January 1996–July 2006

## *Essential Questions*

### **Caliph Haroun Al Rashid (r. 786-809)**

1. Is Masoudi writing as a contemporary of Haroun Al Rashid or as a later chronicler? Explain your reasons for thinking so.
2. In the opening paragraph the author states that the Caliph "patronized literary and learned men." How might such patronage have benefited Baghdad as well as the Abbasid Empire itself?
3. In the third and fourth paragraphs, the historian Asmai relates an anecdote about the Caliph. What does the incident reveal about the Caliph's attitudes and values?
4. In the last paragraph another anecdote is related about the Caliph. Based on this incident, provide three adjectives that would aptly describe Haroun Al Rashid.

# Islamic Culture and the Medical Arts: Greek Influences

The medical theories inherited particularly from the Greek world supplied a thread of continuity to professional learned medical practice throughout the medieval Islamic lands. The caliphs al-Mansur, Harun al-Rashid (of the *Thousand and One Nights* fame), and al-Ma'mun are noted for their patronage of learning and medicine. When suffering from a stomach complaint, al-Mansur, who ruled from 734 to 775 (158-169 H), called a Christian Syriac-speaking physician Jurjis ibn Jibra'il ibn Bakhtishu' to Baghdad from Gondeshapur in southwest Iran. His son was also called to Baghdad in 787 (171 H), where he remained until his death in 801, serving as physician to the caliph Harun al-Rashid. The third generation of this family, Jibra'il ibn Bakhtishu', was physician to Harun al-Rashid and to the two succeeding caliphs in Baghdad. For eight generations, well into the second half of the 11th century, twelve members of the Bakhtishu' family were to serve the caliphs as physicians and advisors, to sponsor the translation of texts, and to compose their own original treatises. A remarkable, if not unique, record in the history of medicine.

Early in the 9th century, there was established in Baghdad a foundation called the House of Wisdom (*Bayt al-Hikmah*), which had its own library. Its purpose was to promote the translation of scientific texts. The most famous of the translators was Hunayn ibn Ishaq al-'Ibadi, a Syriac-speaking Christian originally from southern Iraq who also knew Greek and Arabic. He was the author of many medical tracts and a physician to the caliph al-Mutawakkil (ruled 847-861/232-247 H), but he is most often remembered as a translator, an activity he began at the age of seventeen. He produced a truly prodigious amount of work before his death in about 873 (260 H), for he translated nearly all the Greek medical books known at that time, half of the Aristotelian writings as well as commentaries, various mathematical treatises, and even the *Septuagint*. Ten years before his death he stated that of Galen's works alone, he had made 95 Syriac and 34 Arabic versions. Accuracy and sensitivity were hallmarks of his translating style, and he was no doubt responsible, more than any other person, for the establishment of the classical Arabic scientific and medical vocabulary. Through these translations a continuity of ideas was maintained between Roman and Byzantine practices and Islamic medicine.

Courtesy of the National Library of Medicine. To access related Arabic documents go to [www.nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/islamic\\_medical/islamic\\_03.html](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/islamic_medical/islamic_03.html).

## *Essential Questions*

### **Islamic Culture and Medical Arts Under the Abbasids**

1. Looking at the documents in Arabic, can you figure out whether they were handwritten or printed? On what kind of material are they written? How were they likely to be stored?
2. What role did the Bakhtishu family play in medicine as it was practiced in Baghdad? Who hired them? What was their religious background?
3. What was the purpose of the House of Wisdom (*Bayt al-Hikmah*)? What effect do you think it had on Baghdad as a center of learning?
4. What works did Hunayn ibn Ishaq al-Ibadi translate? In what fields? Who were some of the authors he translated?

# The Fall of Baghdad to the Mongols in 1258

1. When Ibn Jubayr visited Baghdad in 1184 he felt the city's decline: "This ancient city, though it still serves as the Abbasid capital, has lost much of its distinctive character and retains only its famous name. Compared to what it once was—before it fell victim to recurrent misfortunes and repeated calamities—the city resembles a vanished encampment, or a passing phantom." After recounting his visit to the city, Ibn Jubayr concluded that it "is greater than can be described," but he couldn't resist lamenting, "but what is she to what she was? Today we may apply to her the saying of the lover: *You are not you, and the houses are not those I knew.*"

2. Ibn Kathir, *Al-Bidaya wa Al-Nihaya*, 14th century.

They [the Mongols] came down upon the city and killed all they could, men, women and children, the old, the middle-aged, and the young. Many of the people went into wells, latrines, and sewers and hid there for many days without emerging. Most of the people gathered in the caravanserais [inns] and locked themselves in. The Tatars [Mongols] opened the gates by either breaking or burning them. When they entered, the people in them fled upstairs and the Tatars killed them on the roofs until blood poured from the gutters into the street; "We belong to God and to God we return" [Qur'an, ii, 156]. The same happened in the mosques and cathedral mosques and dervish convents. No one escaped them except for the Jewish and Christian dhimmis [protected minorities], those who found shelter with them or in the house of the Vizier Ibn Al-'Alqami the Shi'ite, and a group of merchants who had obtained safe-conduct from them, having paid great sums of money to preserve themselves and their property. And Baghdad, which had been the most civilised of all cities, became a ruin with only a few inhabitants, and they were in fear and hunger and wretchedness and insignificance."

3. The philosopher Nasir Al-Din Al-Tusi (d.1274), who was present with Hulaghu (the Mongol king) at the time, recounts the encounter between the two rulers: "He [Hulaghu] went to examine the Caliph's residence and walked about it in every direction. The Caliph was fetched and ordered presents to be offered. Whatever he brought out the King at once distributed amongst his suite and emirs, as well as among military leaders and all those present. He then set a golden tray before the Caliph and said: 'Eat!' 'It is not edible,' said the Caliph. 'Then why didst thou keep it,' asked the King, 'and not give it to thy soldiers? And why didst thou not make these iron doors into arrow-heads and come to the banks of the river so that I might not have been able to cross it?' 'Such,' replied the Caliph, 'was God's will.' 'What will befall thee,' said the King, 'is also God's will.'"

4. A poem by Taquaddin Ibn Abil-Yusr describes the destruction of Baghdad in 1258. It is quoted by Al-Dhahabi' (d.1348) in his *Tarikh Al-Islam* (The History of Islam).

How many treasures have become scattered abroad through plun-

dering, and passed into the possession of infidels;

How many punishments have been inflicted by their swords upon men's necks, how many burdens [of sin] there lain down...

After the capture of all the house of Al-Abbas, may no brightening illumine the face of the dawn;

Nothing has ever given me pleasure since their departure save the Sayings of the Prophet that I pass on and Traditions of the Fathers;

There remains for neither the Faith nor the world, now that they are gone, any market of glory, for they have passed away and perished.

Truly the Day of Judgment has been held in Baghdad, and her term, when to prosperity succeeds adversity.

The family of the Prophet and the household of learning have been taken captive, and whom, think you, after their loss, will cities contain?"

Excerpts 1, 3 and 4 from "Its Famous Names" by Amina Elbendary, *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*, Cairo (April 2003), [weekly.ahram.org.eg/2003/634/bo2.htm](http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2003/634/bo2.htm).

Excerpt 2 from "Remembrance of Things Past: On the City of Peace, Baghdad," in *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*, Cairo (April 2003), [weekly.ahram.org.eg/2003/634/bsc3.htm](http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2003/634/bsc3.htm).

## Essential Questions

### The Fall of Baghdad to the Mongols in 1258

1. The first excerpt quotes a visitor to Baghdad before it fell to the Mongols. How does Ibn Jubayr describe the city? What evidence does Ibn Jubayr provide that the city is no longer at its height? What evidence does he provide that it is nonetheless a great city?
2. Is the author of the second account, Ibn Kathir, an eyewitness to the fall of Baghdad or a chronicler of past events? Explain.
3. In what ways does Ibn Kathir contrast the "civilized city" of Baghdad with the invaders? Give specifics.
4. Is the third author, Nasir Al-Din Al-Tusi, an eyewitness or historian of a past event? Explain. How does he describe the confrontation between Hulaghu and the Caliph? Who has power at the end of the encounter, and how do we know?
5. The final excerpt is from a poem. In what way does the poet, Taquaddin Ibn Abil-Yusr, lament the demise of Baghdad? What is the role of the Islamic faith in the poem?

# Ibn Battuta: Travels in Asia and Africa 1325-1354

## **Ibn Battuta leaves Basra by boat and travels to Baghdad**

At Basra I embarked in a sumbuq, that is a small boat, for Ubulla, which lies ten miles distant. One travels between a constant succession of orchards and palm-groves both to right and left, with merchants sitting in the shade of the trees selling bread, fish, dates, milk and fruit. Ubulla was formerly a large town, frequented by merchants from India and Firs, but it fell into decay and is now a village.

Thence we travelled to Baghdad, the Abode of Peace and Capital of Islam. Here there are two bridges like that at Hilla on which the people promenade night and day, both men and women. The town has eleven cathedral mosques, eight on the right bank and three on the left, together with very many other mosques and madrasas, only the latter are all in ruins.

The baths at Baghdad are numerous and excellently constructed, most of them being painted with pitch, which has the appearance of black marble. This pitch is brought from a spring between Kufa and Basra, from which it flows continually. It gathers at the sides of the spring like clay and is shovelled up and brought to Baghdad. Each establishment has a large number of private bathrooms, every one of which has also a wash-basin in the corner, with two taps supplying hot and cold water. Every bather is given three towels, one to wear round his waist when he goes in, another to wear round his waist when he comes out, and the third to dry himself with. In no town other than Baghdad have I seen all this elaborate arrangement, though some other towns approach it in this respect.

The western part of Baghdad was the earliest to be built, but it is now for the most part in ruins. In spite of that there remain in it still thirteen quarters, each like a city in itself and possessing two or three baths. The hospital (maristan) is a vast ruined edifice, of which only vestiges remain.

The eastern part has an abundance of bazaars, the largest of which is called the Tuesday bazaar. On this side there are no fruit trees, but all the fruit is brought from the western side, where there are orchards and gardens.

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## *Essential Questions*

### **Ibn Battuta Travels in Asia and Africa**

1. When does Ibn Battuta visit Baghdad? Looking at a map, trace his probable route from Basra to Baghdad.
2. Make a chart of the city on which you place the things described by Ibn Battuta. Is the eastern or western side of the city more prosperous? Why?
3. Based on what you have read, make two lists. On one side list all the evidence that the author gives us that Baghdad is an impressive and prosperous city. On the other side list all the evidence of its decay, destruction and neglect.