

Abbasid Baghdad

In the middle of the eighth century, the Abbasids overthrew the existing Umayyad caliphate and established a new dynasty. The Abbasid ruler al-Mansur (r. 754-775) founded the city of Baghdad and made it the capital of the Abbasid caliphate (750-1258). Baghdad became a commercial, artistic, and scientific center where scholars, scientists, and poets from many different backgrounds mingled. The city drew travelers from all over the world. In the middle of the tenth century, Shi'a Iranian military leaders took power from the caliphs, though they remained as figureheads and symbols until Baghdad was taken by the Mongols in the middle of the thirteenth century.

A Jewish Traveler Visits Baghdad

BENJAMIN OF TUDELA, From *Book of Travels* (ca. 1159-1172)

Benjamin of Tudela (1130-1173) left his home in Christian-controlled Spain and visited Jewish communities throughout Europe, western Asia, and North Africa. Benjamin's record of his journeys, the *Book of Travels*, gives detailed descriptions of cities, buildings, and events, as well as the social and religious customs of Jews and non-Jews at his various stops. One of these was Baghdad.

Thence, it is two days to Baghdad, the great city and the royal residence of the Caliph Emir al Muminin al Abbasi of the family of Mohammed (Caliph Al- Mustanjid, r. 1160-1170). He is at the head of the Mohammedan religion, and all the kings of Islam obey him; he occupies a similar position to that held by the Pope over the Christians. He has a palace in Bagdad three miles in extent, wherein is a great park with all varieties of trees, fruit-bearing and otherwise, and all manner of animals. The whole area is surrounded by a wall, and in the park, there is a lake whose waters are fed by the river Hiddekel. Whenever the king desires to indulge in recreation and to rejoice and feast, his servants catch all manner of birds, game, and fish, and he goes to his palace with his counselors and princes. There, the great king, Al Abbasi the Caliph (Hafiz), holds his court, and he is kind unto Israel, and many belonging to the people of Israel are his attendants; he knows all languages and is well versed in the law of Israel. He reads and writes the holy language (Hebrew). He will not partake of anything unless he has earned it by the work of his own hands. He makes coverlets to which he attaches his seal; his courtiers sell them in the market, and the great ones of the land purchase them, and the proceeds thereof provide his sustenance. He is truthful and trusty, speaking peace to all men. The men of Islam see him but once a year. The pilgrims that come from distant lands to go unto Mecca, which is in the land of El-Yemen, are anxious to see his face, and they assemble before the palace exclaiming, "Our Lord, light of Islam and glory of our Law, show us the effulgence of thy countenance," but he pays no regard to their words. Then the princes who minister unto him say to him, "Our Lord, spread forth thy peace unto the men that have come from distant lands, who crave to abide under the shadow of thy graciousness," and thereupon he arises and lets down the hem of his robe from the window, and the pilgrims come and kiss it, and a

prince says unto them "Go forth in peace, for our Master the Lord of Islam granteth peace to you." He is regarded by them as Mohammed, and they go to their houses rejoicing at the salutation that the prince has vouchsafed unto them and glad at heart that they have kissed his robe.

Each of his brothers and the members of his family have an abode in his palace, but they are all fettered in chains of iron, and guards are placed over each of their houses so that they may not rise against the great Caliph. For once, it happened to a predecessor that his brothers rose up against him and proclaimed one of themselves as Caliph; then it was decreed that all the members of his family should be bound, that they might not rise up against the ruling Caliph.⁶ Each one of them resides in his palace in great splendor, and they own villages and towns, and their stewards bring them the tribute thereof, and they eat and drink and rejoice all the days of their life.⁷

Within the domains of the palace of the Caliph, there are great buildings of marble and columns of silver and gold, and carvings upon rare stones are fixed in the walls. In the Caliph's palace are great riches and towers filled with gold, silken garments, and all precious stones. He does not issue forth from his palace save once in the year, at the feast which the Mohammedans call El-id-bed Ramazan,⁸ and they come from distant lands that day to see him. He rides on a mule and is attired in the royal robes of gold and silver and fine linen; on his head is a turban adorned with precious stones of priceless value, and over the turban is a black shawl as a sign of his modesty, implying that all this glory will be covered by darkness on the day of death. He is accompanied by all the nobles of Islam dressed in fine garments and riding on horses, the princes of Arabia, the princes of Togarma and Daylam (Gilan) and the princes of Persia, Media, and Ghuzz, and the princes of the land of Tibet, which is three months' journey distant, and westward of which lies the land of Samarkand. He proceeds from his palace to the great mosque of Islam, which is by the Basrah Gate. Along the road, the walls are adorned with silk and purple, and the inhabitants receive him with all kinds of song and exultation, and they dance before the great king who is styled the Caliph. They salute him with a loud voice and say, "Peace unto thee, our Lord the King and Light of Islam!" He kisses his robe and, stretching forth the hem thereof, he salutes them. Then he proceeds to the court of the mosque, mounts a wooden pulpit, and expounds to them their Law. Then the learned ones of Islam arise and pray for him and extol his greatness and his graciousness, to which they all respond. Afterward, he gives them his blessing, and they bring before him a camel, which he slays, and this is their Passover sacrifice. He gives thereof unto the princes, and they distribute it to all so that they may taste the sacrifice brought by their sacred king, and they all rejoice. Afterward, he leaves the mosque and returns alone to his palace by way of the river Hiddekel, and the grandees of Islam accompany him in ships on the river until he enters his palace. He does not return the way he came, and the road which he takes along the river-side is watched all the year through so that no man shall tread in his footsteps. He does not leave the palace again for a whole year.

He is a benevolent man. He built on the other side of the river, on the banks of an arm of the Euphrates, which borders the city, a hospital consisting of blocks of houses and hospices for the sick poor who come to be healed. Here, there are about sixty physicians' stores, which are provided by the Caliph's house with drugs and whatever else may be required. Every sick man who comes is maintained at the Caliph's expense and is medically treated. Here is a building which is called Dar-al-Maristan, where they keep charge of the demented people who have become insane in the towns through the great heat in the summer, and they chain each of them in iron chains until their reason becomes restored to them in the winter-time. Whilst they abide there, they are provided with food from the house of the Caliph, and when their reason is restored, they are dismissed, and each one of them goes to his house and his home. Money is given to those who have stayed in the hospices on their return to their homes. Every month, the officers of the Caliph inquire and investigate whether they have regained their reason, in which case they are discharged. All this the Caliph does out of charity to those that come to the city of Baghdad, whether they be sick or insane. The Caliph is a righteous man, and all his actions are for good.

Document Questions:

1. What does Benjamin of Tudela think of Baghdad?
2. What does he highlight about the caliph's characteristics and actions?
3. What does he think of the caliph?

⁶For once, it happened ... the ruling Caliph: This actually happened to Al-Mustanjid himself. His stepmother plotted to put her own son (Al-Mustanjid's half-brother) on the throne, but he discovered her plan and had her, the son, and others who had been part of the rebellion imprisoned.

⁷Each one of them ... days of their life: There seems to be a contradiction here, in that the caliph's brothers are first described as bound in chains, and then as living in great splendor. Benjamin may have heard that the stepmother and male relatives of the caliph were under house arrest but living quite comfortably.

⁸El-id-bed Ramazan: Eid al-Fitr, the religious holiday celebrated by Muslims that marks the end of Ramadan, the Islamic holy

month of fasting