Abbasid Baghdad

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Chapter 6

Abbasid Baghdad

By Peter Webb

Across the 2000-year sweep of history that is the commercial and cultural exchanges of the Silk Roads, there is perhaps no city that better epitomises the ideal of interconnection, trade and luxury than Baghdad. At the moment of the city's construction in 762 CE, its founder reportedly visualized ships from China and caravans from Iran to stock the city's markets, and Baghdad was soon hailed as the central nodal point of the entire world. During its heyday, it was unprecedently large and tremendously rich, possessing the key combination of population and wealth that attracted lucrative trade from wider horizons, and its lure was greater than any other city at the time. Baghdad had the gravitational force to draw long-distance trade from all corners of Asia. During this period of peak prosperity, it was one of the few moments in history when trans-Asiatic connections could function at their fullest extent, through which the many bifurcated trading routes across the continent could all lead, largely unimpeded, to the great cosmopolitan hub that was Baghdad.

Baghdad was founded as the capital city of the Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258) during the time of the Abbasids' maximum reach and effective territorial control. Abbasid armies and administrators could claim to wield authority over an immense region, from Tunisia to the fringes of Pakistan and Kazakhstan, thus politically unifying much of the overland routes across Asia and facilitating the free movement of caravans.

Furthermore, in the same period, the Tang Dynasty (618–907) held similar sway from the Pacific Ocean to Central Asia, which meant that even the longest trade routes neither had to traverse politically fragmented zones nor endure the dangers of large, contested areas or significant unsafe routes where local warlords and brigands wielded power.

During the several generations of Abbasid imperial fluorescence, a merchant in China would feel remarkably secure when dispatching goods to far distant Baghdad. Baghdad also straddled the Tigris River, greeting ships from the Persian Gulf port of Basra during a period when Iranian and Omani sailors appear to have enjoyed a monopoly in direct trade with ports in Southern China. Accordingly, there was also a uniquely direct route to Baghdad across the seas without the impediment of multiple intermediaries and taxes that would complicate the journey.

To complete its ideal geographical situation as a hub for both land and sea travel, Baghdad society in the eighth and ninth centuries was renowned for consumerism and materialism; Baghdadis were willing and eager to spend, so much so that a contemporary Arabic poet, Maḥmūd al-Warrāq (d. 844), lamented:

> *"The people make a show of religion, but their Kaaba is their dinar"*

A revulsion to Baghdad's consumer culture apparently led to the rise of ascetic movements in Islam, which would eventually culminate in Sufism, but the bulk of the city's population was keen on luxury purchases and they ensured that traders from far horizons could be assured of brisk and ready markets for their wares.

Urban settlement and long-distance exchange

The city's unique position in connecting all the cultures of Asia and into the heart of China should be emphasized in order to appreciate the distinctive scope of cultural and commercial exchange which became possible upon Baghdad's founding, and to grasp the wide range of potential cosmopolitan influences on its urban design and architecture. It was unusual for Middle Eastern states to have such direct access across so vast a territory and this context manifestly influenced Baghdad's cosmopolitan and multi-cultural demographic and material realities.

According to the Arabic historian al-Ṭabarī (d. 923), the Caliph al-Manṣūr (r. 754–775) himself chose the site of Baghdad after surveying various possible locations to build his capital city in 762. The caliph stood on the site of his future capital, where the Tigris and Euphrates rivers converge, and exclaimed:

> *"Here is the Tigris, with nothing between us and China! All that is on the sea can come to us on the river, as can the provisions of northern Mesopotamia, Armenia and all surrounding lands. And here is the Euphrates on which everything from Syria and Raqqa and all its surrounding lands can be brought."*

Al-Ṭabarī's account was written over 125 years after the fact, and his personal predilection was to praise the centralized caliphate of the early Abbasids. Therefore, we cannot know if al-Manṣūr actually had China on his mind when considering the site of his capital, but Baghdad's position to maximize trading potential is nonetheless manifest. Moreover, the idea of China as a place of distant luxury trade is attested in Arabic poetry from the mid-eighth century, contemporary with al-Manṣūr. Hence, it is not so far-fetched that Baghdad's founder had deliberately intended to create a major trade hub for the most distant quarters, bringing everything Asia had to offer into one central urban emporium. In addition to its access to Iraq and Syria via their rivers, Baghdad's ready access by river to the Persian Gulf meant that the city was within reach of maritime trade, while being comfortably distant from the sea as well as the unfavourable humid climate and salty marshes of the shoreline.

Middle Eastern and Chinese connections were entering an unusually close period of activity around the time of Baghdad's founding. In the previous generation, the Caliphate had made concerted efforts to assert control over Central Asia, conquering Samarqand in 721. In 751, the Caliphate clashed at the Battle of Talas with a Chinese Tang army, which was seeking its own control over the region. The Muslims emerged victorious, but they did not pursue military conquest further East, instead the caliphs seemed intent on maintaining peaceful relations with the Tang. Chinese records report that twelve Abbasid diplomatic delegations arrived at the emperor's court between 752 and 798. The Chinese reciprocated, sending their own emissaries in 785. The Chinese official, Du Huan, captured at the Battle of Talas, also travelled to the Middle East, visiting a number of Middle Eastern cities and recording his observations.

When Du Huan eventually returned to China by sea he submitted a report vividly describing in detail the capital of the Caliphate, which may have been Baghdad or the previous Abbasid capital at Kufa.

The official relationship reflected the ongoing sentiment as well as the close trading ties. Baghdad imported significant quantities of porcelain from China via maritime routes: the whiteness of Chinese wares from the kilns in Hebei was so admired that the word *Ṣīnī* (Arabic: Chinese) was used as a metaphor for 'pure white' in Arabic poetry from the mid-eighth century onwards (Figure 1).

Figure 1 Tang bowl with lotus and animal motifs

Chinese silks were also in high demand, arriving in Baghdadi markets either by land or sea. Conversely, Baghdad and its hinterland did not seem to produce goods with a high demand in China; Muslim traders did bring glass, incense and such raw materials as cobalt (for making blue ceramic glazes) to China, but these were sourced elsewhere in the Middle East. Baghdad was a trade hub because it had money. Its residents paid for the goods in gold and silver coins minted in the Abbasid imperial treasuries. References to China in other Arabic poems reveal a Baghdadi familiarity with the Far East in the eighth and ninth centuries on a scale that was not often replicated in subsequent eras.

The spectre of Baghdad's exotic China trade and the sheer human achievement of ship- and caravan-borne traders covering such vast distances without the aid of mechanized power enthral our imaginations, but the deeper and more significant cosmopolitan connections of Baghdad were focused a little closer to home. The Abbasid movement derived much of its initial strength from Eastern Iran, and a number of the most powerful governors and ministers of the first Abbasid century hailed from cities in present-day Turkmenistan and northern Afghanistan. A major power struggle between 811–819 within the Abbasid family resulted in the firm victory of an Eastern Iranian faction, and although Baghdad was sacked in the fighting, the victors rebuilt it, creating even more Iranian and Central Asian connections. It is in this sphere of Iranian cultural exchange that much of Baghdad's urban and architectural heritage can be most successfully evaluated.

The same Abbasid family struggle from 811–819 also introduces a host of factors that complicate efforts to explore cultural exchange and influences in the city's urban and architectural fabric. Baghdad did not fare well over the course of time. From its founding in 762, it enjoyed great prosperity for its first 50 years, but the original constructions were damaged by intra-Abbasid warring when the city was sacked in 813. While Baghdad was rebuilt in the aftermath, in 836 the caliphs moved out, shifting their capital and building efforts 120 km to the north at the court city of Samarra on the banks of the Tigris. This left Baghdad as a commercial centre for the general population, albeit bereft of political power and court patronage. The caliphs did return to Baghdad in 892, which would have resulted in renewed construction works, but it was short-lived as the caliphs soon thereafter lost much of their former imperial control and authority. Their empire rapidly became fragmented in the tenth century and the real political power shifted to other urban centres of the Middle East. Tenth-century Baghdadis were well aware that the era of great prosperity had passed. By 950 they were already looking back to the close of the ninth century with distinct nostalgia, and although the population and markets did not collapse, Baghdad was no longer the preeminent city of the Muslim world as it had been during its height from ca. 762–930. By 950, traders would also have known that the lucrative patronage for their wares lay elsewhere.

The gradual effects of decline and underuse took their toll on the edifices of Baghdad's heyday and large parts of the early city were gradually abandoned throughout the tenth century. A series of five serious floods in the 940s, as well as five major floods from 972–1178, did away with much of the rest, and although Baghdad witnessed a building renaissance and greater prosperity under ambitious caliphs in the early thirteenth century, the sacking of the city by the Mongols in 1258 put an end to large-scale development and the town was relegated to a relatively modest status in the centuries that followed. In short, favourable conditions had benefitted Baghdad for around 170 years (from 762 to ca. 930 CE) when it was one – if not the most – populous city in Eurasia. However, its prosperity did not last and while it remained an important centre in the tenth and eleventh centuries, with a significant revival around 1200, Baghdad's status as the hub of global commerce had ended. Baghdad's story of the Silk Roads is, accordingly, confined from 762 to 1258, with greatest importance in the first two centuries.

Assessment of the fabric of Baghdad's construction is also rendered difficult owing to its location, surrounded by rivers and irrigation canals. This geographic feature meant that the most practical building materials for Baghdad were mud and baked brick, and these materials do not survive the test of time. Even without the effects of war, none of Baghdad's buildings were built to last. Mud bricks inevitably disintegrate, becoming unidentifiable mounds of earth, and although baked bricks are longer lasting, the nature of construction and interiors was designed for short-term use. Once buildings began to decay, the baked bricks were torn from their original structures to be used in new constructions.

Thus, practically nothing remains of the original city today; Baghdad's only extant monuments date from ca. 1200, at the earliest. Some material indicators can be adduced from the ruins of the nearby palace city of Samarra, which was built in the ninth century when the caliphs moved out of Baghdad. Since Samarra's palaces were themselves abandoned soon afterwards and were neither sacked nor resettled, substantial constructions have survived and were presumably built in the style analogous to the now vanished Baghdadi courts of the generations before Samarra and immediately after the caliphs returned to Baghdad (more on the Samarra palaces will be discussed later). There is also extensive textual evidence of the city's design in Arabic literature, but these texts do not all agree on the specifics of building design and urban layout and can therefore only provide conjectural notions.

Viewed from the questions arising from material evidence and architectural exchange, Baghdad is somewhat of a mystery. We know it was a great city with fabulous markets that attracted traders and goods from all across Eurasia; a Chinese doctor was even reported to have visited Baghdad in the tenth century to copy medical manuscripts. Arabic literary accounts of caliphal palaces constructed in 917 list curtains, drapery, gold brocade and carpets from Armenia, the Nile delta region of Egypt and northern and central Iran. The court and the wealthy of Baghdad clearly had access to luxury items from a wide swathe of territory, however, the question of how cosmopolitan connections fostered the import and adoption of architectural ideas, decorative motifs and material cultural production are obscured by the fragility of the building materials as well as the considerable ravages of time that have left few remains. Modern Baghdad is constructed on top of these ruins and only a handful of structures dated prior to 1250 remain, let alone the edifices at the height of the Abbasids in the eighth and ninth centuries. Nevertheless, indicators for its architectural features can be found and the Iranian connection has shown to be strong – not surprising given that Baghdad was built in one of the heartlands of the pre-Islamic Sasanian Empire of Iran (224–651), with Baghdad founded near the ruins of the old Sasanian capital city. The Muslim-era craftsmen of Baghdad developed the Sasanian traditions and then exported their new productions to other corners of the Muslim world given Baghdad's pre-eminence and high status, which all subsequent regional regimes sought to copy even a few centuries after the political decline of the Abbasids. However, solid conclusions about Baghdad's architecture will evade us as there is much conjecture as we endeavour to recreate the urban fabric of the Muslim world's most famous yet also most physically invisible city.

The round(ed) city

The most outstanding feature of the original Abbasid city of Baghdad planned in 762, an aspect described in all Arabic sources, is the city's rounded shape. Elaborately defensive, Baghdad first confronted its visitor with a wide circular ditch along the entire length of the outer walls. These were topped by crenelated battlements and watchtowers, with only four entry points along the entire circuit organized at 45° angles to the cardinal points.

The gates were constructed as bent-entranced gateways under guard towers, designed to prevent direct frontal access to the city. Upon entering the gate, a visitor would have to turn left to then face the second part of the gatehouse, enabling the guards in the towers enough time and the opportunity to assail any intruders with hostile intent. This very astute defensive system was uncommon at the time. Indeed, there are no comparable examples of bent gates in earlier Sasanian and Byzantine traditions nor early Muslim-era cities. Despite its utility, the concept, surprisingly, was not often repeated in the two following centuries; the bent-gate entrance only became a standard feature in Middle Eastern castles and cities built after 1100.

Once through one of Baghdad's gates, a visitor would next enter a covered passageway leading into an empty area before the second circuit of walls, again, defended with a second gate tower topped with a dome. The void between the first two sets of walls was yet a further defensive measure to allow for clear views of any attacking forces that managed to penetrate the first section of wall. Beyond the second gate lay a narrower space before a third circuit of walls. Passing through these, the visitor finally entered an inhabited part of Baghdad. Here were a series of arched arcades where the markets were located. Behind them was the residential section of the town, which was surrounded by yet another (fourth) circular wall, which – via four arched entryways – led to an expansive circular open area at the centre of which was the caliph's 'Golden Palace' topped with the 'Green Dome' (*al-qubba al-khaḍrā'*). Beside it stood the central mosque. The caliph placed his residence in the epicentre, with the town and its defences radiating outwards in all directions. The rounded spatial arrangement speaks to some form of political and ritual symbolism, the meaning of which is still debated.

With no archaeological remains, the precise measurements and corroboration of the details cannot be confirmed, with the Arabic textual sources disagreeing on the precise size of al-Manṣūr's original Baghdad, the nature of its circularity, and the details of the buildings in the central area. None of the sources are contemporary with Baghdad's foundation, but the most oft-repeated statement in the earliest texts is that the city was built in a circle, and all agree that the caliph's palace was placed at its centre, suggesting that the city symbolized harmony and perfection. However, a few sources lend support to the notion that the city was more oval in shape without the same radial-length between the centre and all the parts of the walls. The oval shape would still place the caliph's residence at the symbolic centre of the town, but it would suggest that mathematical or astronomical precision and perfection of an exact radius of the circle was not necessarily intended and that a specific astrological significance cannot be read into the fundamental meaning behind Baghdad's urban plan. Whatever the precise nature of the circularity, Arabic texts do not refer to astrological allegories in the city's layout either: Baghdad is simply known as 'the City of Peace' (*madīnat al-salām*), a play on the Qurʾanic description of paradise as the 'Abode of Peace' (*dār al-salām*), and the caliph's palace depicted as the 'Green Dome' hearken to the Qurʾanic descriptions of the 'Dome of Heaven'.

Al-Manṣūr also constructed a palace outside the walls named the 'Palace of Eternity' (*al-khuld*), a reference to the Qur'anic 'Garden of Eternity' in paradise. What is certain, therefore, is that Islamic symbolism was at the centre of the meaning of the city and its main buildings, and although its original measurements are impossible to know for certain, Baghdad was certainly, at the least, round, if not a perfect circle.

The rounded city with the ruler's palace at its centre is a remarkable urban layout for the Muslim era. Indeed, there are no precedents from earlier caliphal constructions and certainly no pre-Islamic Arabian towns had a circular form. The much earlier Parthian-era city of Hatra in northern Iraq, founded around 200 BCE, had roughly circular walls with its ritual complex in the centre and, for a period, Hatra was under the control of clients of the Parthians (247 BCE–224 CE) who controlled the northern reaches of the Syrian Desert, which is geographically close to Baghdad. As such, Hatra has been proposed as a possible precursor to Baghdad, however, Hatra's walls were far from uniformly round like Baghdad. Moreover, it was largely destroyed in the mid-third century CE, 500 years before al-Manṣūr planned Baghdad. Furthermore, Hatra's site was not reoccupied with significant settlements in the Muslim era, and Arabic literature does not recall its rulers nor mention anything about a round city on the site. This lack of memory about Hatra in early Islam makes it unlikely that Hatra could have served as a theoretical model for Baghdad, an early Abbasid city. To probe the reasons for Baghdad's construction, we need to uncover the intention behind its planning, and Hatra does not appear to have been a conscious part of the cultural background. Instead, the round shape of Baghdad hints at ideas possibly emanating from other contexts.

Arabic sources do not explicitly state why Baghdad is round nor do they agree as to the originator of the plan. According to the sources, the city was either designed by the Caliph al-Manṣūr himself or by a group of designers led by Muslim jurists with the help of astronomers and mathematicians, or by the famous courtier, governor and the caliph's confidant, Khālid ibn Barmak (d. 781–2). Reading the sources carefully, the least likely option is that it is the caliph's design; the layout of the urban settlement seems to have been physically marked on the ground and then shown to the caliph for his approval before construction commenced. The second option, the jurist-led design team, is attractive as the city was a greenfield site and the land would need to have been appropriated and then apportioned into residential quarters assigned to the city's population. This naturally invokes issues of property law, and the presence of jurists in this context would have ensured the legitimacy of the city's division under Islamic law. Mathematicians and astronomers are an ever-present consultative body in the context of Muslim-era construction, with astronomers particularly playing an important role in determining when the stars are most propitious to commence operations.

However, as there are no Islamic principles of law stipulating that a town must be round, the involvement of the jurist-led team, while they may have been present, does not explain its shape, which leaves two other options.

The first option, proposed by K.A.C. Creswell, an architectural historian, and endorsed by Jacob Lassner in his detailed study of Baghdad's foundation, is that the rounded shape was primarily pragmatic. They reasoned that the Caliph desired security and so designed a town that enclosed his palace within a dense thicket of walls. In addition, the caliph wished to save money and the rounded design would save on bricks (Creswell estimates an 11% saving compared to a similar area defended by a square wall). Indeed, Arabic texts mention the Caliph al-Manṣūr's reputation for frugality, but Arabic sources do not mention Baghdad's walls as an example of it and, in all events, unfired mud bricks would have been rather inexpensive given the plentiful supply of water and earth around the site. The resulting inefficiencies in developing an urban space within a circle also mitigate the economic benefits. While practical considerations cannot be ruled out, as there are no clear statements in the sources, a second explanation for Baghdad's rounded shape seems more cogent and posits transregional cultural exchange as being at the root of Baghdad's design.

This second possibility involves (at least in part) the figure Khālid ibn Barmak, mentioned by some Arabic sources as the man who conceived Baghdad's layout. He was of Eastern-Iranian descent and came from the region of Balkh in present-day Afghanistan. His father, Barmak, had run the Naw Bahar Buddhist monastery at Balkh, the largest Buddhist ritual centre in the Oxus region. Khalid had also served as the governor of Fars in southwest Iran prior to the planning of Baghdad. Both the region of Khālid's birth and his governorship possess important urban sites that were designed in a circular fashion, and the transfer of Iranian ideas for an 'ideal' symbolic capital city prompts further exploration.

Rounded shapes were by no means the archetypal form of pre-Islamic Iranian city planning nor were they even particularly common, but there are several notable examples at important royal and ritual sites. The two oldest ascertainable round cities constructed by Persian empires may well be Darabjerd in Fars province in southwest Iran and Erk Kala at Marv at the northeast edges of the Iranian empire in present-day Turkmenistan (Figure 2). Darabjerd was a royal construction of the late Achaemenid and early Parthian periods (mid-fourth to early second century BCE), and the circuit of its walls is essentially a perfect circle. Darabjerd long predates Baghdad, but it was used through the Sasanian period and its walls were extant contemporary with al-Manṣūr. The oval-shaped citadel at Marv would have been more familiar to the Abbasids. It was not originally built as a royal residence but it was always the most important administrative centre in pre-Islamic Eastern Iran and, while its foundation was just as old (if not a little older) than Darabjerd, Marv had been continuously inhabited up to the Islamic period, with its imposing oval of high walls still prominent today.

The initial Muslim settlement at Marv was built at a little distance from Erk Kala and had a square circuit of walls, but Erk Kala remained occupied and the Marv region was the centre of the early Abbasid movement's most important network of supporters. It is therefore highly probable that the caliph would have known about Marv, as the city had special significance for the Abbasids and it is certain that Khālid ibn Barmak would have visited it repeatedly. Marv could therefore have presented early Abbasid-era planners with an impressive concept in designing an important political centre.

Figure 2 Erk Kala, Marv

Another prominent round city constructed as a royal residence was Gur, a third century CE foundation of the Sasanian Shah in Fars province in southeast Iran, the same region as Darabjerd, albeit 300 km separates the two. Gur (renamed Firuzabad in the Muslim era) was perfectly round with a domed palace and shrine at its centre, akin to the essence of Baghdad's design.

The Abbasid caliphs drew considerable inspiration from the court culture of the pre-Islamic Sasanian shahs and memorialized them as the paragons of good kings, whose court and customs were deemed worthy of emulation by the Muslim caliphs who melded religious authority and the mores of Islam with aspects of pre-Islamic Sasanian exemplars. Given the context, it would make sense that al-Manṣūr would approve of building his capital in a form used by Sasanian monarchs, especially as his chief courtier, Khālid ibn Barmak, was a descendant of the Sasanian elite.

It is, nonetheless, a fact that not *all* Iranian royal cities were round, and some of the most important, such as the Parthians' Nisa in the east (in present-day Turkmenistan) was square, as was the Sasanians' Ctesiphon in the west (in present-day Iraq, near the site of Baghdad), though it was claimed by earlier archaeologists to have been oval but it was more likely rectangular.

The city planners of al-Manṣūr's generation would, accordingly, not have exclusively associated royal power with round cities but herein emerges another consideration: other examples of rounded centres can be found in Sasanian ritual sites. One of the primary shrines of the Zoroastrian cultic flame at Takht-e Sulaymān is surrounded by a roughly oval wall (it is far from a perfect circle, but a rounded shape seems intentional). In addition, as noted by Christopher Beckwith (1984), the very Buddhist temple of which Khālid ibn Barmak's father was the custodian also appears to have been round. It contained a shrine for the Buddha in a (possibly) square structure at its centre and surrounded by a circle of monastic dwellings, resembling the relationship of the caliph's residence in Baghdad and its surrounding circle of residential areas. The links between Balkh and Baghdad also appear in the size of the bricks. The description of the large bricks used to build Baghdad (51.8 cm^2) reveals that they were similar in size to the bricks used in Balkh, which suggests that architects from Eastern Iran had a hand in Baghdad's original design, which would naturally be the case if Khālid ibn Barmak was involved, as some sources indicate.

The visual traces of rounded royal cities alongside the rounded centres of ritual significance, and the fact that Khālid ibn Barmak hailed from one such rounded Buddhist site and that the Abbasid movement had started as a political force from the rounded citadel at Marv, may have fixed in the mind of al-Manṣūr and his advisors when planning Baghdad, tipping the scales towards a rounded shape. It need not be interpreted that Baghdad's roundness be considered a 'Persification' of the Caliphate or a deliberate effort to build Zoroastrian/Buddhist symbolism into the Abbasid court. Indeed, al-Manṣūr was at the head of a consciously Muslim state and his son and successor was known for his particularly harsh persecution of Zoroastrians.

What we behold in Baghdad is a fine example of cultural exchange across Asia. Concepts of rounded cities with connotations of power and ritual significance were elements in Sasanian concepts of built space and, thanks to the movement of peoples and the expansion of the Muslim Caliphate into the former Sasanian Empire and wider Central Asia, the ideas entered Islamic contexts.

The new Abbasid state, which included powerful Iranian families among its elite who were looking for an array of symbols to demonstrate legitimacy and authority, tapped into those ideas to create a capital emphatically unlike those of the previous caliphal dynasty of the Umayyads (661–750).

One note of irony is that scholars have debated at length Baghdad's round form and the reasons behind it, yet the city's circularity may never have been apparent to observers outside of its walls in practice. The city's vast size meant that the curvature of the outer wall would have been gradual, so much so that its circularity may not have been obvious at all. Within a few years, sprawling suburbs grew around the walls and most of the markets moved outside, making the round(ed) city even harder to discern.

Perhaps the tighter circle of the inner wall was more apparent from the central precinct area, but it would also have been hard to grasp, not least because the palace and mosque occupied the centre and a bird's-eye view would have been necessary to see the whole effect. The lack of physical perception further underlines that the rationale for the round city was likely symbolic. People knew the city was round without actually having perceived it, and thus it seems clear that the *idea* of roundness was the important point which the Abbasids touted. Accordingly, the Abbasids appear to have intended some metaphorical meaning when choosing the design of their city, and a conscious borrowing of the pre-Islamic Eastern-Iranian precedents was more meaningful as a concept than the visual aspect alone.

The symbolism of Baghdad's rounded shape notwithstanding, it had a decidedly muted legacy in Muslim-era constructions and perhaps this stems from practical considerations. Indeed, enclosing the residential quarters between two circuits of rounded walls is an inefficient use of space that caused overcrowding and difficulties to access. For a city intended as the focal point of the world, constricting markets into slivers within a circle and restricting access routes to only four gates and arcades into the centre of the circle obstructs rather than facilitates the free movement of traders. It was impractical to unload ships and transfer goods through a set of gates along one narrow passageway facing the river and therefore new solutions for the market were obviously needed. These difficulties were not lost on al-Manṣūr. Soon after the completion of the city, he ordered nearly all the markets to move outside of the town. The importance of the river trade, connecting Baghdad's population with goods arriving by sea via the Gulf port of Basra and with agricultural goods cultivated to the north, also required that markets have easier access to the river. Soon enough, Baghdad sprawled far beyond its original circular walls and all semblance of its round shape was lost. While the original circular construction, its walls and arcades were mostly intact by the early tenth century, it had long ceased to be the centre of the capital, nor was it even the largest part of the city. Baghdad at the height of its prosperity between 770–930 CE is best conceived as a conglomeration of neighbourhoods and developments that grew outwards in an ad hoc fashion from the rounded city imagined by al-Manṣūr.

The sense of a centrally planned city, apparently essential to al-Manṣūr's conception of the capital, was lost even in his own lifetime, and through the many subsequent constructions, demolitions, renovations and expansions over subsequent centuries, no centrally-oriented plan was attempted again.

The early Abbasid caliphs nonetheless retained some attachment to the rounded shape in theory. For example, al-Manṣūr's grandson, Hārūn al-Rashīd (r. 786–809), established a palace city of al-Rāfiqa near al-Raqqa on the Euphrates in present-day Syria with walls in horseshoe shape, which may be a nod to the same symbolism found in al-Manṣūr's Baghdad. But this appears to be the last manifestation of the phenomenon; subsequent caliphal and royal cities across the Muslim world in the centuries that followed would never again attempt any obviously rounded forms.

Transregional 'Baghdad style'

Baghdad's circular form may have been practically invisible and rarely imitated afterwards, but the cultural exchanges seen in the interior decoration of Baghdad's elite dwellings are more clearly discernible. When planning the internal features of Baghdad's palaces and grand structures, builders faced the typical dilemma caused by the nature of their building materials: they were surrounded by rivers and canals, and therefore bricks were the most efficient means to furnish the vast quantities of building material, but while bricks could be made by the million, they were not the most aesthetically-pleasing material for the interiors as they cannot be easily carved and they create monotonous walls of un-aesthetic courses of brick. The technology for polychrome tiled decoration and turquoise tiled carved terracotta only began to develop in the twelfth-century Middle East, some 400 years after Baghdad was founded. For Baghdad's builders, other solutions were needed.

Prior to Baghdad's construction, a long succession of Iranian and Central Asian regimes had faced the same dilemma of using bricks as their standard building material, while also needing more aesthetically-pleasing interior décor. In the immediate centuries before Baghdad, two decorative options were pursued: fresco painting and carved stucco. Both are fragile materials and thus very little has survived of pre-Islamic palace interiors built by the Sasanian rulers of Iran and the Sogdian trading states beyond the Oxus, however, fragments of surviving interiors have revealed their design solutions. Elaborate frescos of court, mythical and religious scenes from palaces at Varakhsha and Samarqand (in present-day Uzbekistan) and Panjikent (in Tajikistan) attest to the advanced skills of Sogdian rulers and their creations within a decorative tradition that extended to their trading contacts with Turkic peoples in present-day western China, of decorative traditions from China itself, and Buddhist paintings found southwards through the Hindu Kush and into India. Sogdian palaces also yielded fragments of stucco decorations in the form of wall panels of vegetal and animal shapes.

Sasanian stucco work takes the form of figural compositions of royal busts and animals such as horses placed in roundels, panels of hunting scenes, and more abstracted rows of repeating flowers and fruits to fill large sections of wall. All were painted in red, blue, green and gold.

Working with the same building materials, having taken control over both Sasanian and Sogdian territory, the builders of Baghdad were the natural inheritors of these traditions. While nothing survives of the palaces constructed for al-Manṣūr in the 760s, or from the rebuilding of Baghdad in the 810s following the war between rival Abbasid caliphs, the interior of palaces constructed for the caliphs in the 830s and 840s in the vast city of Samarra, built swiftly by a succession of caliphs upriver from Baghdad, are extant since the city was neither destroyed nor reused after the Abbasid caliphs returned to Baghdad in 892. Today, its decoration is known as the 'Samarra style' thanks to the quantity of surviving pieces, but the term was not used by contemporaries and it is better conceived as an Abbasid elite style, used both in Baghdad and Samarra. The extant panels testify to a fruitful cultural exchange between the pre-Islamic Sasanian and Sogdian traditions, and the Abbasid-era decorators in Iraq (Figures 3).

Figure 3 Stucco wall panel, Samarra ninth century

Fragments of wall painting survive from Samarra, though the images of musicians, wine pourers and other merry figures do not have the same compositional mastery of the Sogdian murals. It is clear that the craftsmen employed in the Sogdian palaces were not summoned to Baghdad nor was there Abbasid interest in mimicking or developing such detailed painting traditions. Instead, the bulk of interior decoration at Samarra was carved stucco, and while it has been suggested that Muslims had relied on Persian craftsmen or the communication of Persian stucco designs for seventh and early eighth-century palaces in Umayyad-era Syria, the Iraqi examples from ninth-century Samarra present something different.

Unlike the Sogdian and Sasanian exemplars, the Muslim-era decorators displayed a decisive shift to lower-relief carving of abstract and repeating decorative patterns, familiar to modern eyes as the many varieties of 'Arabesque'. The abiding Muslim disinclination towards realistic depictions of animate beings was one likely factor in the departure from the more common animal and human motifs of Sasanian precursors. However, the presence of painted figures in Samarra reveals that the religious issue was not the sole consideration, and others included size and scale.

The palaces at Samarra served as a city for the entire court and the private army of the caliph, and they had to be constructed rapidly and on a huge scale. Consequently, decorators were tasked with carving stucco designs over many square kilometres of wall surface in the sprawling palace city in very little time. Individualized figurative scenes are laborious to plan and are not easily replicated over large spaces. Since the Sasanian style of high-relief is time-consuming to execute, if the Abbasid workers followed those same techniques and repertoire, they would never have completed the massive projects which they were assigned. The solution of repeating geometric shapes in low relief is the ideal practical solution: low relief carving can proceed briskly and the shapes can be scaled and repeated to fit any size of wall. The lack of animate beings had the additional advantage of appealing to Islamic sensibilities, and through the felicitous mixture of practicality and theology a new style was born.

Surviving precursors of the 'Samarra style' stucco in palaces of the late Umayyad period reveal that al-Manṣūr's Baghdad would surely have been decorated in a similar way. When Baghdad's palaces were lavishly rebuilt after the siege and sack of 812–813, the new caliph al-Maʾmūn, whose previous palace was at the eastern Iranian city of Marv, would assuredly have further encouraged the Sasanian-Sogdian inspired traditions. Al-Maʾmūn's successor was the first to build at Samarra and, during the course of the ninth century, Iraqi palace workers established the signature Arabesque style. Given Baghdad's preeminent geographical position in contemporary Muslim imagination as the centre of the world, as well as the widespread esteem for the prestige of the caliphal court, Baghdad became an exporter of the style to high-status dwellings across the Muslim world. Ninth and tenth-century mosques and palaces from Toledo to Samarqand exhibit the same stucco design and, even after the Abbasid Caliphate lost its political authority, the style remained the standard for successor states, as evidenced in the surviving stuccos from the tenth-century Samanid palace at the citadel in Samarqand (Figure 4).

The Abbasid palace décor in Iraq reveals that styles developed in pre-Islamic Iran and Central Asia were the inspiration and, via a process of refining the technique to better suit mass reproduction and Muslim ethics, a new aesthetic was born. It then spread back to the East (as well as to the West), not because of Abbasid imperial expansion but in fact during an era of Abbasid imperial retraction. The diffusion of architectural and decorative motifs thus needs to be understood as a successful aesthetic which pleased patrons beyond the Abbasid political apparatus.

Figure 4 Stucco wall reliefs, tenth century

Samarqand, Afrasiyab Museum.

The 'transregional Abbasid style' of stucco spread out thanks to a combination of factors: the prestige of the caliphs (even beyond the reach of their power), the movement of courtiers and ambassadors through various courts, the uniformity of building materials, and the mobility of patrons. In this early period, we cannot be sure whether the craftsmen were also mobile, but it is clear that the styles and motifs travelled far and wide. In sum, the ways in which the Abbasid caliphs decorated their palaces became a signature style of interior décor for several centuries and across several thousands of kilometres of land from North Africa to Central Asia.

One survivor from the original Baghdad

While the rounded city walls, the palaces, residences and markets have all vanished, and while al-Manṣūr's central mosque became so surrounded by ruins that it ceased being used and was demolished in the seventeenth century, there is one surviving object that seems to stand as a witness to the original Baghdad. Not surprisingly, it is made from stone and has thus survived centuries of floods and wars. It is a carved *mihrab* niche from a mosque: the central architectural element placed in the mosque's wall that faces Mecca and indicates the direction of prayer for the congregation (Figure 5).

Figure 5 Mihrab, likely from Baghdad's original congregational mosque

Iraq Museum, Baghdad, IM26463.

The Baghdad *mihrab* niche was found in a seventeenth-century mosque, which was constructed shortly after the ruins of al-Manṣūr's mosque were finally cleared. It would seem that the old *mihrab* was salvaged and transferred.

Unlike the Iranian and Central Asian influences on the layout and stucco work of Baghdad, the style of the *mihrab* points more towards a westerly direction and to the stone carving tradition of Syria. When first analysed by historians in the twentieth century, they astutely noted that it predates the familiar style of arabesques developed in the ninth century: the niche's stylized scallop-shell interior is an evident descendant of classical Greek and Roman carving, though the rendering of intertwined vines below the carved shell point to a new direction of arabesques which Muslim craftsmen were then taking. The assumption that the *mihrab* was part of al-Manṣūr's original mosque is a good one as it is clearly older than the mosque where it was found and it seems more archaic than anything that survives from Abbasid-era Iraqi constructions. The object testifies to the nascent processes by which early Abbasid-era craftsmen were developing their own styles, and the niche's westward-looking stylistic inspiration shows that Baghdad was not merely a replication of an Iranian city but that the Abbasids also had an eye on Syria, a fitting testimony to the contemporary view of Baghdad as the veritable centre of the eighth-century world.

Domes of Baghdad

As domes are the prominent and familiar architectural feature of Muslim-era urban skylines, a question arises as to the status of domes in Baghdad, as it was the greatest city of the Caliphate constructed at an early point in Muslim history. Both the pre-Islamic Sasanian and Byzantine architectural traditions had experimented with domes, but their techniques were at a nascent stage and the full sophistication of dome architecture of later Islam represents a major development from these earlier exemplars. Whether or not Baghdad played a role in developing the architecture of the dome will remain something of a mystery as nothing remains of al-Manṣūr's city. However, domes were clearly part of the design, as all texts agree that each of the city's four gates was topped by a dome and al-Manṣūr's palace at the centre was also domed, maximizing the potential of the celestial symbolism for his earthy structure. His dome was apparently topped by the statue of a lance-wielding rider, where it stood until lightning struck it in 941. Here we consider the possible origins of the architectural ideas and techniques behind al-Manṣūr's domes and Baghdad's subsequent input in the development of the beautiful and inspiring domes for which Muslim architecture would later become renowned.

An evident precursor to al-Manṣūr's plans was the Sasanian-era domed structure at the centre of the circular city of Gur in Fars province in southwest Iran, as mentioned earlier in this chapter. Just as Baghdad's round shape suggests the influence of Gur's circular design, al-Manṣūr's domed palace also bears evidence of at least a conceptual relation to the three-domed building at the centre of Gur.

Gur's dome rests on one of the earliest surviving examples of a squinch, an arched niche placed in each of the four corners of the dome chamber to support the weight of the dome by providing a structural transition from the cubic room to the dome's circular drum. Gur's dome is neither so fully rounded nor as elegant as the later Muslim-era domes; its architects were clearly experimenting with the squinch as an architectural solution and made it from cement from limestone and mortar. There are accordingly several developmental steps between Gur and the domes of medieval Islam. A first step was already taken in the late Sasanian period as evidenced by the domes in the fire temple at Sarvestan (ca. 500–600 CE), which are constructed from brick (though the squinches are of mortar). Early Muslim-era architects seem to have relied on the Sasanian precedents to construct domes and semi-domes for the Umayyads in Syria, as evidenced by the fortified palaces at al-Kharrāna and Amman. In the latter case, the squinch has an unusual shape and Creswell suggests that the idea of a Persian squinch was described to a Syrian craftsman instead of the actual presence of Persians at Amman, which seems a reasonable conclusion and an intriguing example of an architectural technique spreading beyond the homelands of the original artisans.

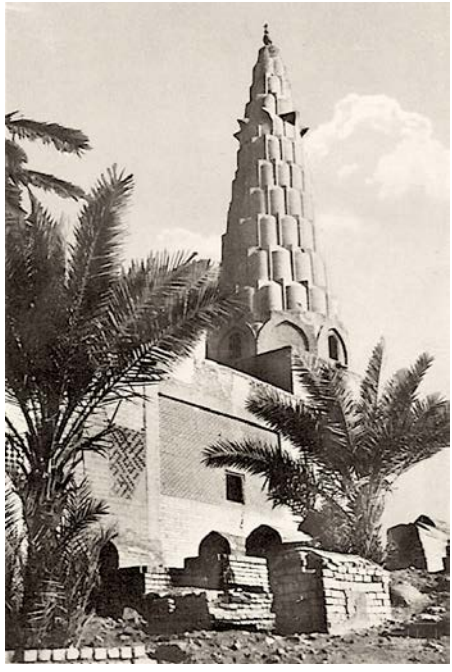
Contemporary with al-Manṣūr's Baghdād is an Abbasid palace in Iraq at Ukhaydir constructed between 762–770 for ʿĪsā ibn Mūsā, nephew of the first Abbasid caliph. Although the building has no domes, its vaults resemble those at al-Kharrāna, while its semi-domes are supported by squinches that have a close affinity to the Sasanian style; suggestive of continuity with the artisanship of the past and the likelihood that the builders trained in the Sasanian-era tradition of early Abbasid projects. It would therefore appear that the prominent domes of al-Manṣūr's Baghdad also relied on Sasanian traditions (and Iranian artisans) and would have reflected a gradual maturation of Sasanian-era techniques. Whether al-Manṣūr's artisans advanced the techniques is unknown; the first brick squinches are found in a palace at Samarra constructed in 838. It is unknown whether the use of brick squinches in ninth-century Samarra originated from an earlier dome at Baghdad, but the fact that the eighth-century squinches at Ukhaydir, which are essentially contemporary with Baghdad's founding, follow the older method suggests that al-Manṣūr's domes were also more traditional. In sum, al-Manṣūr's design for Baghdad embraced the established concept of domes as a feature to mark prominent buildings, quite possibly with the celestial symbolism intended as a dome of heaven above the caliph's throne, and the architects relied on pre-existing technology to erect them. The domes would likely not have been so vertical and impressive as the familiar examples from medieval Islam as the technology to hold them in place had not yet been developed at the time of Baghdad's initial construction.

Subsequent caliphs built a succession of new palaces in and around Baghdad, including the 'Crown' palace of the caliph al-Muktafī (r. 902–908), which is described in Arabic texts as containing a sequence of throne and audience rooms topped with domes of the "greatest possible width and length".

Although nothing remains of al-Muktafī's palace, the textual description suggests that there had been a considerable development in dome technology since the time of al-Manṣūr's palace 150 years earlier. Moreover, al-Muktafī's caliphate is contemporary with the earliest surviving example of a sophisticated dome with elaborate squinches: the Samanid Mausoleum in Bukhara. The Samanid construction reveals the major structural leaps forward from the Sasanian exemplars to the classic dome of medieval Muslim shrines and cities, however, the precise date of the Samanid dome is unknown. It was either constructed around 910 or ca. 930–940 but, regardless, al-Muktafī's domed palace would predate the Samanid structure. Whether or not al-Muktafī's architects created an architecturally similar dome to the Samanid Mausoleum, or whether the Baghdadi domes sought to cover large horizontal spaces with the traditional squinch technology inherited from the Sassanian palace at Gur cannot now be determined. Nevertheless, the importance of domes for the Baghdadi caliphal residence would certainly have been known by the Samanids, and it is in the light of the Baghdadi aesthetics that the Samanid architecture can be appraised.

Baghdad's place within the story of architectural exchange, contributing to the development of domes, has a further and clearly demonstrable chapter when we shift forward to the period of fluorescence which Baghdad enjoyed under the vigorous caliphs from 1180–1250. A prominent domed structure survives from this era: the tomb of Zumurrud Khātūn, built in 1193 (Figure 6) and topped with an unusual honeycomb-style dome, a tapering scalloped structure that rises to a conical point (Figure 7). The nature of construction presents an intriguing external fabric and, because the scalloped components of the dome are pierced with small holes, it creates a striking effect in the interior as well. The dome is an exemplar of the maturation of *muqarnas* decoration, one of the quintessential stylistic features of medieval Islamic architecture.

Figure 6 Zumurrud Khatun complex, exterior view



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Muqarnas seem to have originated as modest decoration under the four corners of domes that was created by designers by splitting the squinch that supports the domes into lobed shapes to create a more complex visual variation. The earliest example of this technique is the early tenth-century Samanid Mausoleum in Bukhara.

Figure 7 Zumurrud Khatun dome, interior view

Over the following century, Iranian craftsmen explored the possibilities of using this technique to create star-shaped patterns inside domes. This innovation is seen in the Zumurrud Khātūn tomb whose star-shaped decoration outright replaces the whole dome, transforming the entire structure into an allusion of stars. The presence of this monument in Baghdad in 1200 confirms that the city was at the centre of the most up-to-date architectural developments, in keeping with contemporary domes from Central and Eastern Iran as well as Central Asia.

While the technology to create the elaborate scalloped domes is shared across the Muslim world, the thirteenth-century Baghdad dome is in a class of its own as the scalloping is equally visible from the outside as it is in the inside. The elaborate *muqarnas* domes constructed elsewhere needed to be shielded by an outer dome in order to protect the delicate shape from precipitation, but in Baghdad, where heavy rains are rare, the domes could be erected without such concern for the elements. As a result, Baghdad's thirteenth-century skyline could benefit from this unique monument.

Baghdad and the madrasa

The most imposing surviving monument from thirteenth-century Baghdad is the Mustanṣiriyya Madrasa, the college established by Caliph al-Mustanṣir in 1232–1233 (Figure 8). Built as a deliberately imposing structure with a grandiloquent inscription praising the caliph, strategically placed on its outer wall facing the river, the building – although built as a college for religious studies – was also designed as an unequivocal proclamation of the caliph's political supremacy to visitors to Baghdad. The madrasa survived the Mongol sack in 1258 and is the most fitting extant testimony to caliphal construction in Baghdad itself. Architecturally, the Mustanṣiriyya is not innovative in that it follows the four-*iwan* style typical of madrasas across the Muslim world, consisting of a grand entrance through a portal and leading into a rectangular courtyard, at the centre of each side stands an *iwan* – a broad and tall arch that covers a sitting area facing the courtyard.

Figure 8 The Mustanṣiriyya Madrasa

Flanking the arch on both sides of each wall are two storeys of rooms for students and teachers. The four-iwan style had been the standard, established form of madrasa construction for over 150 years before the founding of al-Mustanṣiriyya.

For the origins of this particular style we need to return to Eastern Iran but also to an earlier (now lost) madrasa in Baghdad, which presents our final topic of architectural exchange in Baghdad's urban fabric.

The construction of buildings around a rectangular central courtyard with prominent arched open spaces at the centre of each wall is traced to an architectural style from Eastern Iran in the pre-Islamic period. This style does not seem to have spread to the West in the early Muslim era. In the early eleventh century, however, the winds of political change began to blow strongly from the East as powerful regimes, led by Turkic rulers originally from the lands beyond the Oxus, took over Eastern Iran, then the Iranian plateau and Iraq, before moving towards Syria and present-day Turkey. The most powerful of these Turkic states was the Seljuks (1037–1194), and as they took over the central part of the Muslim world between 1040 and 1055, they came into direct conflict with the Fatimids (909–1171), a rival Caliphate that had established itself in Egypt as a Shiʿa regime. During this period, Sunni Islam was taking an institutionalized form and there was a need to develop Sunni teachings in a systematic fashion and to promote them against the Fatimid Shiʿa.

At the same time there was a growing need for the state to observe and control the religious scholars who were by this time a powerful force in the urban fabric. To address both these needs in one fell swoop, the madrasa emerged as the Seljuks' solution. In previous centuries, Islamic learning had taken place in mosques and in the houses of scholars but by the tenth century more formal buildings were constructed. The Fatimids founded a Shiʿa school of their own in 970–972 and it was at this time that buildings called madrasa (lit. 'a place for study') first emerged. The Seljuks capitalized on the centralizing forces in Islamic learning, and a major step forward in the formal organization and establishment of curricula for madrasas was undertaken by the Seljuk vizier, Niẓām al-Mulk (1018–1092), a member of one of the elite families of the Eastern Iranian city, Nishapur. Niẓām al-Mulk established his first madrasa in his hometown of Nishapur in 1058 and, while nothing of it remains, we can surmise that its shape resembled the local four-*iwan* structure.

As Seljuk power rapidly spread across Iran and Iraq, so did Niẓām al-Mulk's series of madrasas, and it was in Baghdad in 1065 that he began construction on the largest and most prestigious of them all. Although the Abbasid caliphs in this period were politically weak, the status of Baghdad as the titular seat of the Abbasids and its association with the height of caliphal power in the eighth and ninth centuries, still strongly resonated, which bestowed on Baghdad a symbolic value at the heart of the Muslim world. This prompted Niẓām al-Mulk to select Baghdad for his greatest madrasa, and the Baghdad Niẓāmiyya (as it became known), once it was opened in 1067, rapidly became the most prestigious centre of learning in the Middle East. Its architectural form and decoration became the model for madrasas over subsequent centuries. Notably, Niẓām al-Mulk selected an Eastern Iranian, Abū Saʿīd from Nishapur, as the architect of Baghdad's Niẓāmiyya, and while nothing of the building remains today, its memory stands as a testament to the Eastern Iranian influence in the architectural flavour of Baghdad, serving as the model for the thirteenth-century al-Mustanṣiriyya, Baghdad's grandest surviving building from its premodern past.

Conclusion: the intangible Silk Roads

Much like the idea of the Silk Roads, Baghdad – the political, commercial and symbolic centre of the Muslim World and hub of all world trade – was very much a grand enigma. It was among the largest (if not the single largest) city of its time, yet nothing remains of it today. We know that carpets from Iran, porcelain from China, teakwood from India, embroideries from Egypt, and much more were hauled through the bent gates of al-Manṣūr's circular city to meet the wealthiest clients with the grandest appetite for luxury goods of their day, but every scrap that was shipped, sold and admired in those markets is lost. Likewise, the domes, vaults and palatial decorations that witness the conspicuous consumption and deft synthesis of architectural heritage between Syria and Central Asia have disappeared down to the last brick. Yet the idea is clear: Baghdad was the greatest magnet for trans-Asian trade in its day. It was a cosmopolitan city that was built on Muslim reinterpretations of Iranian and Eastern Iranian cultural and architectural ideas and – because it was the paragon of Muslim court culture – Baghdad was emulated far and wide. The appeal of the caliphal court as the ideal model for rulership meant that Baghdad exported its cultural manifestations everywhere, including back eastwards, thus playing a major role in creating that elusive notion of Islamic art, which imperial courts from Spain to Samarqand would spend successive centuries emulating and developing. The great Baghdad has long been lost, but it can be discerned in many ways, from the palace walls of Samanid Samarqand, the *muqarnas* vaults of the Alhambra in Granada, the madrasas of Cairo, and perhaps even through the ubiquitous domes across Iran. Patrons and builders of medieval Islam had all learned of the glory that was Baghdad and the grandeur that was Samarra and they all strove to create their worlds with some resonance traceable, in some form, to ideas present in the culture and architecture of the Abbasid fluorescence.

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Chapter 7

Seljuk Marv and the Monuments of Northern Khurasan

By Ruslan G. Muradov

While most ancient cities evolved within the same walls and grew around their earliest kern, representing a kind of urban palimpsest, Marv can well be called a moving city, as its built-up area periodically shifted from east to west following the changing course of the Murghab River, whose water balance gradually decreased over time. Geographical conditions played a major role in this urban shift, but there were also political reasons. Since the end of the nineteenth century, Marv has been studied by several generations of historians and archaeologists, and yet its past is still full of gaps. Even scholars cannot universally agree on its age. Nevertheless, archaeologists have proved that the core of Marv was formed in the Hellenistic period. During the Parthian Empire, it was the administrative centre of the prosperous region of Margiana, as well as an important hub for caravan routes. Under the Samanids, Marv was given the special epithet 'Shahijan', which literally translates as 'Soul of Kings'. Other epithets used to describe the city in medieval chronicles include: 'Mother of all cities of Khurasan' and 'City on which the world rests'. During its most glorious period, Marv – together with the surrounding oasis in the old Murghab delta – became a megalopolis, the largest in Central Asia. This chapter will describe the urban evolution of Marv before the Seljuks. It will also examine the major buildings erected under the Seljuks in Northern Khurasan, with a particular focus on the several decades covering the reign of Davud Çaghribek (r. 1038–1060) and the era of his great-grandson, Sultan Sanjar (r. 1118–1153).