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Building a Language of Power: the Early Abbasid Caliphs and Rum

Abstract: The Abbasid caliphal cities and monumental building projects in the period 754–861 CE operated as a language of power, articulating their relationship to the past as well as communicating with the rival imperial power in Constantinople. However, the more prominent focus on their Persian audience and transformation, the limitations of the material remains, and the generally overlooked relationship between the building projects themselves and the literary reception means this language of power and its multiple audiences have been misunderstood.

This chapter explores the literary legacy to better ‘read’ the Abbasid imperial building projects within the Western Asian tradition. It employs a different periodisation and spatialisation to focus on the early Abbasid relationship with Rum, their imperial rivals in Constantinople and the other of the “two eyes” of late antiquity. This new reading demonstrates how the early Abbasid caliphs exploited the imperial building traditions of Western Asia, claiming the triple inheritance of Arabia, Rome, and Persia, to project a universal claim to power.

I still hear that kings / Build according to their rank
And I know that the wisdom of men / Is destroyed by their ruins
For Rome has that which their ancestors built / And the Persians inherited the monumental
traces of their noblemen
When we see the constructions of the Imam / We see the Caliphate in its abode
We already believed in the honour of [the Caliphate] / And you reinforced the honour of its
leader
You built, vindicating the Muslims / To their apostates and unbelievers,
Creations that Persia has not seen, / Or Rome, in the course of their lives!¹
– Ali ibn al-Jahm (804–63 CE)

The Abbasid caliphal cities and monumental building projects in the period 754–861 CE operated as a language of power, articulating their relationship to the

1 Translation based on Dr Matthew Saba’s work, with my own amendments, in Matthew D. Saba, *Impermanent Monuments, Lasting Legacies: The Dār al-Khilāfa of Samarra and Palace Building in Early Abbasid Iraq* (Munich: Reichert Verlag, 2022). A full text can be found in Ali Ibn al-Jahm, *Diwan*, ed. Khalil Marum (Damascus: Al-Majma’ al-’Ilmi al-’Arabi, 1949), 29.

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past as well as communicating with the rival imperial power in Constantinople.² However, the more prominent focus on their Persian audience and transformation, the limitations of the material remains, and the generally overlooked relationship between the building projects themselves and the literary reception means this language of power and its multiple audiences have been misunderstood. In this chapter, I explore the literary legacy to better “read” the Abbasid imperial building projects within the western Asian tradition. I focus on the early Abbasid relationship with *Rum*, their imperial rivals in Constantinople, rather than the Persian elites that the early Abbasid caliphs are usually understood to be communicating with.³ By employing a different periodisation and spatialisation to focus on the other of the “two eyes”⁴ of late antiquity and its ongoing relationship with the Abbasid Caliphate, I demonstrate how the early Abbasid caliphs exploited the imperial building traditions of Western Asia, claiming the triple inheritance of Rome, Persia, and Arabia and projecting a universal claim to power.⁵

Monumental Language and Linguistic Monuments

The caliphs built new palaces and cities on a vast scale between 754–862 CE and archaeological sites like Samarra offer a wealth of insight into urbanism in this period. However, as Matthew Saba has argued, it is likely they considered their buildings as impermanent monuments to their wealth and power, with the legacy being

² I use the Gregorian calendar here to better support the continuities highlighted in my periodisation and spatialisation; the time range here corresponds to 136–248 AH.

³ See, for example, Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity* (Thames and Hudson, 1971); Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco Arabic Translation Movement In Baghdad And Early 'Abbāsīd Society (2nd-4th/8th-10th Centuries)* (Routledge, 1998); Garth Fowden, *Before and After Muhammad: The First Millennium Refocused* (Princeton University Press, 2014).

⁴ Khosrow II in a letter to the Roman emperor Maurice, in Theophylact Simocatta 4.11.2–3, trans. Whitby. Cited and explored by Matthew P. Canepa, *The Two Eyes of the Earth: Art and Ritual of Kingship between Rome and Sasanian Iran* (California: University of California Press, 2009), 1.

⁵ For a comparative discussion of imperial universality, see Michal Biran, Yuri Pines and Jörg Rüpke, “Empires and Their Space,” in *The Limits of Universal Rule. Eurasian Empires Compared*, ed. Biran et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 1–48. For a discussion on early Muslim understandings of power, see Aziz al-Azhmeh, *Muslim Kingship. Power and the Sacred in Muslim, Christian and Pagan Polities* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1997).

trusted instead to their reception and literature.⁶ It is clear from a number of contemporary and preceding literary sources that the Abbasids understood both that buildings could be used to communicate power but also the limitations of this language.⁷ This perception is demonstrated in the poem cited at the beginning of this chapter and in other sources such as the “litterateur” al-Jahiz (d. 868 CE):

Because of this, books are more effective than buildings of stones and walls of earth. It is in the nature of kings to efface the traces of those who came before them and to thus kill the memory of their enemies. For this reason, they have razed most cities and fortresses to the ground. [Kings] were like this in the days of the Persians and the Jahiliyya, they are like this in the days of Islam.⁸

This observation from al-Jahiz shows that both the building and destruction of architecture was understood as a political statement of power and that this potential for political destruction meant that “books are more effective than buildings.” Indeed, both Mohammed Hamdouni Alami’s work on al-Jahiz’s *Kitab al-Hayawan* and Saba’s research on the Dar al-Khalifa at Samarra have demonstrated that there was a long-standing Arab belief in the value of literary sources as a crucial and reliable legacy for building projects by the time the early Abbasid caliphs began their urban building projects.⁹ In fact, while the early Muslim rulers clearly wanted to compete with the Romans and Persians in building, they also maintained their traditional focus on poetry. Again, al-Jahiz provides a contemporary source:

During the Jahiliyya, the Arabs sought means to memorialize themselves. They relied upon metered poetry and rhymed speech to do so, and that was their registry (diwan) [. . .] The Persians, on the other hand, went about commemorating their great deeds with buildings [. . .] The Arabs wished to compete with the Persians in building while being peerless in poetry, so they built [many famous cities and monuments].¹⁰

6 Saba, *Impermanent Monuments*, 17. Cf Aloïs Regel’s ideas of “permanent monuments” in Aloïs Riegl, *Moderne Denkmalkultus: sein Wesen und seine Entstehung* (Wien: K. K. Zentral-Kommission für Kunst und Historische Denkmale, 1903). Translation first published as Aloïs Riegl, “The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin,” trans. Kurt W. Forster and Diane Ghirardo, in *Oppositions*, n. 25 (Fall 1982), 21–51.

7 Mohammed Hamdouni Alami, *Art and Architecture in the Islamic Tradition: Aesthetics, Politics and Desire in Early Islam* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011).

8 Al-Jahiz, *Kitab al-Hayawan*, ed. Abd al-Salām Muḥammad Hārūn (Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1965–1969), 1:72. Translation by Dr Matthew Saba.

9 Mohammed Hamdouni Alami, *Art and Architecture in the Islamic Tradition*; Saba, *Impermanent Monuments*.

10 Translated in Mohammed Hamdouni Alami, *Art and Architecture in the Islamic Tradition*, 37. For a fuller discussion of al-Jahiz’ theory of *al-bayan* and architecture, see Chapter 2 of this same text; for a linguistic analysis of early Islamic architecture, see Chapter 3.

Fascinatingly, a number of scholars have highlighted the use of *diwan* here to refer to the corpus of poetry that memorialises achievements, a word which can also be translated as “archive.”¹¹ The idea of the poetry serving as a record is also expressed by ibn al-Faqih al-Hamadani, a late ninth-century Persian historian and geographer, who stated, “when al-Mutasim, al-Wathiq, and al-Mutawakkil built a palace or other building, they used to order the poets to compose a verse about it.”¹² Saba summarises, “the Samarra palace poems were the only truly lasting representations that the caliphs could produce of these buildings [. . .] For the generations that followed until the birth of archaeological excavation, they were the only medium through which one could know the palaces.”¹³ The praise poems, then, were intended to be part of the monumental legacy of caliphal building projects, perhaps even the main legacy. Moreover, the fact that they were so frequently sponsored by patrons at the court tells us about the image that the individual caliphs were trying to project. The caliphs were the “authors” of the buildings and the courtly praise poems were part of their message dissemination.¹⁴

Understanding and using the literary sources as part of the intended legacy of the early Abbasid caliphal building projects in this way sheds light on their messages.¹⁵ The political statements they communicated were conveyed both metaphorically and literally, and to a multitude of audiences: a combination that reflected the building traditions of western Asia in antiquity and the Arab understanding of the limitations of that tradition.

Considerations of Time and Space

This connection to the wider building traditions of western Asia in antiquity is lost in the traditional periodisation and spatialisation, which tends to focus on the Persian heritage of the Abbasids and the development of “classical Islam” in this period. Early Islamic culture, religion, and politics are increasingly seen as emerging from and indeed part of late antiquity and, in recent years, scholarship has moved on from the paradigm of derivative “copying” to emphasise the agency, creativity, selec-

11 Saba, *Impermanent Monuments*, 85.

12 Translated in Alastair Northedge, *The Historical Topography of Samarra* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2005), 275. This sentiment also appears in Yaqut in Mujam al-Buldān, 3:18.

13 Saba, *Impermanent Monuments*, 85.

14 Mohammed Hamdouni Alami, *Art and Architecture in the Islamic Tradition*, 12.

15 The understanding of the literary sources as an intended legacy of the built monuments and the connected understanding of the fragility of those monuments as a record of power underpins the choice not to illustrate this contribution with images.

tivity, and skill involved in adapting, for example, art, architecture and literature to create new expressions of communal identity and power.¹⁶ Elsewhere, the vast spread of cross-cultural contacts and subsequent interconnected nature of elite culture and visual language in antiquity across Eurasia is increasingly understood, as is the way items and motifs from other cultural spheres could be used or rejected in what Katharina Meinecke calls, “the construction and consolidation of royal and elite identities of sovereigns and dynasties.”¹⁷ Diplomacy and trade connected the Mediterranean, the Arabian Peninsula, the Indian Ocean, and the South China Sea. Neither the great empires nor the minorities ruled by them were isolated and their cultures were not monolithic. Across time and space, imperial cultures developed in contact and conversation with others, reflecting differing micro- and macro-contexts.¹⁸

The territories, populations, and urban centres the Abbasid empire claimed throughout this period or within living memory (stretching from today’s Morocco in the west, all the way east to modern-day Pakistan, and south across the entire Arabian Peninsula) had developed over a millennium or more, to varying degrees, in contact with each other and shared aspects of visual and ritualistic languages of imperial power.¹⁹ An understanding of cultural influence that separates Roman, Persian, and Arab influence into discrete categories has limited utility for understanding either the Umayyad or Abbasid powers that followed and united many of those territories.²⁰ An ambassador from Constantinople, a member of the Khurasani elite, or a leader from the Qays or Yaman confederations might all understand the same monumental building as an expression of power while interpreting it differently, for varying reasons, because of their shared understanding of the late antique visual *koiné* and the regional contexts.²¹

16 See, for instance, Aziz al-Azmeh, *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity: Allah and His People*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Robert Hoyland, “Early Islam as a Late Antique Religion” in *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, ed. Scott Fitzgerald Johnson (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012), 1053–77; Nadia Ali and Rachel Wood, “The Emergence of Islamic Arts,” in *Imagining the Divine: Art and the Rise of World Religions*, ed. Elsner, Lenk et al. (Oxford: Ashmolean Museum, 2017), 135–59.

17 Katharina Meinecke, “Circulating images: Late Antiquity’s cross-cultural visual *koiné*,” in *A Globalised Visual Culture? Towards a Geography of Late Antique Art*, ed. Fabio Guidetti and Katharina Meinecke (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2020), 321–39, 335.

18 Matthew P. Canepa, “Theorizing Cross-Cultural Interaction among the Ancient and Early Medieval Mediterranean, Near East and Asia,” *Ars Orientalis* 38 (2010): 9.

19 Canepa, *The Two Eyes of the Earth*, 224; Meinecke, “Circulating Images,” 335.

20 Of course, these categories were not discrete entities; I refer to them as such in terms of how the poetry and histories of the time personify them.

21 For further discussion of this broader phenomenon, see Thomas Bauer, *A Culture of Ambiguity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

Often, however, “early Islam” is taken to end with the Umayyads in 750 CE. The end point for late antiquity famously varies greatly, often by centuries or more, but it is not usually applied to the Abbasids.²² The second dynasty to rule the Islamic world are, instead, studied in a different periodisation and spatialisation – with or without the Umayyads but separate from late antiquity as the “classical” form of Islam. This separation has many reasons. The increasingly prominent role of Persian elites in Abbasid court and government, the move of the Abbasid capital city from Syria to Iraq, and the gradual shift in the cultural and scholarly so-called centre of the Islamic world to Persian cities like Balkh, Bukhara, and Merv as the ninth century progressed and Abbasid military power declined has, among other reasons, led to a focus on Persia, both in terms of time and space. The use of “Byzantium” in scholarship when referring to the empire based in Constantinople has also created an artificial break with late antiquity that impacts studies on the early Abbasid period, a topic to which I shall return.²³

Perhaps the most important element, however, was the Abbasids’ own implementation of the concept of *dawla*, a term that developed over time to mean “revolution” or “dramatically changed times” but which Jacob Lassner defines in this context as “a historical process that had come full circle,” to separate themselves from the Umayyads.²⁴ The first century or more of Abbasid rule would later be characterised as a “Golden Age” of wealth, power, and intellectual accomplishments during which the so-called “classical” form of Islam was developed. In the formative years of the Abbasid regime, however, as Lassner has noted, it was the Islamic past and not “visions of a radically new future that shaped the political outlook.”²⁵ Their revolution against the Umayyads had promised to represent the Islamic community on a much wider basis than the narrow, “Arab aristocracy”²⁶ of their predecessors and the early steps of the new governing dynasty to balance competing interests and regions suggested an intention to live up to that promise, with a focus on an empire wide understanding of Islam.

Both periodisation and spatialisation are necessary constructions to analyse the past and their construction, of course, depends on the focus of the scholars in

22 There are some exceptions, of course; see, for example, Thomas Bauer, *Warum es kein islamisches Mittelalter gab: Das Erbe der Antike und der Orient* (Munich: Verlag C.H.Beck, 2018).

23 See Anthony Kaldellis, *Romanland: Ethnicity and Empire in Byzantium* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019), for more detail.

24 For a detailed discussion, see Jacob Lassner, “The ‘Abbasid Dawla: an Essay on the Concept of Revolution in Early Islam,” in *Shi’ism*, ed. Ethan Kohlberg (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2003), 309–32, 320.

25 Lassner, “The ‘Abbasid Dawla,” 320.

26 Jacob Lassner, *The Topography of Baghdad in the Early Middle Ages: Text and Studies* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970), 122.

question.²⁷ In his chapter, shifting the periodisation and spatialisation to focus on the long tradition of imperial building in western Asia and Abbasid relationship with *Rum* adds to our understanding of their language of power.

Imperial Building Traditions of Western Asia

In his discussion of Iron Age city building in Western Asia, from Babylonia to Anatolia and Iran, Ömür Harmanşah demonstrates that, “building cities was envisioned as a social event that then became part and parcel of the politics of kingship and the shaping of social memory at the time.”²⁸ From the Assyrians to the Achaemenids, he combines ancient texts with archaeological excavations and surveys to trace a tradition where building cities was understood as “a source of political discourse.”²⁹ He situates his study within the wider practice of foundation cities in the ancient world, referencing Phoenician and Greek colonies and Akhenaten’s city at Tell el-Amarn, as well as Alexander the Great’s new cities and military settlements and the Augustan foundations in Rome’s provinces.³⁰ I argue that this discourse continued in the early Abbasid understanding, framed firstly as a discourse between Rome and Persia, and then maintained by the Umayyads with a focus on the role of Solomon as an example of Muslim kingship.³¹ This understanding and the focus on their relationship with Rome contextualises their building practices in the period 754–862 CE.

27 Particularly relevant to my own research are: Thomas Bauer, *Warum es kein islamisches Mittelalter gab*; Fred Donner, “Periodization as a Tool of the Historian with Special Reference to Islamic History,” *Der Islam: Journal of the History and Culture of the Middle East* 91, no. 1 (2014): 20–36; Garth Fowden, *Before and After Muhammad: The First Millennium Refocused* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); Jurgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015). My categorisation reflects Thomas Bauer’s “Islamic Late Antiquity” and the continuity he insists on between that and the preceding “Romano-Graeco-Iranian Antiquity” (103). However, I close my periodisation in 862 CE, when the caliphs stopped sponsoring and constructing new cities and building projects on a massive scale.

28 Ömür Harmanşah, *Cities and the Shaping of Memory in the Ancient Near East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 2.

29 Harmanşah, *Cities and the Shaping of Memory*, 1.

30 Harmanşah, *Cities and the Shaping of Memory*, 6.

31 Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych, “Solomon and Mythic Kingship in the Arab-Islamic Tradition: Qaṣīdah, Qurʾān and Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ”, *Journal of Arabic Literature* 48, no. 1 (2017): 1–37, 4, <https://doi.org/10.1163/1570064x-12341340>.

Matthew P. Canepa's analysis of the cross-cultural interaction between the later Roman and Sasanian empires concludes that, "Rome and Sasanian Iran's fraught relationship as brothers and enemies was the crucible that forged the late antique Mediterranean, Europe, and western Asia. The end result of their coexistence was not just an exchange of cultural material, but a truly global, cross-cultural, and extrareligious language of debate and legitimacy [. . .] The meeting and melding of Roman and Sasanian practices of kingship shaped the expression of power in the Mediterranean, Near East, Central and South Asia, and China from the Middle Ages to the seventeenth century."³² This language of legitimacy and practice of kingship was a significant part of the world in which the early Abbasids ruled and it was necessary for them to engage with and manipulate them to assert their own imperial authority and identity.

The poem cited in the introduction to this chapter, composed by Ali ibn al-Jahm, expresses this understanding clearly; buildings are the language of kings and the Abbasid caliphs' building projects exceed those of Rome and Persia and stand as proof of the superiority of Islam. The Samarran *qasida*, or praise poetry, are, by their nature, intended to represent the caliphs and their achievements positively. The poets were at the mercy of their patrons, the caliphs – indeed, this particular Ali ibn al-Jahm poem was written while the poet was imprisoned by al-Mutawakkil in an effort to earn the poet's freedom.³³ As representations of the wider reception of the caliphal building projects, then, they are problematic. However, as "a way to shape knowledge about the past"³⁴ and a reflection of caliphal intentions, the poems can be understood as an extension of the lives of these buildings and a more permanent legacy.

Another poem, by the famous al-Buhturi, reflects the same context and rivalry:³⁵

It belittles the aspirations of other kings
and diminishes the buildings of Kisra, in his age, and of Caesar

Here, "Kisra" stands in for the Sasanian dynasty and "Caesar" reflects the ongoing Roman dynasty. This poem is one of the most famous of the Samarran *qasida* and we can assume that its success indicates that the idea of the palace diminishing the buildings of the other two empires met with the approval of al-Mutawakkil.

³² Canepa, *Theorizing Cross-Cultural Interactions*, 224–25.

³³ Isfahani, Afghani 9:114, cited in Saba, *Impermanent Monuments*, 87.

³⁴ Saba, *Impermanent Monuments*, 87.

³⁵ Buhturī, al-Walid ibn 'Ubayd. *Dīwān al-Buhturī*, ed. Ḥasan Kāmil al-Ṣayrafi (Beirut: Dār Sādir, 1962). Translation Dr. Julie Scott-Meisami, in Julie Scott Meisami, "The Palace-Complex as Emblem: Some Samarran Qasidas," in *A Medieval Islamic City Reconsidered. An Interdisciplinary Approach to Samarra* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2001), 75.

The other iconic “builder king” that both poems repeatedly reference is Solomon, perhaps the most iconic in Muslim tradition.³⁶ It has been argued that a Solomonic geography existed across Bilad al-Sham and Iran, including Persepolis.³⁷ Most importantly, he was inarguably associated with building spectacular palaces and power in the Quran. Al-Buhturi makes the connection at least twice:

Atop a court paved with glass
strange of composition and paving
If its beauty was known to the djinn of Solomon
Then they would kneel down and prostrate themselves³⁸

He also suggests that the magical djinn of Solomon would be impressed by al-Mutawakkil’s accomplishments. This was clearly a popular theme, for Ali ibn al-Jahm also suggests the djinn would acknowledge the importance and accomplishments of the Banu Hashim, the family of the Prophet from which the Abbasids descended and claimed their right to the caliphate:

If Solomon had been brought
by his djinn, some tales about it,
He would have known surely that the Hashemites
surpass him through their eminent majesty
The earth remains built and inhabited
through your life, the best of builders³⁹

This extract from Ali ibn al-Jahm is towards the end of the poem cited earlier, which also repeatedly references Rome and Persia. The claim that Solomon’s djinn would be impressed and that al-Mutawakkil is “the best of builders” is part of the rhetorical conclusion of the poem and suggests that, as important as it is to outstrip the achievements of the Persian and Roman empires, the legacy and superiority as a builder over Solomon, one of the ideal rulers of Islamic tradition,⁴⁰ was more significant.

There is an additional element to the role of Solomon in the Abbasid building tradition as they understood it. As Antoine Borrut has shown, traditions about Solomon were significant across the time and space of Romano-Graeco-Iranian

36 Michelina De Cesare, “Manazil Sulayman: Solomonic Memory and the Islamic Empire in the Early Abbasid Period,” in *Before Archaeology: The Meaning of the Past in the Islamic Pre-Modern Thought (and After)*, ed. L. Capezzone (OCAVOA 1, 2020), 31–60, 31.

37 Antoine Borrut, “La Syrie de Salomon: L’appropriation Du Mythe Salomonien Dans Les Sources Arabes,” *Pallas*, no. 63 (2003): 107–20, 107.

38 Translation based on Dr Matthew Saba’s, with my own amendments.

39 Translation based on Dr Julie Scott-Meisami’s, with my own amendments.

40 Stetkevych, *Solomon and Mythic Kingship*, 25.

late antiquity and Constantinople was no exception to this trend.⁴¹ Claims about the appropriation of and/or surpassing of Solomon's Temple were common in sixth century Constantinople, particularly with reference to Hagia Sophia and Hagios Polyeuktos.⁴² A number of textual sources from the early Abbasid period contextualise the background to the building of the Dome of the Rock (691–692 CE) by the Umayyad caliph Abd al-Malik in terms of the relationship with Constantinople. In particular, per Milka Levy-Rubin, in al-Tabari (writing in late ninth and early tenth century Baghdad), “the villain is clearly defined: it is the Roman Empire and its people, and specifically Constantinople, rather than just the Christians.”⁴³ She frames the construction of this monumental building on the site of Solomon's Temple as both a rival to the Kaaba (controlled at that time by the rebel Abdallah b. al-Zubayr) and Hagia Sophia, against the backdrop of military engagements between the Umayyads and Constantinople. Al-Malik, she argues, “chose to build this stunning monument in the tradition of the classical Roman–Byzantine *commemoratoria*, and to embellish it with the finest mosaics in the best style of Byzantine artistic tradition [in order to obtain superiority over Constantinople].”⁴⁴ In other words, the Dome of the Rock was partly constructed to project Umayyad power at a time of dynastic difficulty and a key audience for that projection of power was Constantinople.

The Need to Project Power

As with the Umayyad construction of the Dome of the Rock, the need to project power is also apparent when we consider the circumstances in which both Baghdad and Samarra were founded by Abbasid caliphs. In 762 CE, when al-Mansur, the second Abbasid caliph – and, arguably, the “real” founder of the dynasty⁴⁵ – chose a site on the Tigris river, around 30 kilometres north of the former Sasanian capital of Ctesiphon for the city he would call “Madinat al-Salam” or “the city of Peace,” the position of his dynasty was not obviously secure. He had suc-

41 Borrut, *La Syrie de Salomon*.

42 Milka Levy-Rubin, “Why was the Dome of the Rock built? A new perspective on a long-discussed question.” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 80, no. 3 (2017): 441–64. doi:10.1017/S0041977X17000908, 451–3.

43 Levy-Rubin, *Why was the Dome of the Rock built?*, 459.

44 Levy-Rubin, *Why was the Dome of the Rock built?*, 463.

45 Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early ‘Abbāsid Society, 2nd-4th/8th-10th Centuries* (London: Psychology Press, 1998), 29.

ceeded his brother in 754 CE, only four years after the Abbasid Revolution had overthrown the Umayyad dynasty.⁴⁶ He had immediately faced threats to his position, from his uncle, from his main general, from the heirs of Ali, from competing factions throughout society, and from the last of the Umayyad dynasty that the Abbasid Revolution had overthrown. He also had to deliver on the promise of the Abbasid revolution and a broader Muslim identity to justify his new dynasty.⁴⁷ In hindsight, we can see that he dealt with each new challenge ruthlessly and effectively, and the number of his achievements at the time of his death in 775 CE when he handed over to his son makes for impressive reading.

At the time, however, the situation must have felt much more precarious. In the first eight years of his rule, al-Mansur's capital city had moved around as he dealt with different military rebellions and individual threats. The commissioning of Baghdad can be seen as a statement of al-Mansur's power and authority – that he could now devote time and finances to building a new capital city.⁴⁸ It went hand-in-hand with his new designation of a successor, his son, in a gesture that was intended to suppress or reconcile various other contenders, respectively.⁴⁹

The Abbasid capital of Samarra, meanwhile, was founded in 836 CE at a time when huge financial resources were available to the caliphs and a military restructuring seemed like it might have solved the competing military factions of Arab and Persian troops.⁵⁰ However, the pro-Alid rebel Idrisid dynasty had ruled most of present-day Morocco and parts of present-day western Algeria from 788 CE and the Aghlabid emirs had established a de facto independent emirate in Tunisia since 801 CE.⁵¹ A serious civil war, in part driven by the competing interests of those troops, had raged from 811 to 819 CE and caused significant damage to the territorial integrity of Abbasid rule as well as allowing the Tahirid dynasty to grow increasingly powerful as governors in Khorasan.⁵² The Umayyad Emirate of Córdoba in al-Andalus was flourishing and the Roman empire in Constantinople had been through a transition over the previous decades and, with some caveats,

46 Hugh Kennedy, *The Early Abbasid Caliphate, A Political History* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 1981), 110.

47 Lassner, *The Topography of Baghdad*, 122.

48 Hugh Kennedy, trans., *The History of al-Ṭabari vol. XXIX: Al-Manṣūr and al-Mahdī A.D. 763–786/A.H. 146–169* (New York: Suny Press, 1990), 21.

49 Kennedy, *al-Ṭabari vol. XXIX*, 224–25.

50 C.E. Bosworth, trans., *The History of al-Ṭabari vol XXXIII: Storm and Stress along the Northern Frontiers of the 'Abbasid Caliphate: The Caliphate of al-Mu'taṣim A.D. 833–842/A.H. 218–227* (New York: Suny Press, 1991), xv.

51 Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates, The Islamic Near East from the Sixth to the Eleventh Century* (Routledge, 2023), 140.

52 Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates*, 142.

appeared to be emerging strongly. Finally, a major religious rift in 833 CE between the caliph al-Mamun and the Islamic ulama had created an ongoing crisis that saw the religious authority of the caliphs decline.⁵³

This tension between the universalist, messianic proclamations of the caliphs in this period and the frequently precarious reality of their political and military positions created a situation where they were looking back as well as forwards, to the west and south as well as the east, and when there was a need to assert the Abbasid's regime power in every possible way to a wide array of audiences. Both cities can be understood as projections of power and legitimacy, claiming the inheritance of a Western Asian model that included Rome, Persia, and Arabia.

The Round City: a Discourse with Whom?

The different audiences of Rome, Persia, and Arabia can be seen more clearly if we return to the founding of Baghdad in 762 CE by caliph al-Mansur. We have a number of accounts about the city's founding, construction, and immediate reception that reflect the potential audience, with perhaps the two most interesting appearing in the *Tarikh* of al-Tabari (d. 923 CE) and the *Tarikh* of Khatib al-Baghdadi (d. 1071 CE). Both al-Tabari and al-Baghdadi (the later based on the former) record an account where al-Mansur discusses with his Persian adviser, Khalid ibn Bar-mak, whether or not to use materials from nearby Ctesiphon in the new city of Baghdad and how that will be interpreted by Muslim inhabitants of the city. Khalid gives his opinion twice, which is different the second time. Both times, his advice is rejected by the caliph.⁵⁴ Both accounts then discuss a visit of an ambassador from Constantinople who is asked for his opinion on the new city. Again, the caliph verbally rejects this advice, however, when the ambassador has left, he gives instructions to act upon the advice and make changes.⁵⁵ There are varying interpretations of these related accounts, their veracity, and the important nuances.⁵⁶ It is clear, however, that al-Mansur was later understood to have been conscious of the audience for his new city and that he understood its potential communicative role. Both citizens and visitors generally were expected to "read" and recognize the city's material allusions and reference points, as we can see in

53 Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates*, 147.

54 For a full account, see Kennedy, *al-Ṭabari* vol. XXIX, 4–5; Lassner, *The Topography of Baghdad*, 46.

55 Kennedy, *al-Ṭabari* vol. XXIX, 7–8; Lassner, *The Topography of Baghdad*, 58.

56 For a full discussion, see Alexandre M. Roberts, "Al-Manṣūr and the Critical Ambassador," in *Bulletin d'études orientales*, T. 60 (2011): 145–60.

the discussion between al-Mansur and Khalid ibn Barmak. However, the Roman and Persian audiences are personified in the written accounts in the figures of the ambassador and Khalid ibn Barmak himself.

We can perhaps see the expectation of an audience “reading” the city most clearly in the gates. The Round City had four monumental gateways: the Damascus Gate, the Khorasan Gate, the Basra Gate, and the Kufa Gate. Each gateway was made up of two separate gates: one on the outer ring and one that admitted entrance into the city. Al-Baghdadi tells us that,

The second gate was the gate of the city and was protected by the large wall which we have described. The main gate gave access to a vaulted passage, constructed of burnt brick cemented by gypsum, which was twenty cubits long and twelve cubits wide [. . .] Above the vaulted passage of each gate was an audience room with a staircase against the wall by which means one ascended it. Crowning this audience room was a great dome which reached a height of fifty cubits.⁵⁷

Four individual iron gates associated with King Solomon were used in these gateways, with a fifth used in the entrance to the palace. The exterior of the iron gate at the Khorasan entrance was likely associated with Rome⁵⁸ while the exterior iron gate used in the Kufa entrance was originally used by a well-liked former governor of Iraq. The gate of the Damascus complex, however, was made locally and, “lacking the legendary credentials of the others, it was considered the weakest of the lot.”⁵⁹ These were hugely significant structures, imposing and expressive: “In the medieval Near East, the transfer of gates from one city to another may have had a certain practical significance, but it was also a symbolic act expressive of authority.”⁶⁰ The gates of the Round City connected the caliph with Solomon and with different corners of his empire, in a language that was understood by his citizens. The caliph al-Mutasim, who moved the imperial capital to Samarra in 836 CE, also took a set of monumental iron gates identified with spoils from the Roman city of Amorion, and installed them in a palace at Samarra in 838 CE.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Lassner, *The Topography of Baghdad*, 54.

⁵⁸ Kennedy, *al-Ṭabari* vol. XXIX, 5; Lassner, *The Topography of Baghdad*, 54. The gate is described as *fīr’awn*, which directly translates as “Pharaoh” but often has a looser meaning of “oppressor,” presumably based on the Qur’anic stories of the prophet Musa, the most frequently mentioned individual in the Qur’an. For more discussion, see Charles Wendell, “Baghdad: Imago Mundi, and Other Foundation-Lore,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 2, no. 2 (1971): 99–128, 166.

⁵⁹ Jacob Lassner, *The Shaping of Abbasid Rule* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 181.

⁶⁰ Lassner, *The Shaping of Abbasid Rule*, 181.

⁶¹ M. Meinecke, “al-Raḡḡa,” in *The Encyclopedia of Islam, New Edition, Volume VIII*, ed. C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs, and G. Lecomte (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 410–14, 412.

The Abbasids and their Rivalry with *Rum*

As Canepa has demonstrated, the late Roman and Sasanian empires had interacted for centuries and developed a visual diplomatic language.⁶² That language was itself part of a broader late antique visual koiné that connected territories between Lombardy and Yaman, the Nile valley and Transoxiana.⁶³ This visual language of late antiquity and early Islam is increasingly understood but the way the literary sources can illuminate it further remains understudied. The long-standing insistence on referring to the empire based in Constantinople as “the Byzantine Empire” and translating it as such obscures both the self-claimed identity and history of that empire⁶⁴ and its relationship with the early Abbasids. The people living and ruling in Constantinople conceived of themselves as Roman, their language as Roman, and their history as Roman.⁶⁵ Likewise, the Abbasids conceived of them as Roman and referred to them, thus, as *Rum* or Rome, as did the other sources in Western Asia at this time. For the Abbasids, Rome was a contemporary imperial rival, based in Constantinople.

In Nadia al-Cheikh’s excellent compilation of Arabic sources on Byzantium, she suggests that Arab writers generally, “viewed the history of the Byzantines as an extension of the histories of ancient Greece and the Roman empire. This led Arab authors to mingle and confuse the names by which they referred to the Byzantines: the term *Rum* was used to refer interchangeably the Romans, the Byzantines, and the Christian Melkites [. . .] On occasion, *al-Rum* was used to refer to the ancient Greeks, although the predominant term in that context was *al-Yunaniyyun/Yūnānīh*.”⁶⁶

It is my suggestion that, rather than “confusing” the names, they had a different understanding than we do and were able to deploy nuances within it and adapt the category according to their needs. In fact, they were able to separate Greek, Roman, and Christian as categories when it suited their purposes, for example, in this ninth century letter from al-Jahiz:

The Rum are not scholars: they are craftspeople who took to writing because of their geographical proximity to the land of the ancient Greeks (Yunan). The Rum subsequently attributed to themselves some of the books of the ancient Greeks (Yunan). Since the Rum could not change the names of the most famous Greek (Yunan) authors, they ended by claiming

⁶² Canepa, *The Two Eyes of the Earth*, 224.

⁶³ Meinecke, “*Circulating Images*,” 335.

⁶⁴ Kaldellis, *Romanland*, 11–17.

⁶⁵ Kaldellis, *Romanland*, 36.

⁶⁶ Nadia al-Cheikh, *Byzantium Viewed by the Arabs* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 22.

that the Greeks (Yunan) are actually a tribe of the Rum . . . Kitab al-Mantiq and Kitab al-Kawn wa al-Fasad were written by Aristotle, who was neither Byzantine Rum nor Christian; the *Almagest* was written by Ptolemy, and he was neither Byzantine Rum nor Christian; [. . .] In reality, the Christians and the Byzantine Rum have neither science, nor expository literature, nor vision, and their names should be erased from the registers of the philosophers and the sages.⁶⁷

Rum could be a catch-all term to describe a Christian and geopolitical Other based in Constantinople, recognising a continuity between Greece and Rome, or it could be limited to deny the legitimacy of the Christian empire based in Constantinople and the connection between them and the Ancient Greeks, whose knowledge was currently being claimed for the Abbasids as part of the Translation Movement in Baghdad.⁶⁸

When Ali ibn-Jahm refers to Rome and Persia as reference points for imperial building achievements, he subtly implies a distinction between the present day-Romans and the buildings of their ancestors, while also claiming that the Abbasid caliph al-Mutawakkil (to whom the poem was recited), has outstripped their greatest building accomplishments. In doing so, he not only positions the Abbasids within the long tradition of imperial building in western Asia but also presents a contemporary triumph over their imperial and military rival in Constantinople.

Conclusion

As the literary sources make clear, Rome was a key audience for the Abbasids in their imperial building projects. The imperial capitals of Baghdad and Samarra were intended as statements of power, prestige, and vast resources but both cities were founded at a time of fragility and instability and their success was far from assured. The building projects of this period are often seen through the lens of the “Golden Age” of Islam, a classical period distinct from late antiquity and the preceding Umayyad dynasty that looks forward to the so-called “Persian revival.” However, the courtly poetry of the period clearly looks back, placing them squarely within the imperial building traditions of antiquity in Western Asia. Understanding the literary sources as an intended legacy of the building projects, a linguistic monument to those achievements, allows us to better “read” the building projects as a

⁶⁷ Cheikh, *Byzantium*, 104. Edits and formatting my own, to emphasise the amended translation and results.

⁶⁸ For a fuller discussion of the Translation Movement and its significance, see Gutas, *Arabic Thought*.

language of power. In particular, it allows us to see the Abbasid caliphs asserting their relationship with the past and making claims to the heritage of Rome as well as Persia and Arabia. In doing so, they projected a universal claim to power, one that excluded their imperial rival in Constantinople.

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