L. Holmquist, S. Kalmring & C. Hedenstierna-Jonson (eds.),

# New Aspects on Viking-age Urbanism *c.* AD 750-1100



Proceedings of the International Symposium
at the Swedish History Museum, April 17-20th 2013.

Theses and Papers in Archaeology B:12

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*Proceedings of the International Symposium at the Swedish History Museum, April 17–20th 2013*

Lena Holmquist, Sven Kalmring &
Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson (eds.)

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# Baghdad and Samarra. Imperial Capitals of the Abbasid Empire

*Andrew D. Petersen*




*Fig. 1. Map of Abbasid Empir (Map couretsy of the David Collection Copenhagen).*

The arrival of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula in the first quarter of the seventh century and its rapid growth and expansion to become both a major religion and a world empire are unique in world history. There are many explanations for this phenomenon however a few factors which certainly played an important part. The first of these is that the Arabs were able to defeat two major empires, the Byzantines and the Persians and in so doing were able to draw on the expertise and traditions of both civilizations. Secondly as a proselytising religion the new Islamic state was able to incorporate the diverse peoples of these empires to create a cosmopolitan and vibrant society which stretched from the Iberian Peninsula to the Indus Valley and beyond. A third and often misunderstood aspect of the early Islamic state was the concept of *jihad* which allowed for the conquest of new territories and also the enslavement of non-believers (see Gordon 2010).

## Umayyads and Abbasids

Within the period of a century prior to the rise of the Abbasid dynasty the early Islamic state went through a number of changes both in organization and orientation which had a profound impact on the subsequent development of Islamic civilization. In the early years during the life of the prophet Muhammad and his

immediate successors, the rightly guided caliphs Abu Bakr (632–634 AD), 'Umar (634–644 AD), 'Uthman (644–656 AD), and 'Ali (656–661 AD) the Islamic state had remained very much dominated by the Arab tribes. During the rule of the Umayyad dynasty (661-750 AD) the focus of the empire shifted northwards to Syria and the Mediterranean. Although Arabic was firmly established as the language of the religion Greek, as the language of the former Byzantine rulers, was widely used in administration and culture. There is also a growing body of archaeological evidence pointing to the continuity of Christian worship throughout the former Byzantine territories (see for example Najjar & Sa'id 1994). The establishment of Damascus as capital of the Umayyad state demonstrated the cultural and geographical direction of the empire. Whilst this arrangement worked well for the western portion of the Islamic state it increasingly seemed to be out of step with the eastern half of the Islamic state which was not only continually expanding but also producing much of the wealth upon which the Umayyads relied for their extravagant lifestyle. There were also questions of legitimacy as well as religious or doctrinal issues which became increasingly problematic. The problems came to a head in the mid-eighth century when followers of the murdered caliph 'Ali began a rebellion which challenged and finally crushed the Umayyad rulers purging them from the entire empire except from Spain where a fugitive branch of the family was able to establish itself.

In place of the Umayyads the Islamic state was now ruled by a new dynasty- the Abbasids. Whilst in terms of religious observance the Abbasids were no particular improvement on the Umayyads they were at least seen as having more legitimacy and significantly had more of an eastern orientation. Whereas the Umayyads had largely inherited Byzantine/Roman culture the Abbasids took on and developed Persian culture from the elaborate court ceremonials to architecture and other branches of culture.[1] However the most obvious sign of the new orientation was moving the location of the imperial capital from the western side of the Syrian dessert to Mesopotamia (Iraq) in the east. The first Abbasid capital was Raqqa which although still in Syria was on the Euphrates river and therefore in direct communication with Mesopotamia. Finally a new capital was built at Baghdad, in the centre of Mesopotamia by the 2nd Abbasid caliph al-Mansur in 768 AD. This new location had a decisive effect on the Islamic state not only by establishing the wealthiest capital of the early medieval world but also because it stood at the edge of the Central Asian world and also the vast possibilities of the Indian Ocean cultures. For reasons which will be discussed in greater detail below the capital was briefly moved northwards to Samarra during the ninth century later returning to Baghdad at the end of the century.

## Origins of Islamic Urbanism

Because of the hybrid nature of the early Islamic state the first new towns built by the Arabs had a variety of cultural and historical roots (Petersen in press). In the past there was a general idea that the Arabs had no concept of either architecture or town planning and that any town built during the early Islamic period were purely derivative of either Roman, Persian or other local traditions. However in recent years there has been a reassessment of these view partly in the light of more extensive fieldwork in the Arabian Peninsula and partly because of a new willingness to accept that the Arabs made a contribution to the early Islamic state beyond the fundamentals of the religion (see for example King 1990). In considering the origins of Islamic urbanism authors are now willing to include examples of pre-Islamic Arab towns such as Umm al-Jimal in Jordan, Dumat al-Jandal in Saudi Arabia, Shibam and other early towns in Yemen as well as early urban centres such as Malaiha in the United Arab Emirates (for a discussion see Whitcomb 1996; Petersen 2009). The archaeological evidence from these sites indicate that although the towns were related to other traditions outside Arabia they did have certain common 'Arabian' features. These may be characterised as a spatial arrangement based on tribal affiliations, the absence of town walls (although boundaries in the form of ditches may have existed), a generally non-orthagonal plan and the provision of large scale communal water sources. The first Arab/Islamic new towns certainly conformed to this pattern. The earliest and most famous Islamic new towns were the cities of Basra and Kufa both in southern Iraq established in the seventh century as garrison cities for Arab tribes engaged in campaigns further east in Iran and Khurassan. Although very little archaeological work has been carried out in either city the literary accounts provide considerable information on their location and layout. Neither city was provided with a wall and instead a ditch was used to mark the borders of the settlement. At the centre of each city was the governor's palace, the central mosque and the market place. The housing space was allocated on a tribal basis and it is probable that this reflected the hierarchy of family groupings.

With the rise of the Umayyads in the late seventh century Roman concepts of urban planning became

the standard for Islamic new towns. A Roman plan was used as early as the 670's when the Islamic new town of Ayla was developed alongside its Roman predecessor.[2] However under the Umayyads Roman planning was used in many categories of construction from palaces to cities. The derivation of plan of the so called 'Desert Palaces' from Roman frontier forts is well known (Genequand 2006) whilst the architectural origins of Syrian mosques from Byzantine churches and ultimately the Roman basilicas also testifies to the strong classical influences on Umayyad towns and cities. Probably the most famous example is the Umayyad city of 'Anjar in Lebanon which is based on the plan of a Roman legionary fortress. Despite intensive research little is known of the original plan of the Umayyad city of Ramla in Palestine although the consensus is that it closely followed classical precedents. Certainly the fact that the city employed much re-used material from the nearby Roman/Byzantine city of Lydda will have ensured that it had a classical appearance.[3]

The advent of Abbasid rule, or the 'Abbasid revolution as it is known, marked a fundamental change in the character of the early Islamic state (fig. 1). Amongst archaeologist working in the Levant (Syria, Palestine, Jordan and Lebanon) the Abbasid period is generally regarded as one of decline – where the focus of attention shifted irrevocably eastwards leading to economic and urban decline in the western region. Certainly the apparatus of government was no longer focussed on the region and there are few major building projects that can be dated to this period.[4] In Mesopotamia on the other hand there are numerous examples of palatial construction the most spectacular of which is the desert palace of al-Ukhaidhir (Bell 1914).

The new Abbasid rulers were aware that they needed a capital in Iraq so that they could be in direct contact with their original support base in Khurassan and the garrison cities (*amsar*) of Basra and Kufa (fig. 2).




*Fig. 2. Iraq. Principal Cities during the ninth century AD.*

## Baghdad

### Archaeology and Historical Sources

One of the problems discussing the plan and appearance of Abbasid Baghdad is that nothing remains standing from the Round City and the only monuments to survive from Baghdad before the Mongol invasion are some of the buildings on the east side of the river and date to the early 13th century – examples include the Bab al-Wastani, the Mustansariyya Madrassa and the so called Abbasid Palace. The only part of early Abbasid Baghdad to have survived is a marble *mihrab* from the Great Mosque which is now in the Iraq Museum. There have also been some excavations in the area of West Baghdad which have revealed some ninth century housing and ceramics, probably from the area of al-Karkh, but weron too small a scale to greatly add to our knowledge of the Round City.

In the absence of archaeological information we are forced to rely on the descriptions of near contemporary Arabic writers. Important descriptions of the Round City come from the famous tenth century Persian historian al-Tabari whilst detailed descriptions of the topography of early medieval Baghdad are provided by the ninth century historian al- Ya'qubi († 897AD) and Ibn Serapion (writing *c.* 900 AD). Additional material historical information is supplied al-Baladhuri († 892) a famous historian and long-time resident in Baghdad, al-Muqaddasi a tenth century Palestinian geographer and al-Khatib another resident of Baghdad writing in the mid-eleventh century (Le Strange 1899; Lassner 1970).

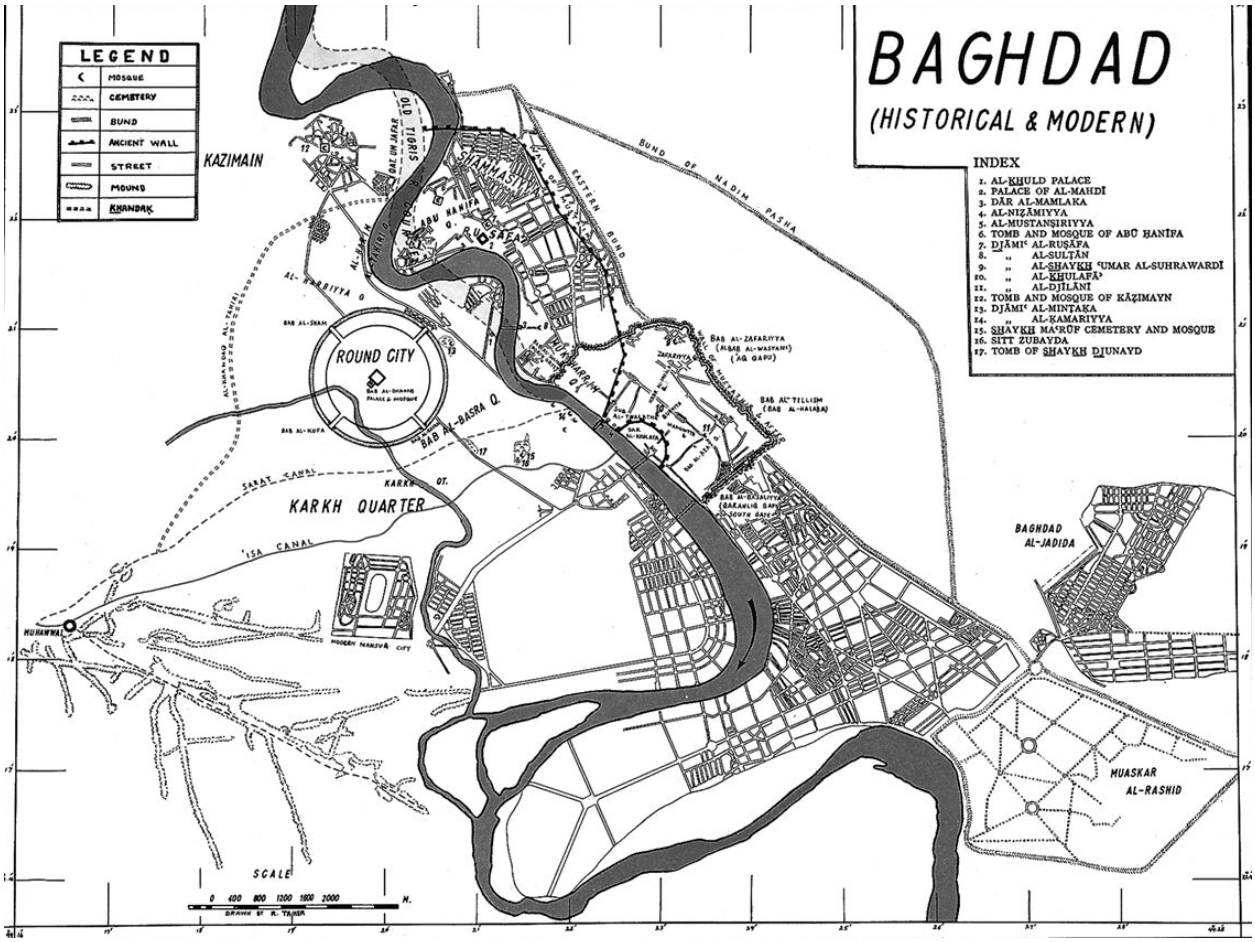



*Fig. 3. Baghdad- reconstruction of the Round City of al-Mansur 767-912 AD (from Le Strange 1899).*

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## Foundation and Architectural Origins

Although the first Islamic capital outside Arabia had been located in Iraq – at Kufa near the present city on the Euphrates – this had proved problematic because of rebellions amongst the troops and also because the city had been built as a military camp but rather than as a an imperial capital. During the Umayyad period the focus shifted westwards to Syria although in Iraq the town of Wasit was built between Basra and Kufa as a regional capital and as a means of retaining Umayyad control of the region. In any case the first Abbasid ruler al-Saffah clearly saw the need to be based in Iraq and established a base (*al-Hashimiyya*) near the ancient city of Anbar on the Euphrates. However during his short reign of four years al-Saffah was too pre-occupied with defeating the remnants of the Umayyads and other opposition to establish a new capital. However al-Mansur, the second Abbasid caliph, had both more incentive, more wealth and more political stability to establish a new capital. On first assuming the title of caliph in 754 AD he had based his court near Kufa but found this problematic both because of difficulties with the local Arab population and because of religious fanatics in the region. Al-Mansur's search for a suitable location for a new palace and capital took him along the banks of the Tigris from al-Jarjaraya in central Iraq 100 miles south of modern Baghdad to Mosul in the north. The old Persian village of Baghdad was eventually chosen primarily because of its location between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers which at this point are at their closest until they unite in southern Iraq. The same logic had been used by the Sasanians who established Ctesiphon (Ar. *al-Madaʿin*) as the capital of their Persian Empire next to ancient Seleucia. Significantly in late Sasanian and early Islamic times Baghdad was known as *souq* Baghdad and was the location of

a famous market. By the mid seventh century much of the area was owned by Nestorian monasteries and it was presumably relatively easy to acquire the land. The precise location of the site was also well chosen as it lay within a sharp bend in the river which had obvious defensive advantages as well as access to the river as a supra-regional trade route from North to South (fig. 3). The site was also connected to the Euphrates river by the Sarat canal enabling communication with Syria and the West.

Once the site had been chosen work on the new capital began in 762 AD. The precise dimensions and shape of the new city were decided with the help of the Persian astronomers Naubakht Ahvaz and Mashallah (Allawi 1988). The layout was based on a concentric circle with four main gates leading to the centre where the ruler's palace and the main mosque were located (fig. 4). The gates aligned to North-West, North-East, South-West and South-East and were known as the al-Sham or Syria Gate (NW), the Khurassan Gate (NE), the Kufa Gate (SW) and the Basra Gate (SE). According to the Arabic sources this city plan was the first ever example of a round city and was a testament to the originality and intelligence of the founder. However as K.A.C. Creswell (1989) and other authors have pointed out there are several Persian and Mesopotamian examples of cities with a round plan – the most important example of which is Firuzabad in Iran (Huff 1999). This Royal Sasanian city founded by the emperor Ardashir I in the early third century AD was completely circular and divided into twenty segments by radial streets which converged on the imperial palace at the centre. Although the town had dwindled into insignificance by the early Islamic period its similarity to Baghdad is striking and is the most likely source of Baghdad's Round Plan. The round shape also has considerable cosmological significance representing itself as the centre of the earth.

In addition to its symbolic significance a round plan had several advantages over the rectangular plans favoured by Roman, Byzantine and Umayyad city planners. Firstly a circle is able to enclose a much greater area for the length of wall required than a typical rectangular plan and therefore in terms of materials was considerably cheaper to build. The round shape also had defensive advantages as there were no weak corners to defend and each point of the fortifications was equidistant from the centre and so could easily be reached.

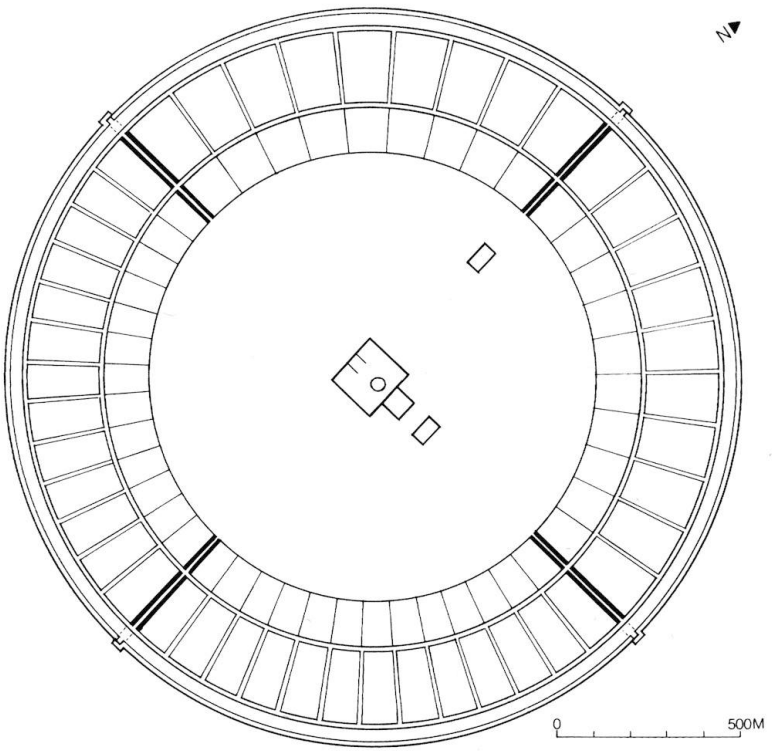



*Fig. 4. Baghdad. Plan of the Round City. (Creswell's reconstruction of the Round City of al-Mansur)*

## Growth and Development

The Round City was formally known as Madinat al-Salam (Ar. *City of Peace*) to distinguish it from the pre-Abbasid Persian village of Baghdad which had previously occupied part of the site. In addition to the caliph's palace and the central mosque the Round City originally included housing and markets for merchants indicating that it was intended to be a real city rather than just an enormous fortified palatial compound. The markets were located in the arcades of the radial streets and were arranged according to their different crafts. However soon after completion of the Round City the markets within the city were moved outside to the area of al-Karkh as they were regarded as a security threat to the caliph and his advisors. The al-Karkh area was located immediately outside the Basra gate was laid out as a suburb on the orders of the caliph al-Mansur although it had not been included in the original city plan. This immense area had formally been mostly arable land and became the main residential and commercial area during the reign of al-Mansur. During the reign of al-Mahdi the east bank was developed and became known as Mu'asker al-Mahdi. During the ninth century the city continued to flourish and grow even though between the years 836–892 AD the caliph and his entourage moved north to a new capital at Samarra (see below). The significant change was that when the caliph al-Mu'tamid returned from Samarra he established himself on the east bank of the Tigris which has remained the centre of the city till the present day. Although during the tenth and eleventh centuries the city lost its political significance it was still a major cultural and scientific centre for the Arab world prominent examples of which were the famous hospital Bimaristan al-Aduli and the Dar al-'Alim (Ar. *House of Science*). During the rule of the later Abbasid caliphs (12th–13th centuries) the city on the east side was protected by a large ditch and a wall with four gates one of which survives (*Bab al-Wastani*). Although Baghdad ultimately re-emerged after the Mongol conquest of 1258 it never recovered its former glory. At its height in the ninth century it is estimated that Baghdad was one of the largest cities in the world with a population of 900,000 surpassing that of Constantinople.

## Samarra

Samarra is in many ways the opposite of Baghdad. Baghdad has continued to flourish as a thriving capital city despite numerous assaults and sieges including attacks by both the Mongols in the 13th century and the Americans in the 21st century – Samarra on the other hand was established fairly quickly but only functioned as a capital for less than sixty years and ultimately shrunk to a fraction of its former size today resembling a small market town rather than an imperial capital. However Samarra's lack of success as a major city has been of great benefit to archaeologists who have been able to explore its vast ruin field extending for over 45 kilometres from North to South and a width of up to 10 km: Samarra is recognized as the largest single archaeological site in the world.

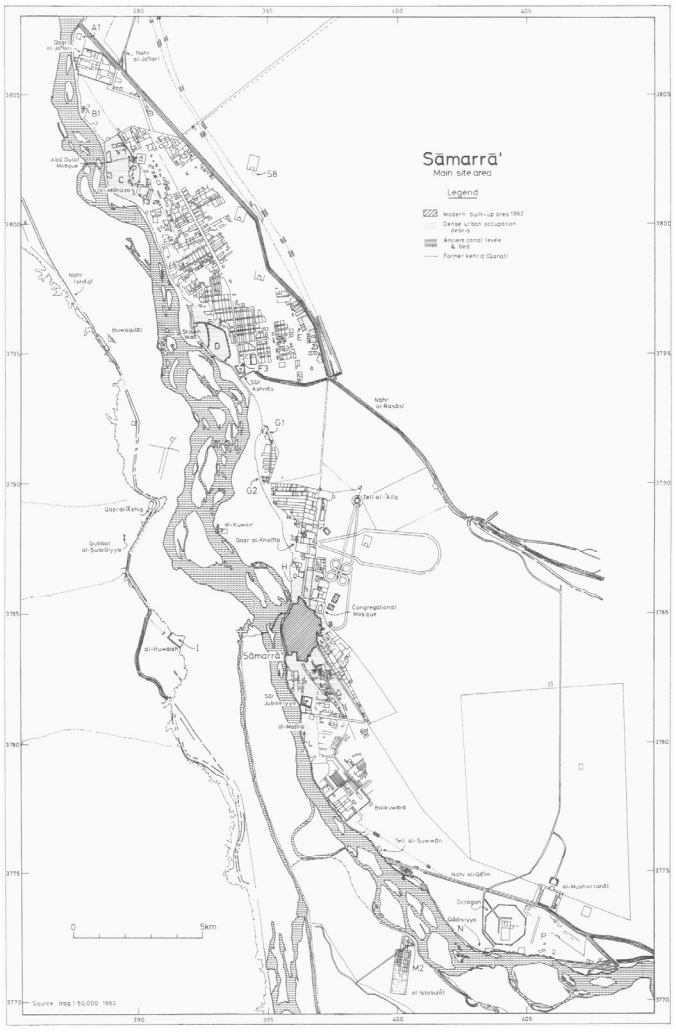



*Fig. 5. Samarra. Plan from aerial photographs courtesy of A. Northedge.*

## Archaeology and Historical Sources

As with Baghdad there are plentiful historical sources the most complete of which is the account of al-Ya'qu-




*Fig. 6. Samarra. Great Mosque with spiral minaret. (RAF photograph with WWI military trenches in foreground).*

bi. In fact Ya'qubi's description of Samarra seems so detailed and vivid that it seems likely that he actually lived in the city for a period of time in the ninth century (Northedge 2007: 30). Other authors who provide useful descriptions include the famous historian al-Tabari who visited Samarra in 863 AD and possibly on other occasions. Other historical sources include the late ninth early tenth century author al-Hamdani and various sections in the geographical works of the 13th century Syrian author Yaqut.

Whilst the historical sources are plentiful the archaeological evidence for Samarra is overwhelming. The first systematic excavations at Samarra were carried out over a century ago by the German expedition to Samarra but were interrupted by the First World War.[5] Since then there have been a number of smaller scale excavations mostly during the 1970's and 1980's. Probably the most significant contribution to the study of Samarra as a city is the analysis of RAF aerial photographs and mapping carried out by A. Northedge since 1983 (fig. 5). This work has been able to reconcile the surviving remains with historical accounts to provide a detailed description of the historical topography of the Abbasid city.

## Foundation and Architectural Origins

The reasons for the move from Baghdad and the foundation of Samarra as a new imperial capital in 836 AD are well known and recorded by many of the early Arab writers. For example al-Yaqubi records that there were continual skirmishes between the caliph al-Mu'tasim's troops and the local population of Baghdad during the early eighth century.

"*When these barbarian Turks would gallop around on horseback, they would crash into people left and right, so the rabble would pounce on them and kill some of them and beat up other.* [The Turks'] *blood could be shed with impunity; nothing was done against those committing these deeds. This weighed heavily on al-Mu'tasim and he decided to leave Baghdad*" (al-Yaqubi 1892:255–256 cited in Gordon 2010:72).

The troops were part of a Turkic slave army which the caliphs had begun accumulating as personal body guards and as internal security to counter the problem of Arab tribal conflicts and rebellions. The site for the new capital was also on the Tigris but this time it was located on the east bank in the vicinity of a Sasanian

irrigation canal known as *Qatul al-Khisrawi* dug between 531 and 578 AD. Although the site was on the east bank the Qatul al-Khisrawi provided some level of protection from the east and marked a boundary to almost all of the urban development. On the other hand the Tigris did not form a barrier to the development and several palaces are located on the west bank overlooking the main city.

Unlike Baghdad the site chosen for the new imperial capital was not generally regarded by contemporaries as a good choice and it has been suggested that the main reason for choosing the site was that the caliph liked the area for hunting (see Northedge 2007:98). The area had been famous for hunting during the Sasanian period and there are the remains of a large pre-Islamic hunting enclosure to the north of the Abbasid city.

Unlike Baghdad which was based around the concept of a Round City there was no central geometric or symbolic principal to the layout of Samarra. The layout of the city was articulated by the course of the Tigris and a central street or avenue *Shari' al- A'zam* which ran North to South roughly parallel to the river. The main components of the city were palatial complexes and numerous military camps providing accommodation for the Turkic troops and their families. Whilst the caliph himself took charge of land allocations he left it to his generals and followers to build their own palaces possibly with a grant to finance the construction. It is probable that the caliph was responsible for the construction of his own palace, the *Dar al- 'Amma* as well as the congregational mosque markets and main streets. One of the principals in the planning of the city was the separation of the Arab population from the Turkish troops. This was enforced spatially and also by regulations which made it illegal for Turkish slave troops to marry from amongst the local Arab population.

## Growth and Development

Although the construction of Samarra began in 836 AD the government consisting of officers and notables did not move there until 838 AD. According to al-Ya'qubi when al-Mu'tasim died it had been assumed that the city would be dismantled. The fact that the new caliph al-Wathiq (842–847 AD) chose to remain in Samarra encouraged further investment an expansion of the city to the south and the north. However the biggest expansion of the city took place under al-Mutawakkil (847–861 AD) who not only expanded the existing city but also chose to add a completely new area to the north known as al-Mutawakiliya. Probably the most famous building in Samarra is the great Mosque built by al-Mutawakil to the east of the original city. The mosque is of immense size (239 x 156 metres) with 17 aisles and at the north end a spiral minaret 52 metres high (fig. 6). This was an immense building project which employed elephants for moving stone to build the fountain in the central courtyard. The walls of the mosque were lined with sheets of blue glass whilst the roof was supported on fired brick piers with marble columns at each corner. In Mutawakkil's new suburb in the north (*Mutawakkiliya*) he built a slightly scaled down replica (214 x 135 metres) of the Great Mosque known as the mosque of Abu Dulaf complete with a spiral minaret 34 metres high. The model for both minarets may have been the stair tower in the centre of Firuzabad.[6]

One of the notable features of Samarra is the presence of a number of enclosures and race tracks. The enclosures were probably mostly used for hunting although some may also have functioned as recreational parks. The race tracks have been studied in detail by Northedge who distinguished three distinct race courses all located to the east of the city opposite the caliphal palace (Northedge 2007:152-162).

## Conclusion

In many respects Baghdad and Samarra appear to be two very different forms of city- one centralised and commercially active (Baghdad) and the other (Samarra) a sprawling complex of palaces with little to sustain it apart from the presence of the caliph and his court. However there are some strong similarities not the least of which is the immense scale of construction in both cities which were purposefully built as imperial centres. The other feature shared by both cities is the concern with security and the increasing need to isolate the caliph from the general population. At Samarra the streets were purposefully designed as wide avenues to prevent the encounters between the mounted Turkish troops and the local population. It is also probable that the spiral minarets at Mutawakkil's two mosques, the Great Mosque and the Abu Dulaf Mosque, also had a security function and could be used as watchtowers over the city – a similar function is suggested for the square tower minaret at Ramla (see Cytryn-Silverman 2008:385–386). The murder of Mutawakkil and the return of the capital to Baghdad in 892 AD mark the beginnings of the collapse of the Abbasids as an imperial power. This decline also marks the end of the unified Islamic state which had existed since the time of Muhammad in the seventh

century. From the tenth century onwards the Islamic world would increasingly be subdivided into competing emirates and sultanates sometimes coalescing into larger units but never regaining the unity and power of the early Islamic state.

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## Endnotes

[1] For a full discussion of the Abbasid regime see Kennedy 2004.

[2] For a discussion of Roman and Islamic Ayla see Whitcomb 2006.

[3] For a reconstruction of the Umayyad city of Ramla see Luz 1997.

[4] The al-'Anaziyya water cisterns at Ramla are an exception to this general rule see Creswell 1989.

[5] The final report has only recently been published as Leisten 2003.

[6] For a description of the tower see Huff 1999.