Research article

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“The Eye’s Delight”: Baghdad in Arabic Poetry

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Abstract: The article deals with the role that Baghdad has played in Arabic poetry since its foundation in 762 AD and throughout the history of Arabic literature. Founded at a time when Arabic poetry was at its peak, the glorious image of the city perched on both banks of the Tigris ignited the imagination of subsequent generations of poets to carve it in verse and enshrine it in the mantle of universal myth. There were also periods when Baghdad claimed attention because of its dramatic decline and disintegration as well as for being a theater for bloody wars, but even in such tragic times the image of an alternative, utopian Baghdad, as a metaphor, remained immune to the vicissitudes of time and the dreary reality of the earthly city. The sway of Baghdad, the fabled city of Hārūn al-Rashid and the enchanted land of *A Thousand and One Nights*, continues to capture the imagination of successive generations of poets, writers, and artists the world over. Neither East nor West seems immune to its irresistible charm.

Keywords: Baghdad, Iraq, Arabic poetry, Tigris, Hārūn al-Rashid, *A Thousand and One Nights*, Hulagu

1 Introduction

“Poetry and Baghdad are indivisible, flowing together. One reflects, then feeds the other and so on,” writes contemporary Baghdadi poet ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Janābī (b. 1944), “the very nature of Baghdad strikes the match that ignites the poetic imagination of the Iraqis, and in a sense of poets in the Arab world.”¹ About ninety years ago, the historian Reuben Levy (1891–1966) wrote that even in the storied East there are few cities that hold the imagination like Baghdad “whose annals should be sought not in the humdrum narratives of the scribe but in the unfettered imagery of poet or painter.”² As expressed in a truism by English poet William Cowper (1731–1800), “God made the country, and man made the town.”³ Indeed, cities are “living processes” rather than “products” or “formalistic shells for living,”⁴ but Baghdad has been shaped also by the numerous poets who have written about the city during the more than 1,200 years since its foundation. Surely there are not many cities in the world about which so many verses have been written over such a span of time.⁵

There were, of course, variations in the volume and nature of the productive creativity of Baghdad’s poets. In the first few centuries after the city was founded, both the Arab and international gaze witnessed Baghdad’s great cultural and artistic achievements, and the inspiration of its so very many poets and writers. In other periods such as the first half of the twentieth century, Baghdad became known for its remarkable religious tolerance, multicultural cosmopolitan atmosphere, and peaceful cohabitations between all components of the society. There were also periods when Baghdad claimed attention because of its dramatic decline and disintegration, for example after the thirteenth century Mongol destruction; during Saddam Hussein’s ill-reputed regime; and, for being a theater for bloody wars — such as the Iran–Iraq war of the 1980s, followed, in the next decades by the Gulf War and the

1 Snir 2013, p. 309.

2 Levy 1977 [1929], p. 1.

3 Johnston 1984, p. xv.

4 Abu-Lughod 1987, pp. 172–173.

5 See Snir 2013.

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American occupation. However, even during periods when Baghdad seemed to be in the process of collapse and disintegration, the image of an alternative, utopian Baghdad, as metaphor, remained immune to the vicissitudes of time and the dreary reality of the earthly city. The sway of Baghdad, the fabled city of Caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (763–809), and the enchanted land of *A Thousand and One Nights*, will probably continue to capture the imagination of successive generations of poets, writers, and artists the world over. Neither East nor West seems immune to its irresistible charm.

Baghdad was founded at a time when Arabic poetry was at its peak. The development of the city thus coincided with, and was inspired by the creative imagination of the poets who were associated with what was a cultural urban center during the Golden Age of medieval Arabic culture. The glorious image of the city perched on both banks of the Tigris ignited the imagination of subsequent generations of poets to carve it in verse and enshrine it in the mantle of universal myth.⁶

2 “Metropolis of the World”

Soon after the founding of the city, it became obvious that a specific identity, with distinct characteristics of Baghdad and its residents, was coming into being. The Bedouin nomadic ideology, which retained influence even in urban centers of the Islamic empire, placed genealogy (*nasab*) far higher on its meritorious scale than homeland (*waṭan*) — the implication being that “place” was, at best, only secondary, and perhaps even incidental, to the constitution of identity. Thus, biographical dictionaries were organized according to profession, legal school or generation, and only rarely according to city; it is no wonder that one of the outstanding of the latter type of dictionary was *Ta’rikh Baghdād* (The History of Baghdad). With the city of Baghdad, the relationship of a person to a place had acquired new meaning and became a formative constituent of individual identity — place and self became mutually interdependent, the one a reflection of the other. Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Shāfi‘ī (767–820), for example, illustrates the change in the attitude toward the place when he writes: “I have never stayed in a place which I did not consider a mere stage in a journey, until I came to Baghdad. As soon as I entered the city, I, at once, considered it was my very homeland.”⁷ Not only did the city of Baghdad begin to serve as a source of identity for Arab and Muslim alike, but the Tigris and major icons of the city, such as various quarters, mosques and palaces, became anchors of personal identity. Baghdad became not only one of the most impressive cities in the Islamic empire, but also a place where people literally defined their identity in relation to it.⁸

Like people, cities often have multiple layers of identity. Reflection on the subject of identity generally proceeds along one of two major premises: primordialist and non-primordialist. The first assumes that there is an essential content to any identity which is defined by common origin or common structure of experience. The second argues that identities are constructed through an interplay of cultural reproduction, everyday reinforcements, as well as institutional indoctrination.⁹ In the present case, it seems that Baghdad’s identity has been acquired through its natural location, rulers, residents, historians, writers, and, of course, its poets. However, since cities, especially major ones like Baghdad, are more evolving “processes” than finished “products,” they inevitably embody, express, and prioritize specific values. And this is how a city comes to acquire its particular ethos or “soul.” “Ethos” can be defined as the characteristic spirit of a culture, era, community, or place as manifested in its beliefs and aspirations; in other words, “ethos” is “the set of values and outlooks that are generally acknowledged by people living in any specific city.” Cities not only reflect but also “shape their inhabitants values and outlooks in various ways.”¹⁰ In the case of Baghdad, from its in-

6 The present article uses material first published as an introduction for Snir 2013.

7 Ibn al-Fuwaṭī 2008, p. 72.

8 On Place as an image of self in classical Arabic literature, see Hämeen-Anttila 2002, pp. 25–38.

9 On the theoretical conceptions of identity, see Snir 2015.

10 Bell and de-Shalit 2011, p. 2.

ception the city was more than the sum total of its parts. From its Golden Age, its image has been shaped by the poetic creativity of its residents, visitors, and those who identified with it.

Daniel Bell and Avner de-Shalit studied the identity and "spirit" of nine contemporary cities. They concluded that Jerusalem, for example, is the city of religion; Montreal, the city of language; Oxford, the city of learning; Berlin, the city of (in)tolerance; Paris, the city of romance, and, New York, the city of ambition.¹¹ What might we say about Baghdad's spirit? Or, should we refrain from any such attempt lest by reducing it to a single ethos we end up being guilty of reductionism and simplification? And what might we add if we tried to judge Baghdad not only in "our global age," as Bell and de-Shalit have done with the aforementioned cities, but to delve into this city's history from this diachronic perspective, since its foundation in the eighth century? Does Baghdad actually have any particular ethos? If we should attempt to designate an ethos for the city, and ignore the controversy about the essence of "Islamic city,"¹² there is no doubt that, from the time of its founding, and in contradistinction from the aforementioned cities, Baghdad cannot be reduced to a single universal ethos which may serve as a recognizable core of identity shared in common by its inhabitants. Baghdad has been the city of Islam and Arabism *par excellence* — the center of the Islamic empire and the Arab world, in reality and, certainly, metaphorically. Baghdad was at times a metaphor even for the entire East. It was the city of the *Arabian Nights*, the city of the Golden Age of Islamic and Arab culture. Its destruction in 1258 reflected the decline of Arabism and Islam. For various Arab religious communities during the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, it was the city of tolerance. By contrast, during most of the second half of the twentieth century, it was the city of Arab-Muslim dictatorship, or, during the last decades of that century, the city that illustrated the total submission of the Arab world and Islamic religion to the West.

Classical Arabic sources are full of sayings in reference to the glory of the city as the capital of Islam and Arabism in the medieval ages. "Baghdad is the mother of this world and the queen of the provinces,"¹³ and, "it is the navel of the globe, the treasure of earth, the source of sciences and the spring of wisdom."¹⁴ When one person declared that he had never been to Baghdad, the answer was crystal clear: "In that case, you have seen nothing on the earth."¹⁵ "Nothing is equal to Baghdad," said another, "for the sublimity of its rank, for the splendor of its authority, for the great number of its scholars and prominent personalities, and for its glorious poets."¹⁶

After he founded the city in 762, the Caliph al-Manṣūr (reign 754–775)¹⁷ called the new city *Madīnat al-Salām* (The City of Peace); this became the official name of the city on government documents

11 It seems that the British statesman Benjamin Disraeli (1804–1881) tried to define the ethos of some cities when he said that "a great city, whose image dwells in the memory of man, is the type of some great idea. Rome represents conquest; Faith hovers over the towers of Jerusalem; and Athens embodies the pre-eminent quality of the antique world, Art" (Disraeli 1844, p. 52).

12 On this controversy, see Lapidus 1969; Hourani and Stern 1970, mainly the introduction on pp. 9–24; Eickelman 1974, pp. 274–294; Serjeant 1980; Abu-Lughod 1987, pp. 155–176; Raymond 1994, pp. 3–18 (Raymond quotes as well a lecture given by Eugen Wirth at 1982 where he suggested to renounce the term "Islamic city" and to prefer the more general "Oriental city" since "Islam seems to be more inhabitant or occupant of Middle Eastern urban systems than the architect" [p. 12]); and Khan 2008, pp. 1035–1062.

13 Yāqūt 1990, I, p. 541.

14 Khālīṣ 2005, p. 8.

15 Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī 1931, p. 45; Yāqūt 1990, I, p. 548; Ibn al-Fuwaṭī 2008, p. 74; al-Ālūsī 1987, p. 18; and Khālīṣ 2005, p. 7.

16 Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī 1931, p. 119; and Khālīṣ 2005, pp. 8–9.

17 According to historical sources, al-Mansur laid the first brick for the city and recited the following Qur'anic text: "Surely the earth is God's and He bequeaths it to whom He will among his servants. The issue ultimate is to the godfearing" (*al-A'raf* [The Battlements], 127; English translation according to Arberry 1979 [1964], pp. 157–158. See Yāqūt 1990, I, p. 543). For English references on the foundation of Baghdad and its development, see Coke 1935 [1927], pp. 34–47; El-Ali 1970, pp. 87–101; Lassner 1970, pp. 103–118; Lassner 1970a; Duri 1980, pp. 52–65; and Duri 2012.

and coins.¹⁸ Later a shorter form of the name became popular, *Dār al-Salām* (The Abode of Peace), a name that hints at the Qur'ānic description of paradise: "And God summons to the Abode of Peace, and He guides whomsoever He will to a straight path; to the good-doers the reward most fair and surplus; neither dust nor abasement shall overspread their faces. Those are the inhabitants of Paradise, therein dwelling forever."¹⁹ By the eleventh century, *Baghdad* had become the almost exclusive name for this world-renowned metropolis.²⁰ Despite the name "Baghdad" being pre-Islamic in origin, most Arabic scholars have assumed it to be derived from Middle Persian, a compound of "Bag" (god) and "dad" (given), meaning "God-given" or "God's gift." However, the name *Bagdadu* was in use from the time of Hammurabi (1800 B.C.), which means that the name was current before any possible Persian influence. The city was also known as *Madīnat al-Manṣūr* (The City of al-Manṣūr); *al-Zawrā'* (The Bent or the Crooked);²¹ and, *al-Madīna al-Mudawwara* (The Round City), since the old city was built as a circle with an approximate diameter of between two and three kilometers. The city was planned so that within it there would be many parks, gardens, villas, and promenades, and at its center would lay the mosque and headquarters for guards. The four surrounding walls of Baghdad were named Kufa, Basra, Khurasan, and Damascus after the direction of the city gates, which faced these destinations.

After its founding, the city was developed rapidly. "Never had there been a Middle Eastern city so large," Ira M. Lapidus writes: "Baghdad was not a single city, but a metropolitan center, made up of conglomeration of districts on both sides of the Tigris River. In the ninth century it measured about 25 square miles, and had a population of between 300,000 and 500,000. It was ten times the size of Sasanian Ctesiphon." Baghdad was larger than Constantinople or any other Middle Eastern city until Istanbul in the sixteenth century. In its time, Baghdad was the largest city in the world outside China.²² With the founding of Baghdad, the Islamic empire established an effective governing system such as had never existed before; it had political, military, juridical, administrative powers, talented bureaucratic staffs, and improved practices. For example, the office of the vizier was further developed at the time and his power, as chief of administration, functioned in direct connection to the wishes or, one could say, the strength of the caliph — for example, the Barmakid viziers were very powerful at the time, but Hārūn al-Rashīd did not hesitate to execute prominent members of this family.

Many sayings in classical literary sources, prose and poetry, testify to the unique nature of Baghdad. A short while after its founding, Abu 'Uthmān 'Amr ibn Baḥr al-Jāḥiẓ (776–869), one of the greatest of classical Arab authors, gave the following testimony: "I have seen the greatest of cities that are known for their perfection and refinement, in the lands of Syria and the Greeks and other countries, but I have never seen a city like Baghdad whose roofs are so high, a city which is so round or more noble, the gates of which are wider and the walls better. It is as if the city were cast into a mould and poured out."²³ When referring to the three great cities in the territories known today as Iraq, al-Jāḥiẓ made the observation that "industry is in Basra, eloquence in Kufa, but goodness in Baghdad."²⁴ Abū al-Qāsim ibn al-Ḥasan al-Daylamī related: "I have travelled throughout the lands,

18 According to some sources the city was called "The City of Peace" because one of the 99 names of God is *al-Salām* and the intended meaning was "The City of God." According to other suggestion, the Tigris valley was called *Wādī al-Salām* (The Valley of Peace) (Yāqūt 1990, I, pp. 541–542).

19 *Yūnus* (Jonah), 25–26 (English translation according to Arberry 1979 [1964], p. 200).

20 There are additional versions of the name such as *Baghdādh*, *Baghdān*, *Maghdād*, *Maghdādh*, and *Maghdān* (Yāqūt 1990, I, p. 541).

21 One explanation is that the city took the name from the Tigris which was bent as it passed by the city (Le Strange 1900, p. 11).

22 Lapidus 2002, p. 56.

23 Ibn al-Fuwaṭī 2008, p. 73; and al-Ālūsī 1987, p. 13.

24 Al-Ālūsī 1987, p. 13.

visited countries from the borders of Samarkand to Qayrawān, from Sri Lanka to the lands of the Greeks, but I have never found a place better than or superior to Baghdad."²⁵

Baghdad acquired acceptance as the urban center of the Arab world and Islamic empire, to the degree that people regarded all other places outside it as rural.²⁶ "Baghdad is the metropolis of the world," Abū Ishāq al-Zajjāj (d. 923) said, "outside it, there is only desert."²⁷ When a visitor returned from Baghdad, he was asked about the city and replied: "Baghdad among the lands is like a master among slaves."²⁸ The traveler al-Muqaddasī al-Bashshārī (947–990) described Baghdad as having "a nature and elegance peculiar to her, excellent faculties and tenderness; the air is soft; the science is precise; everything is good. Everything nice is there; every wise man comes from there. Every heart longs for this city. Every war is declared against her. Her fame defies description, her goodness cannot be depicted. Praise cannot reach her heights."²⁹

As the capital of the Islamic empire, it is no wonder that Baghdad has been praised as a religious center. Abū al-Faraj al-Babbagha (925–1008) wrote:

هي مدينة السلام بل مدينة الإسلام، فإن الدولة النبوية والخلافة الإسلامية بها عشتنا وفرختنا وضربنا بعروقهما وبسقتنا بفروعهما، وإن هواءها أغذى من كل هواء وماءها أعذب من كل ماء، وإن نسيمها أرق من كل نسيم.

[Baghdad] is the City of Peace, indeed she is the city of Islam. The Prophetic State and the Caliphate of Islam nested there, hatched and struck its roots into the earth, and made its branches tall. Her air is more pleasant than any other air and her water sweeter than any other water, and her breeze is softer than any other breeze.³⁰

It was said that whenever the name of Baghdad was raised in any conversation, people quoted the Qur'ānic verse: "A good land, and a Lord All-forgiving."³¹ An interpreter explained that Baghdad was enriched with the fruits of a refreshing breeze.³² We read also in the sources:

بغداد جنة الأرض ومدينة السلام وقبة الإسلام ومجمع الرافدين وغرة البلاد وعين العراق ودار الخلافة ومجمع المحاسن والطيبات ومعدن الطرائف واللطائف، وبها أرباب الغايات في كل فن، وآحاد الدهر في كل نوع.

Baghdad is a paradise on earth, the City of Peace; the dome of Islam; the union of two rivers; the head of the land; the eye of Iraq; the house of the caliphate; the ingathering of good deeds and actions; the source of uncommon qualities and niceties. There can be found experts in any of the arts and extraordinary people in every field.³³

Also: "From the merits of Islam — Friday in Baghdad, the prayer performed during the nights of Ramadan in Mecca, and religious festivals in Tarsus."³⁴

Moreover, Baghdad enjoyed a pluralistic, cosmopolitan, and multi-confessional atmosphere with multi-cultural ethnic and religious gatherings of Muslims, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, pagans, Arabs, Persians, as well as various Asian populations. This atmosphere was initially inspired by the leadership of the Caliph al-Manṣūr (754–775), who propagated, from Baghdad, an open and multicultural policy toward religious minorities. The political, religious and cultural supremacy of Baghdad as the center of the flowering of the Islamic empire encouraged such an atmosphere not only in Bagh-

25 Ibn al-Fuwaṭī 2008, p. 74; and al-Ālūsī 1987, p. 13.

26 Al-Ālūsī 1987, p. 13.

27 Yāqūt 1990, I, p. 547; Ibn al-Fuwaṭī 2008, p. 72; and al-Ālūsī 1987, p. 22.

28 Yāqūt 1990, I, p. 547; and al-Ālūsī 1987, p. 22.

29 Al-Ālūsī 1987, p. 22.

30 Yāqūt 1990, I, p. 547; and al-Ālūsī 1987, p. 22.

31 Saba' (Sheba), 15 (English translation according to Arberry 1979 [1964], p. 439).

32 Al-Ālūsī 1987, p. 14.

33 Yāqūt 1990, I, p. 547; and al-Ālūsī 1987, p. 21.

34 Khāliṣ 2005, p. 7.

dad itself, but throughout other close and even remote cities. A contemporary text describing a gathering in the southern city of Basra in the year 156H (772/773 A.D.), may serve to illustrate this policy of multiculturalism:

كان يجتمع بالبصرة عشرة في مجلس لا يعرف مثلهم في تضادّ أديانهم ونحلهم: الخليل بن أحمد سنّي، والسّيد بن محمّد الحميريّ رافضيّ، وصالح بن عبد القدّوس ثنويّ، وسفيان بن مجاشع صفريّ، وبشار بن برد خليع ماجن، وحمام عجرد زنديق، وابن رأس الجالوت يهوديّ، وابن نظير متكلّم النّصارى، وعمرو ابن أخت المؤيّد المجوسيّ، وروح بن سنان الحرانيّ صابئيّ، فيتناشد الجماعة أشعارًا، فكان بشار يقول: أياتك هذه يا فلان، أحسن من سورة كذا وكذا، وبهذا المزاح ونحوه كفّروا بشارًا.

Ten persons used to meet regularly. There was no equivalent to this gathering for the diversity of the religions and sects of its members: al-Khalil ibn Aḥmad — a Sunni, and al-Sayyid ibn Muḥammad al-Ḥimyarī — Shiite, and Ṣāliḥ ibn ‘Abd al-Qaddūs — dualist, and Sufyān ibn Mujāshī‘ — Khariji, and Bashshār ibn Burd — morally depraved and impudent, and Ḥammad ‘Ajrad — heretic, and the exilarch’s son — a Jew, and Ibn Naṭīra — a Christian theologian, and ‘Amrū the nephew of al-Mu’ayyad — Zoroastrian, and Rawḥ ibn Sinān al-Harranī — Gnostic. At these gatherings they used to recite poems, and Bashshār used to say: Your verses, Oh so-and-so, are better than *sūra* this or that [of the Qur’ān], and from that kind of joking and similar things they declared Bashshār to be a disbeliever.³⁵

3 The Golden Age

The glorious and multi-cultural cosmopolitan image of Baghdad, in the imagination of Arab culture, concealed a day-to-day reality of a city which suffered from all kinds of difficulties and troubles, just like any other medieval city. An example is the Caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (763–809), whose name and fame have been associated with Baghdad as the legendary ultimate capital of the Islamic empire. It was under him that Baghdad flourished and became the most splendid city of its period. Taxes paid by rulers were used to finance activities in fine art, the construction of buildings with a high standard of architecture, and also a luxurious and even decadent way of life at court. Due to the *One Thousand-and-One Nights* tales, Hārūn al-Rashīd and particularly his activities in Baghdad became legendary but his true historic personality was thus obscured. Hārūn al-Rashīd was virtually responsible for dismembering the empire when he apportioned Baghdad between his two sons, al-Amīn (reign 809–813) and al-Ma’mūn (reign 813–833). After his death, a civil war (*fitna*) broke out between them (811–813). Contemporary poets described the events of the civil war and, between their poetic lines, the high status of Baghdad is apparent. ‘Amr ibn ‘Abd al-Malik al-Warrāq (d. 815) wrote:

مَنْ ذَا أَصَابَكَ يَا بَغْدَادُ بِالْعَيْنِ أَلَمْ تَكُونِي زَمَانًا قُرَّةَ الْعَيْنِ

Oh Baghdad, who afflicted you with an evil eye?!

Were not you the eye’s delight?³⁶

Another anonymous poet said:

بكيت دما على بغداد لَمَّا فقدت غضارة العيش الأنيق
تبدّلنا هموما من سرور ومن سعة تبدّلنا بضيق

I weep blood over Baghdad,
I lost the comfort of an elegant life.
Anxiety has replaced happiness,
Instead of prosperity, there is only misery.

³⁵ Al-Dhahabī 1988, p. 383. For another version of this episode, see Ibn Taghribirdī 1930, II, p. 29; and Ibn Taghribirdī 1992, II, 36–37. On that liberal cultural atmosphere, see also Yāqūt 1990, III, pp. 242–244.

³⁶ Al-Nawrasī 2009, p. 72.

And Ishāq al-Khuraymī (d. 829) described a *mundus inversus* situation:

وخطّم العبد أنف سيّده	بالزّغم واستعبدت حرائرها
وصار ربّ الجيران فاسقهم	وابتزّر أمر الدّروب ذاعرها

The slave has put a mark of disgrace upon his master,
[Baghdad's] noblewomen have been enslaved.
Among neighbors the noble have become the most evil,
He who had been afraid of roads has become their master.

This is a description of a world upside-down reminiscent of the *Carmina Burana* where the Fathers Gregory, Jerome, Augustine and Benedict are to be found in the alehouse, in court, or in the meat market; Mary no longer delights in the contemplative life and Lucretia has turned whore.³⁷ No restraints were enforced in that cruel war between al-Rashīd's sons. A graphic account is given in the verses of al-Ḥusayn ibn al-Ḍaḥḥāk (778–870) when, addressing al-Amin, he says:

هتكوا بحرمتك التي هتكت	حرم الرّسول ودونها السّجف
ونبت أقاربك التي خذلت	وجميعها بالذلّ معترف
أبدت مخلصها على دهش	أبكارهنّ وونت النّصف
سليت معاجزهن واختلست	ذات النّقاب ونوزع الشّنف
فكأنهنّ خلال منتهب	درّ تكشف دونه الصّدف

Among the violations of your sanctity they abused,
Behind curtains, the honor of the Prophet's female descendants.
Your relatives remained in their places and failed to help,
All of them admitted humiliation.
Their virgin females showed their ankles
In grief, as they wept their demand for justice.
Garments were stolen, veiled women
Were exposed, ear-rings were removed.
While being assaulted they seemed as
Pearls emerging from oysters.

Notwithstanding all, within a short time after its inception, Baghdad evolved into a significant industrial and commercial center for international trade as well as the intellectual and cultural heart of the Arab and Islamic world. On the latter level, Baghdad garnered a worldwide reputation as the "Center of Learning," housing several key academic institutions, the best known being Bayt al-Ḥikma (House of Wisdom). This high point of Islamic civilization came when scholars of various religions from around the world flocked to that city, which was the unrivaled center for the study of the humanities and sciences, including mathematics, astronomy, medicine, chemistry, zoology and geography, in addition to alchemy, and astrology. Drawing on Persian, Indian and Greek texts, Baghdad's scholars accumulated the greatest collection of learned texts in the world, and built on this knowledge through their own discoveries. In these times, there was also a market for copyists (*sūq al-warrāqīn*) where more than one hundred booksellers' shops were to be found and writers and merchants used to buy and sell manuscripts. Baghdad's libraries were renowned for their wealth even beyond the Arab world. Whereas the largest library in twelfth-century Europe housed around 2,000 volumes, there was a library in Baghdad that had 10,400 books.³⁸ In Umberto Eco's *Il Nome Della Rosa* (1980), the library of the abbey is praised as "the only light Christianity can oppose to the thirty-six libraries of

³⁷ See Snir 1994, pp. 51–75.

³⁸ Coke 1935 [1927], p. 63; Ali 2010, p. 221; and Toorawa 2005, pp. 13–15.

Baghdad, to the ten thousand codices of the Vizir Ibn al-ʿAlqamī.³⁹ However, Baghdad's rapid development met with delays. In 836, the caliphate residence was removed to the new city of Samarra, just built by the Caliph al-Muʿtaṣim (reign 833–842). The caliphate would remain there for over fifty-five years, that is, until the year 892 when it was returned to Baghdad by the Caliph al-Muʿtamid (reign 870–892). During that period, Baghdad missed the attention of the caliphs, even though it was still the center of commercial and cultural activity.

From the late tenth century, inter-sectarian conflicts between the Muslim Shiʿis and Sunnis became usual, but soon the population of Baghdad became international, a mixture of different religions, nations and cultures. The Jews of Mesopotamia, for example, who for centuries spoke Aramaic, in which language they produced the Talmud, underwent a rapid process of Arabization and integration into the surrounding Arab-Muslim society, the majority of them congregating in the new metropolis of Baghdad. Facilitating their integration was their high level of achievement and resulting prosperity in commerce, education and culture.⁴⁰ It is estimated that in the tenth century the population of Baghdad reached one-and-a-half million⁴¹ and was considered to be the largest city in the world, the kind of which had not been known before in the Middle East. Very sophisticated services were installed to meet the requirements of its residents. This is illustrated by, for example, the health system. We know of hospitals in Baghdad from since the ninth century. At the beginning of the tenth century, the chief court physician, Sinān ibn Thābit (880–943), was appointed director of the city's hospitals; he founded three additional hospitals.⁴²

Many poems reflect various levels of life in Baghdad throughout the first centuries after its founding and in a sense may be read as an alternative history of the city. "Literature is a frail vehicle for documentation," James Dougherty writes, "but it can become powerful when understood as the imaginative review of experience, a review that both discovers and imparts those spiritual expectations against which the city's appearance must be measured."⁴³ Moreover, the history of Baghdad, during its formative classical period, cannot be fully documented without poetry. This is all the more obvious since until the second half of the twentieth century, poetry was the principal channel of literary creativity and served as the chronicle and public register of the Arabs as illustrated in the aforementioned saying *al-Shiʿr Dīwān al-ʿArab*. No other genres could challenge the supremacy of poetry in the field of belles lettres across more than 1,500 years of Arabic literary history. This high status that poetry enjoyed in Arab society as a whole is reflected in a passage by the eleventh-century scholar Ibn Rashīq al-Qayrawānī (d. 1063 or 1071):

كانت القبيلة من العرب إذا نبغ فيها شاعر أنت القبائل فهنأتها بذلك وصنعت الأطعمة واجتمع النساء يلعبن بالمزاهر كما يصنعن في الأعراس وتتباشر الرجال والولدان لأنه حماية لأعراضهم وذبت عن أحسابهم وتخلد لمآثرهم وإشادة لذكورهم وكانوا لا يهتئون إلا بغلام يولد أو شاعر ينبغ فيهم أو فرس تنتج.

When a poet appeared in a family of the Arabs, the adjacent tribes would gather together and wish that family the joy of their good luck. Feasts would be got ready, the women of the tribe would join together in bands, playing upon lutes, as they were wont to do at bridals, and the men and boys would congratulate one another; for a poet was a defence of the honour of them all, a weapon to ward off insult from their good name, and a means of perpetuating their glorious deeds and of establishing their

³⁹ Eco 1984, p. 35. In Eco's novel, the historical background of fourteenth century Christian Europe is reconstructed, but Baghdad's libraries had been already destroyed in 1258 and Baghdad lost its cultural dominance in the Arab world before the events of the novel took place.

⁴⁰ Wasserstrom 1995, pp. 19–20.

⁴¹ On this number and the various calculations which enable scholars to reach it, see Micheau 2008, pp. 234–235.

⁴² Duri 1980, p. 64.

⁴³ Dougherty 1980, p. x. Cf. Johnston 1984, p. xx.

fame forever. And they used not to wish one another joy but for three things: the birth of a boy, the coming to light of a poet, and the foaling of a noble mare.⁴⁴

Poets of the time actually referred to Baghdad as a paradise on earth; they described its beauty, natural scenes, and the attachment they felt toward it. Maṣṣūr al-Namārī (d. 825) described the Baghdadi breeze:

تحبي الرياح المرضى إذا تنسّمت وجوّشت بين أغصان الرّياحين

Breeze reviving the sick,
blowing between sweet basil branches.⁴⁵

And ʿAlī ibn Jabala al-Anṣarī (known as al-ʿAkawwak) (776–828) described the city as paradise on earth:

لهفي على بغداد من بلدة كانت من الأسقام لي جنة
كأنني عند فراقها لهي آدم لما فارق الجنة

Truly, I grieve for Baghdad, what a town!
Midst my maladies, she has protected me.
Separating from her, I was Adam
expelled from Eden.⁴⁶

ʿAlī ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Wāsiṭī (d. 919) asks a rhetorical question and is quick to respond:

ألدار السلام في الأرض شبه؟ معجز أن ترى لبغداد مثلاً
مربع للقلوب فيه ربيع متوال إذا الربيع تـوَلَّى

Is there any equivalent to the City of Peace?
A miracle, you will not find for Baghdad any parallel.
A temple for the hearts, spring
There everlasting, even in summer.⁴⁷

And ʿUmāra ibn ʿUqayl (798–853) asks another similar question:

أعانيت في طول من الأرض أو عرض كـبغداد داراً إنّهـا جنّة الأرض
صفا العيش في بغداد واخضرّ عوده وعيش سواها غير صاف ولا غصن
تطول بها الأعمار إنّ غذاءها مريء وبعض الأرض أمرؤ من بعض

Have you seen in any corner of the world
A tranquil abode like Baghdad?!
Here, life is pure, green, and fresh;
in other places life is neither gentle nor cool.
Life here is longer; the food is wholesome;
indeed parts of the earth are better than others.⁴⁸

In another poem he adds:

ما مثل بغداد في الدّنيا ولا الدّين على تقلّبها في كلّ ما حين

⁴⁴ Ibn Rashīq al-Qayrawānī 1963, p. 65; and al-Suyūṭī n.d., II, p. 473. The translation is according to Lyall 1930 with minor modifications.

⁴⁵ Al-Nawrasī 2009, p. 62.

⁴⁶ Al-Nawrasī 2009, p. 87.

⁴⁷ Al-Ālūsī 1987, p. 34.

⁴⁸ Yāqūt 1990, I, p. 546; and Al-Ālūsī 1987, p. 21.

There is nothing like Baghdad, worldly-wise and religiously,
Despite Time's transitions.⁴⁹

Ibn al-Rūmī (836–896) depicted the city as

بلدٌ صَحْبَتْ به الشَّبِيبة والصَّبَا وليستُ فيه العيشَ وهو جَدِيدُ
فإذا تمثَّل في الضمير رأيتُه وعليه أفنان الشَّباب تَمِيدُ

A city where I accompanied youthfulness and childhood,
Where I wore a new cloak of glory.
When she appears in the imagination, I see on her
Budding branches flutter.⁵⁰

The like of Baghdad's residents is unavailable in other places, as 'Alī ibn Zurayq Abū al-Ḥasan al-Baghdādī (d. 1029) argues:

سافرت أبغي لبغداد وساكنها مثلاً قد اخترت شيئاً دونه الياس
هيهات بغداد والدنيا بأجمعها عندي وسكان بغداد هم الناس

I have traveled far to find a parallel for Baghdad
And her people — my task was second to despair.
Alas, for me Baghdad is the entire world,
Her people — the only genuine ones.⁵¹

And al-Ṭāhir ibn al-Muẓaffar ibn Ṭāhir al-Khāzin declared:

هواء رقيق في اعتدال وصحة وماء له طعم ألد من الخمر
ودجلتها شيطان قد نظماً لنا بتاج إلى تاج وقصر إلى قصر
تراها كمسك والمياه كفضة وحصابؤها مثل اليواقيت والدرّ

Tender weather, balanced and healthy,
The water — what a taste! Sweeter than wine.
Her Tigris — two banks arrayed for us like pearls in a necklace,
A crown beside a crown, a palace beside a palace.
Her soil — musk; her water — silver;
Her gravel — diamonds and jewels.⁵²

On the other hand, Baghdad was also known as a hedonist city, where pleasures of all sorts were available. The pleasures, as 'Alī ibn al-Jahm (804–863) wrote, were sensual with wine parties, cup-bearers, young men and women, and a *carpe diem* atmosphere: "Use your hands, carefree! Do not be afraid of the master, do whatever you want. Hint with your hand, wink, do not fear."⁵³ Homosexual love was very widespread and accepted in Baghdad at the time, and among the upper classes in society there was always an urgent need for newly imported young beardless boys. When Abū al-Ma'ālī (1028–1085) was suddenly seen with a bearded boy, eyebrows were lifted: "Look for another! They urged. In that case I will never be pleased, I replied. / If his saliva were not honey, the bees would never have invaded his mouth."⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Al-Ālūsī 1987, p. 22.

⁵⁰ Al-Ālūsī 1987, p. 31.

⁵¹ Yāqūt 1990, I, p. 547; al-Ālūsī 1987, p. 22; and al-Nawrasī 2009, p. 63.

⁵² Al-Ālūsī 1987, p. 24.

⁵³ Snir 2013, pp. 98–99.

⁵⁴ Snir 2013, p. 147.

The hedonism of Baghdad's wealthier residents created a need for more free time for leisure. From the start, with the Abbasid dynasty, the caliphate's public offices were closed on Fridays so that believers could pray together in the mosques. For rest, relaxation and leisure, the Caliph al-Mu'taḍid (reign 857–902) added another off-day — Tuesday. Every Tuesday, public employees would stay at home or head for public parks where they would spend their time in recreation and rest. Sometimes, it seemed a shame for a man to stay in the house on Tuesday and not participate in the *majālis* (sessions) of singing and wine drinking. Various poets wrote about that weekly day of vacation, such as Ibn al-Rūmī (836–896):

يَوْمُ الثَّلَاثَاءِ مَا يَوْمُ الثَّلَاثَاءِ
كَأَنَّمَا هُوَ فِي الْأُسْبُوعِ وَاسْطَةً
فِي ذُرْوَةٍ مِنْ دُرِّ الْأَيَّامِ عَلِيَاءِ
فِي سَمِطٍ دُرٍّ مُحَلٍّ جَيْدٍ حَسَنَاءِ

Tuesday? What is Tuesday?

It is raised high in the pick of the days.

A center in the middle of the week,

A pearl necklace decorating a beautiful woman.

This hedonist aspect of city-living aroused opposition from ascetic and mystical circles who considered Baghdad a dangerous place because of its luxurious life and the shamelessness and excessive pleasures that newcomers could be tempted by — all of which could cause avoidance of religious observance and duties. For example, 'Abd Allah ibn al-Mubarak (736–797) held that if you want to be pious you should avoid Baghdad:

قُلْ لِمَنْ أَظْهَرَ التَّنَسُّكِ فِي النَّاءِ
أَلَمْ تَرَ الثَّغْرَ وَالتَّوَّاضِعَ فِيهِ
سِوَاكُمْ يُعَدُّ فِي الزَّهَادِ
لَيْسَ بِبَغْدَادٍ مَنْزِلُ الْعَبَادِ
وَمَنَاخُ لِلْفَارِسِ الصِّيَادِ
إِنَّ بِبَغْدَادٍ لِلْمَلُوكِ مُحَلًّا

Please tell those preferring abstinence,

Tell all considered to be pious:

Stay on the frontier, be modest,

Baghdad is not an abode for hermits.

Baghdad is a place only for kings,

An abode solely for hunters and knights.⁵⁵

Like any other urban center, the city suffered from negative phenomena such as social differences between the classes. Unlike poets who described Baghdad as a city of only dreams, Abū Muḥammad 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Mālikī (d. 1031) did not have doubts that

بَغْدَادُ دَارٌ لِأَهْلِ الْمَالِ وَاسِعَةٍ
ظَلَلَتْ حِيرَانَ أَمْشِي فِي أَزْقَتِهَا
وَلِلصَّعَالِيكَ دَارُ الضَّنْكِ وَالضَّيْقِ
كَأَنَّنِي مَصْحَفٌ فِي بَيْتِ زَنْدِيقِ

Baghdad is a fine home for the wealthy,

But an abode of misery and distress for the poor.

I walked among them in dismay

As though I were a Qur'ān in an unbeliever's house.⁵⁶

Muḥammad ibn Ahmad ibn Shumay'a al-Baghdādī (tenth century) captured the self-centered nature of this urban center's residents:

وَدَّ أَهْلُ الزُّورِ زُورَ فَلَا
هِيَ دَارُ السَّلَامِ حَسَبَ، فَلَا
تَغْتَرُّ بِالْوَدَادِ مَنْ سَاكِنُهَا
يَطْمَعُ مِنْهَا، إِلَّا بِمَا قَبْلَ فِيهَا

55 Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī 1971, p. 36; Yāqūt 1990, I, p. 550; and al-Ālūsī 1987, p. 37.

56 Yāqūt 1990, I, p. 550; and al-Ālūsī 1987, p. 37.

Friendship of al-Zawra's residents is falsehood,
Residents' warmth as well – don't be tempted.
Baghdad is a place for a mere "how are you?"
You will not be able to gain more.⁵⁷

And Abū al-ʿĀliya (The ninth century) has strong advice:

ولا عند من يرجى ببغداد طائل
فكلهم من حلية المجد عاطل
ترحل فما بغداد دار إقامة
محل ملوك سمتهم في أديمهم

Leave! Baghdad is not a place to stay in,
There is no benefit from her.
She is a place for kings, their wickedness seen in their faces,
All of them devoid of any glory.⁵⁸

Many anonymous verses described the immoral and evil nature of the residents such as the following:

أذمّ بغداد والمقام بها
ما عند أملاكهم لمختبط
من بعد ما خيرة وتجريب
خير ولا فرجة لمكروب
إلى ثلاث من بعد تقريب
وعمر نوح وصبر أيوب
بخارف القول والأكاذيب
ونازعوا في الفسوق والحبوب
يحتاج باغي التوال عندهم
كنوز قارون أن تكون له
قوم مواعيدهم مطرزة
خلوا سبيل العلى لغيرهم

I abhor Baghdad, I abhor life there,
This is from experience, after a test,
Baghdad's residents have no pity for the needy,
No remedy for the gloomy.
Whoever among them who wants favor
Needs mainly three things:
The treasures of Korah,
Noah's age, and Job's patience.
People whose encounters are embroidered
With ornamented rhetoric and lies.
Abandoning the path of nobility,
They rival each other instead in disobedience and sinfulness.⁵⁹

And another adds:

وتزداد نتناً حين تمطر أو تندى
بلاد ترى الأرواح فيها مريضة

It is a land where men's souls are sick,
The stench even more when it rains.⁶⁰

And a third poet says:

ولا سقى صوب الحيا أهلها
كيف أبحوا جنة مثلها
سقى لبغداد ورعا لها
يا عجباً من سفلى مثلهم

57 Yāqūt 1990, I, p. 550; al-Ālūsī 1987, p. 40; and al-Nawrasī 2009, p. 98.

58 Yāqūt 1990, p. 551.

59 Yāqūt 1990, I, p. 551; and al-Ālūsī 1987, pp. 40–41.

60 Al-Ālūsī 1987, p. 41; and al-Nawrasī 2009, p. 94.

May God rain on Baghdad, may He protect her;
 Alas, may the clouds not provide rain for her residents.
 Mean as they are, amazingly so,
 For goodness sake, why have they been allowed such a paradise.⁶¹

And a fourth anonymous poet:

كفى حزنا والحمد لله أنني
 أصاحب قوما لا ألدّ أصحابهم
 ببغداد قد أعيت عليّ مذاهبي
 وألف قوما لست فيهم براغب

Enough of moaning, thank God, I
 Could not manage in Baghdad anymore.
 I consort with people who afford me no pleasure,
 I keep company with people I deem undesirable.⁶²

There were also corruptive phenomena, like those of the viziers. Take, for example, the vizier Abū 'Alī Muḥammad ibn Yaḥyā. He was known as a great opportunist and hypocrite. When he saw people praying, he would hurry to join them; when someone asked him for help, he would beat his breast saying: "With the greatest of pleasure." However, he gave nothing. That is why the people used to call him "Beating his Breast" (*Daqqa Ṣadrahu*). He was known for his hankering for bribes. When appointing officials, he did so only in exchange for bribes. At times he would appoint someone, then after a few days regret it and accept a higher bribe from someone else. It is said that in al-Kufa in the course of twenty days, he appointed and fired no less than seven governors. About this vizier, an anonymous poet wrote:

وزير قد تكامل في الرقاعة
 إذا أهل الرشا اجتمعوا لديه
 يولي ثم يعزل بعد ساعة
 فخير القوم أوفرهم بضاعة
 لأنّ الشّيخ أفلت من مجاعة
 وليس يلام في هذا بحال

This minister—he was perfect in stupidity,
 No sooner appointing than dismissing.
 In his office, he assembles bribers and campaigners,
 The best merchandiser is the winner.
 I beseech you not to reproach him,
 He barely escaped beggary.⁶³

It was in the prisons of Baghdad that (so we learn from poetry) the craft of weaving waistbands became very developed, and served as a metaphor for the deterioration of the status of the prisoners. We learn this, for example, from the poetry of the Prince 'Abd Allāh ibn al-Mu'tazz (861–909), who succeeded in ruling for a single lone day before he was strangled in a palace intrigue:

تعلّمت في السّجن نسج التّكك
 وقيدت بعد ركوب الجياد
 وكنت امرءًا قبل حبسي ملك
 وما ذاك إلا بدور الفلك

In Baghdad, I got lessons in weaving waistbands,
 Before imprisonment, I had been a king.
 After riding noble horses, I was chained,
 This is because of changing constellations.⁶⁴

In a letter to a friend, Ibn al-Mu'tazz complains about Baghdad:

⁶¹ Al-Ālūsī 1987, p. 42.

⁶² Al-Ālūsī 1987, p. 42.

⁶³ Ibn al-Athīr 1987, VI, pp. 470–471; and al-'Umārī 2010, VI, p. 125.

⁶⁴ Al-Ālūsī 1987, pp. 40–41.

الوسخة السماء، الومدة الماء والهواء، جوها غبار، وأرضها خبار، وماؤها طين، وترابها سرجين، وحيطانها نزوز، وتشرينها تمّوز، فكم من شمسها من محترق، وفي ظلّها من عرق، ضيقة الدّيار، وسيّئة الجوار، أهلها ذئاب، وكلامه سباب، وسائلهم محروم، ومالهم مكتوم، ولا يجوز إنفاقه، ولا يحلّ خناقه، حشوشهم مسايل، وطرقهم مزابيل، وحيطانهم أخصاص، وبيوتهم أفاص.

The sky of which is dirty, her water and air are muggy, her weather dusty, her soil quagmire, her water clay, her dirt dung, her walls unstable, her October – July. Many are burnt by the sun. In her shade the sweat is unbearable, her houses narrow, her neighbors evil, her citizens wolves, their speeches curses, their beggars deprived, their money hidden, never for spending, never for releasing, their gardens know no gardening, their roads rubbish, their walls unstable, their houses cages.⁶⁵

And he composed the following verses:

أطال الهمّ في بغداد ليلي وقد يشقى المسافر أو يفوز
ظلمت بها على رغمي مقيما كعنّين تعانقه عـجـوز

In Baghdad, night made my sorrow deepen,
If you leave her, you may win or lose.
Unwillingly, I stayed there, as if I were an
Impotent man being squeezed by an old woman.⁶⁶

According to historical sources, one reason for selecting the site chosen for Baghdad was because it was free of mosquitoes and had lots of fresh air; but after the city had been built, there seem to have been various opinions from those who beheld the city and breathed its air. Ṭāhir ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Khuzaʿī (776–822) wrote:

زعم النَّاسُ أَنَّ لَيْلَكَ يَا بَغ داد ليل يطيب فيه التّسيم
ولعمري ما ذاك إلّا لان خ الفها، بالنّهار، منك السّموم
وقليل الرّخاء يتبع الشّد ة عند الأنام، خطب عظيم

People say: Your night, Oh Baghdad,
Is lovely, the air cool and fresh.
By my life, your night is thus only
Because the day is beset by hellish wind.
A slight comfort after great agony,
And people say at once: "What a paradise!"⁶⁷

And we have, as well, the testimony of Ādam ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAziz al-Umawī (ninth century):

لقد طال في بغداد ليلي ومن بيت ببغداد يصبح ليله غير راقد
بلاد إذا ولّى النّهار تنـفـارت براغيثها من بين مثنّى وواحد
ديازجة شهب البطون كأنّهم بغال بريد أرسلت في مذاود

My night in Baghdad became longer, whoever spends a night in
Baghdad will stay awake, deprived of sleep.
As soon as day escapes, it becomes a land where mosquitoes
Swarm, couples and lone.
Humming, their bellies white as if they were
Pack mules repelled by spears.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Yāqūt 1990, I, p. 550; and al-Ālūsī 1987, pp. 38–39.

⁶⁶ Yāqūt 1990, I, p. 550–551; and al-Ālūsī 1987, p. 39.

⁶⁷ Yāqūt 1990, I, p. 550; and al-Ālūsī 1987, pp. 43–44.

⁶⁸ Yāqūt 1990, I, p. 551; al-Ālūsī 1987, p. 41; and al-Nawrasī 2009, p. 95.

In any event, Baghdad could not have achieved its supremacy without having been an industrial urban center from its earliest times. Its residents were known for their brilliance in building splendid boats and ships, some in special shapes, such as domes, lions and eagles. According to extant statistics, there were thirty thousand of these ornate boats and ships; the Caliph al-Amīn owned a number. In his verses, Abū Nuwās (d. 815) describes the ships:

سَخَّرَ اللَّهُ لِلْأَمِينِ مَطَايَا لَمْ تَسَخَّرْ لَصَاحِبِ الْمَحْرَابِ
فَإِذَا مَا رَكَابُهُ سِرْنَ بَرًّا سَارَ فِي الْمَاءِ رَاكِبًا لَيْثَ غَابِ

God made mounted beasts submissive to al-Amīn,
He had never made them obedient even for the king.⁶⁹
While the king's mounted beasts stride on the ground,
Al-Amīn passes on water, riding a forest lion.⁷⁰

Many verses refer to the rain, as does that by Abū 'Abd Allah Ibrahim ibn Muḥammad Niftawayhi (858–935):

سَقَى اللَّهُ أَرْبَعَ الْكَرَخِ الْغَوَادِي بِدِيمَةٍ وَكَلَّ مَلَتْ دَائِمَ الْهَطْلِ مَسْبِلَ
مَنَازِلَ فِيهَا كُلِّ حَسَنٍ وَبِهَجْجَةٍ وَتِلْكَ لَهَا فَضْلٌ عَلَى كُلِّ مَنَزَلِ

Clouds water al-Karkh⁷¹ with perpetual rain,
Unceasingly falling, never stopping.
These abodes possess beauty and joy,
They have advantages over any other abode.

Because the climate in Baghdad is dry, poems blessing or cursing the city and its dwellers frequently open with such verses as "may God rain on Baghdad," "may the rain water the surface of your earth," "may He not rain on Baghdad" or "may clouds never rain upon you."

Poetry also chronicles spells when Baghdad was covered in snow and inspired poets. Ibn al-Mu'tazz (861–909) described a sudden flurry of snow: "The clouds' eyes were bathed in water, / all at once they poured down snow, spreading it like white roses." Unlike Ibn al-Mu'tazz, al-Sharīf al-Rāḍī (930–977) had a different impression and makes an analogy between the damage caused by snow and people's wickedness and evil-doing:

أَرَى بَغْدَادَ قَدْ أَخْتَى عَلَيْهَا وَصَبَحَهَا بَغَارَتُهُ الْجَلِيدُ
كَانَ ذَرَى مَعَالِمِهَا قِلَاصَ نَوَائِ كُشِطَتْ عَنْهَا الْجُلُودُ
كَأَنَّ بِهِ لُغَامَ الْعَيْسِ بَاتَتْ تُسَاقِطُهُ عَجَالُ الرِّجْعِ قُودُ
غَطَى قِمَمَ النَّجَادِ، فَكُلُّ وَادٍ عَلَى نَشْرَاتِهِ سَبَّ جَدِيدُ
كَمَا تَعْرِى بِهِ الْغَيْطَانُ مَحَلًّا وَتَغْبِرُ التَّهَائِيمُ وَالنَّجُودُ
فَمَهْمَا شِئَتْ تَنْظُرُ مِنْ رُبَاهَا إِلَى بَيْضِ عَوَاقِبُهُنَّ سُودُ
أَقُولُ لَهُ وَقَدْ أَمْسَى مَكْبًًّا عَلَى الْأَقْطَارِ يَضْعُفُ أَوْ يَزِيدُ
وَرَأَيْتُكَ فَالْخَوَاطِرَ بَارِدَاتِ عَلَى الْإِحْسَانِ وَالْأَيْدِي جُمُودِ
وَأَنَّكَ لَوْ تَرَوُ مَزِيدَ بَرْدٍ إِلَى بَرْدٍ لَا عَوْزَكَ الْمَزِيدُ

I see Baghdad, hit by snow,
Attacking early in the morning.
As if the tips of her landmarks were burdened she-camels
With their skins removed.
As if the snow were camels' saliva poured

⁶⁹ Literally, "the owner of the *mihrāb*" (=a throne room in a palace).

⁷⁰ Al-Nawrasī 2009, p. 45.

⁷¹ A quarter on the western shore of the Tigris which runs through Baghdad.

Like a torrent, shot from a water wheel.
 It covered uplands, every valley,
 Upon its elevated spots a new white veil.
 All valleys were smitten by snow,
 All planes and uplands became dust-colored.
 Wherever you look from the hills,
 You see only white; the consequence is only dark.
 I say to the snow, as it is hitting
 Lands, more strongly or less:
 Beware, human minds are ice for any
 Generosity, favors are chilly.
 If you want to pile up more miseries on the already
 Existing ones, you will never succeed.

Such analogy is not unusual: for example, a rare snow storm which hit my own city, Haifa, in February 1950 inspired different narratives by Jews and Palestinians in the political and cultural contexts of the city in the aftermath of the war of 1948.⁷²

Floods have been one of the most frequently chronicled natural catastrophes striking Baghdad as recorded by historians⁷³ and poets from the first centuries after its founding — generally because of the neglect of the irrigation system. For example, a flood in the year 883 ruined 7,000 houses in al-Karkh. In 1243, 1248, 1255 and 1256, a series of floods ruined some of the city quarters and in one case floods even entered the markets of eastern Baghdad. The city suffered from floods until the twentieth century as Ma'rūf al-Ruṣāfī (1875–1945) describes in one of his poems:

زحفت جيوش السيل حتى أصبحت
 فسقت بيوت الكرخ شرّ مُـقـي
 بالكرخ نازلة لها ضوضاء
 منها فقاعات أهلها الايبات

Flood's armies kept advancing,
 They fell upon al-Karkh with a mighty uproar.
 As they streamed onto houses with nauseous fluids,
 The houses spat out their residents.⁷⁴

Some decades later, Nāzik al-Malā'ika (1923–2007) wrote:

إنّه الآن إله
 أولم تغسل مبانينا عليه قدّميتها؟
 إنه يعلو ويُلقِي كنزَه بين يديها
 إنه يمنحنا الطينَ وموتاً لا نراه
 من لنا الآن سواه؟

Now the river has become a god.
 Haven't our buildings washed their feet in its water?
 It rises and pours its treasures in front of them,
 It grants us mud and invisible death.
 And now what is left for us?⁷⁵

As with any other urban center, Baghdad had bustling squares, and poets had both a negative and positive view of them. According to Muṭī' ibn Iyās (704–785):

⁷² See Rabinowitz and Mansour 2011, pp. 119–148.

⁷³ See Micheau 2008, pp. 240–241.

⁷⁴ Al-Ruṣāfī 1986, I, pp. 304–315. The quotation is from pp. 308–309.

⁷⁵ Al-Malā'ika 1981, pp. 531–534.

زاد هذا الزمان شراً وعسراً
بلدة تمطر التراب على الناس
عندنا إذ أحلنا بغداداً⁷⁶
كما تمطر السماء الرذاذاً

This time has increased evil and hardness —
It made us settle in Baghdad.
A town raining dust on people
As the sky drizzling.⁷⁷

And another anonymous poet:

هل الله من بغداد يا صاح مخرجي
وميدانها المذري علينا ترابها
فأصبح لا تبدو لعيني قصورها
إذا شجحت أبعاليها وحميرها

Tell me, my friend, will God let me get out of Baghdad,
Never again to set eyes on her palaces?
Never again to behold her square raising dust
Whenever voices of mules and donkeys are heard?⁷⁸

Unlike these poets, Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd Allāh al-Salāmī (947–1002), was inspired by the busy activities of the square:

وميدان تجول به خيول
ركبت به الى اللذات طرفاً
تقوم الدارعين ولا تقاؤ
له جسم وليس له فؤاد
ودجلة ناظر وهو السواد
جرى فظننت أن الأرض وجه

I see a busy square, galloping horses
Leading armored fighters, nobody leading them.
Once I was riding for pleasure on a noble horse,
With a body but no heart.
Galloping on, I imagined the ground was a lady's face;
The Tigris was the eye, the horse the eyeball.⁷⁹

In the early centuries after Baghdad's founding, scenes of the Tigris were frequently depicted. One favorite image was the moon upon the river. Ibn al-Tammār al-Wāsiṭī (tenth century) writes:

والبدر في الأفق الغربي تحسبه
قد مدّ جسراً، على الشطّين، من ذهب

Full moon sits in the western horizon as though
A golden bridge stretching between the two banks.⁸⁰

Or as ʿAlī ibn Muḥammad al-Tanūkhī (d. 953) writes:

أحسن بدجلة والدّجى متصوب
فكانها فيه بساط أزرق
والبدر في أفق السماء مغرب
وكأنها فيها طراز مذهب

What a beautiful river when night falls!
The moon stirs westwards toward the horizon;
The Tigris on the moon — a blue carpet,
The moon over the river — a golden veil.⁸¹

⁷⁶ Baghdād=Baghdād (see Yāqūt 1990, I, p. 541).

⁷⁷ Al-Ālūsī 1987, pp. 37–38; al-Nawrasī 2009, p. 93.

⁷⁸ Yāqūt 1990, I, p. 551; and al-Ālūsī 1987, p. 40.

⁷⁹ Al-Ālūsī 1987, p. 36.

⁸⁰ Yāqūt 1990, II, p. 504.

⁸¹ Yāqūt 1990, II, p. 504; and al-Ālūsī 1987, p. 36.

Sometimes the image of the moon shifts or blurs into other images; thus with the face of the young cupbearer at a wine party, in Maṣṣūr ibn Kayghlagh's (d. 960) verses:

من فوق دجلة قبل أن يتغيّبا	كم ليلة سامرت فيها بديرها
فحسبت بدر التم يحمل كوكبا	قام الغلام يديرها في كَفِّه
قد سلّ فوق الماء سيفاً مذهباً	والبدر يجنح للغروب كأنّه

Many a night did I spend with her full moon
 Hovering over the Tigris before it disappeared.
 The cupbearer passed around the wine,
 I imagined he was a full moon bearing a star.
 When the moon is about to set, it is
 A golden sword unsheathed over the water.⁸²

Another oft used image was a bridge over the Tigris; thus 'Alī ibn al-Faraj al-Shāfi'ī (tenth century?) writes:

بأثقان تأسيس وحسن ورونق	أيا حبذا جسر على متن دجلة
وسلوة من أضناه فرط التشوق	جمال وفخر للعراق ونزهة
كشطر عبير خطّ في وسط مفرق	تراه إذا ما جنته متأمّلاً
مثال فيول تحتها أرض زنبق	أو العاج فيه الآبتوس مرقّش

What a wonderful bridge stretching over the Tigris,
 Great in perfection, saturated with glamor and beauty.
 Glory and honor to Iraq, consolation
 And solace for gloomy lovers.
 Curiously, when approaching it and fixing your eyes on it,
 You see a perfumed line written on parchment.
 Or an ivory with ebony decorations —
 Elephants stepping on soil of mercury.⁸³

Almost one thousand years later, Ma'rūf al-Ruṣāfi wrote:

كرخ فمدّت لاعتناقه يدا	كأنما الرّصافة اشتاقت إلى ال
لكان يعنيه بما قد أنشد	فلو رأى ابن الجهم منه ما نرى

As if al-Ruṣāfa longed for al-Karkh,
 Extending a hand to touch it.
 If Ibn al-Jahm had seen what we see,
 He would have worried about what he sang⁸⁴

In these verses al-Ruṣāfi alludes to Ibn Jahm's famous poem whose opening verse is

عيون المها بين الرّصافة والجسر
 جلبن الهوى من حيث أدري ولا أدري

Does' eyes between Ruṣāfa and the bridge
 carried desire from places I know or know not.⁸⁵

⁸² Al-Ālūsī 1987, pp. 36–37.

⁸³ Al-Ālūsī 1987, pp. 26–27.

⁸⁴ <https://www.alghadeer.tv/notes/876/> (accessed on 11 May 2020).

⁸⁵ Ibn al-Jahm n.d., p. 143.

Reading the aforementioned verses about the Tigris and the bridges upon the river, William Wordsworth's lines "Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802" are recalled:

Earth has not anything to show more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty:
This City now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare.

Baghdad was the city of lovers, worldly and divine. As it was the greatest urban center of the Islamic empire, this is no wonder! Certain parts of the city provided opportunities for the intermingling of the sexes, and had much more to offer than other less prominent, smaller places in affording space for this. An agonized earthly anonymous lover wonders:

ببغدان ⁸⁶ لا تجلو وأنت صحيح	ألا يا غراب البين ما لك واقفا
نقضي لبات لنا ونسرح	فقال غراب البين وانهلّ دمعته
أراحك من سجن العذاب مريح	ألا إنما ببغدان سجن إقامة

Oh crow of separation,⁸⁷ why have you landed
In Baghdad to settle and never leave, are you so salubrious?
Tears fell from the crow's eyes, while replying:
We fulfill our desires and then leave.
Baghdad, you know, is a house of calamity,
May God save us from this very prison.⁸⁸

On the other hand, it is noteworthy that, contrary to traditional thought where mystical phenomena thrive in isolated places like deserts, mountains and the countryside, Baghdad was one of the greatest centers of Muslim mysticism, i.e. Sufism. Scholars even refer to a Baghdadi Ṣūfī tendency, which places heavy stress on *zuhd* (asceticism) as opposed to the Khurasanian ecstatic tendency. Al-Ḥusayn ibn Maṣṣūr al-Ḥallāj (858–922), whose mysticism was Khurasanian, spent his last period in Baghdad, where he was executed for having declared I am the Truth – "Truth" being a synonym for God in mystical parlance. His divine love poems were inspired by Baghdadi scenes:

لم يزدني الورد إلا عطشا	يا نسيم الروح قل لي للرضا
إن يشا يمشي على خدي مشا	لي حبيب حبه وسط الحشا
إن يشا شئت وإن شئت يشا	روحه روحي وروحي روحه

Oh breeze of the soul, please tell the gazelle:
Water only increases thirst.
I have a lover, his love is ever inside me,
If He wishes to walk, He can do it on my cheeks.
His soul is mine – mine His;
If He wishes, I too wish; if I wish He does too.⁸⁹

Another lover of the divine, Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn al-ʿArabī (1165–1240), wrote:

بشاطي نهر بغداد	ألا يا بانة الوادي
طروبت فوق ميا	شجانني فيك ميا

⁸⁶ Baghdān=Baghdād (see Yāqūt 1990, I, p. 541).

⁸⁷ The black crow, the "crow of separation" (*ghurāb al-bayn*), is a frequent motif in classical Arabic poetry.

⁸⁸ Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī 1971, p. 82; and Yāqūt 1990, I, p. 552.

⁸⁹ Al-Ḥallāj 1974, p. 41.

Oh you, the ben-tree of the valley⁹⁰
 On Baghdad river's bank.
 A melancholic dove on a swaying bough
 Filled me with grief.⁹¹

There were poets who compared Baghdad to other cities, as did Abū Ishāq al-Ṣābī (925–994):

وشربي من ماء كوز بثلج	لهف نفسي على المقام ببغداد
شر سقيا، من مائها الأترنجي	نحن بالبصرة الذميمة نسقي
خاثر مثل حقنة القولنج	أصفر منكر ثقیل غليظ
منه في كنف أرضنا نستنجي؟! ⁹²	كيف نرضى بمائها، وبخير

Alas, I deeply miss Baghdad,
 I miss her snowy water.
 Here, in ugly Basra, we are watered
 With only sickly, yellowish drinks.
 How could we be satisfied drinking it, while in our own land,
 We clean our asses with purer water?!⁹²

This particular "tradition of comparison" has lasted throughout Baghdad's history. While staying in Tabriz, Rāḍī al-Qazwīnī (1819–1868) wrote:

لقد طال النوى فمتى التلاقي	أحببتنا بزوراء العراق
وأين الترك من عرب العراق	وما تبريز للفصحاء مأوى

My beloved people in Zawrā' of Iraq,
 We have been apart for too long, when will we meet?
 Tabriz is not a refuge for eloquent Arabic speakers,
 Could you ever compare Turks to the Arabs of Iraq?

And Aḥmad Shawqī (1868–1932) urged his readers:

كلّ اليواقيت في بغداد والتؤم	دع عنك روما وأثينا وما حوتا
دار السلام لها القت يد السلام	دار الشرائع روما كلما ذكرت
ولا حكمتها قضاء عند مختصم	ما ضارعتها بيانا عند ملتأم

Forget Rome and Athens and all that they contain,
 All jewels are only in Baghdad.

At the mention of the House of Peace, the House of Law, Rome,
 Hastens to congratulate her.
 When they meet, Rome cannot equal her in eloquence,
 In a court of law, she cannot challenge her rival.⁹³

Apart from poetry, Baghdad was a center of other literary genres such as the *Maqāmāt* (literally "assemblies"), a rhymed prose with intervals of poetry in which rhetorical extravagance is noticeable. All great writers of that genre wrote assemblies set in Baghdad: one is Badi' al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī (969–1007), whose twelfth *maqāma* is called *al-Maqāma al-Baghdādiyya* (The Baghdadi Assembly),

⁹⁰ The ben-tree (*ban*), according to the poet, is the tree of light.

⁹¹ Ibn al-ʿArabī 1966, p. 197 (for another English translation, see Ibn al-ʿArabī 1978 [1911], p. 46).

⁹² Al-Ālūsī 1987, p. 30.

⁹³ Shawqī 1964, I, p. 205.

and whose thirtieth *maqāma* is called *al-Ruṣāfiyya*;⁹⁴ another is Abū Muḥammad al-Ḥarīrī (1054–1122), whose thirteenth *maqāma* is called *al-Maqāma al-Baghdādīyya* (The Baghdadi Assembly).⁹⁵ Unlike most writers of the *māqamāt*, Ibn al-Kazarūnī (d. 1298) wrote a Baghdadi *maqāma* which was not only set in Baghdad, but also included descriptions of the city before its destruction by the Mongols with many *ubi sunt* exclamations ("Where are those who were before us?") to indicate nostalgia for the bygone wondrous city of Baghdad.⁹⁶

Because of its reputation among the Arabs, Baghdad was frequently mentioned in poems of *mufākharah* (boasting) of other cities such as Qayrawān, as we can see in the *nūniyya* by Ibn Rashīq al-Qayrawānī (d. 1063 or 1071):

وَزَهَتْ عَلَى مِصْرَ وَحَقَّ لَهَا، كَمَا تَزْهَوُ بِهِمْ، وَعَدَّتْ عَلَى بَغْدَادِ

[Qayrawān] outshone Cairo, as it truly deserved, as
It boasted of [its scholars], it prevailed over Baghdad.⁹⁷

4 1258 and Beyond

And this leads us to the major event that poets chronicled in detail — the destruction of Baghdad in 1258. Hulagu (1217–1265), the Mongol conqueror and founder of the Il-Khanid dynasty of Persia, launched a wave of conquests throughout the Islamic world. After direct control of much of the Islamic world south of the Oxus had slipped from the hands of the Mongols, Hulagu was entrusted by the Möngke Khan (1209–1259) with the task of recovering and consolidating the Mongol conquests in western Asia. He overcame the resistance of the Ismaʿilis of northern Persia, routed a caliphal army in Iraq, captured Baghdad, and murdered the Caliph al-Mustaʿsim (reign 1242–1258). His army sacked the city and the killing, looting, and burning lasted for several days. The numbers killed during the fifty-day siege were estimated at from 800,000 to 1,300,000. According to some accounts, the Tigris and Euphrates ran red with the blood of scholars.⁹⁸ Most of the city's monuments were wrecked and burnt, and the famous libraries of Baghdad, including the House of Wisdom, were eradicated. Poems and chronicles describe how copies of the Qurʾānic "became cattle's fodder." Books were used to make a passage across the Tigris: "The water of the river became black because of the ink of the books." Books were also pillaged from Baghdad's famous libraries and transported to a new library that Hulagu erected near Lake Urmiya.⁹⁹

As a result of these events, Baghdad remained depopulated and in ruins for several centuries, and the event is conventionally regarded as the end of the Islamic Golden Age. The destruction of Baghdad inspired many poets in the centuries following and up to our own times — Hulagu being taken as the figure of the archetypal cruel dictator. The poetry of the times was a faithful mirror of those events. Taqī al-Dīn ibn Abī al-Yusr wrote:

يَا زَائِرِينَ إِلَى الزُّورَاءِ لَا تَفْـلُـدُوا فَمَا بِذَاكَ الْحُمَى وَالذَّارِ دِيَارِ
تَاجُ الْخِلَافَةِ وَالرَّبْعُ الَّذِي شَرَفَتْ بِهِ الْمَعَالِمُ قَدْ عَفَاهُ إِقْفَارِ

⁹⁴ Al-Hamadhānī 1973, pp. 61–64, 122–128; al-Hamadhānī 1983, pp. 55–59, 157–165; and al-Hamadhānī 2005, pp. 71–74, 181–189. *Baghdādih*, as previously mentioned, is another version of name of Baghdad. It appears as such in order to rhyme with *azādih* (dates) in the first line of the *maqāma*.

⁹⁵ Al-Ḥarīrī 1985, pp. 105–111; al-Ḥarīrī, 1969 [1867], pp. 176–181; and al-Ḥarīrī 1980, pp. 54–57.

⁹⁶ Hämeen-Anttila 2002, pp. 329–330; and al-Ālūsī 1987, pp. 150–153.

⁹⁷ On this poem, see Hermes 2017, pp. 270–297, where a translation of the entire poem is quoted (this specific verse is translated in two versions in pp. 282 and 295).

⁹⁸ Boyle 1968, pp. 348–349; Boswerth 1967, pp. 149–151; and Muir 1924, pp. 591–592.

⁹⁹ Hitti 1946, p. 378; and Sedillot 1877, p. 293.

Oh visitors to al-Zawra', please do not come here.
 In this refuge and abode, no one is here anymore.
 The crown of the Caliphate, the great monuments,
 All have been burnt to ashes.¹⁰⁰

Al-Majd al-Nashābī (d. 1259?) complains that

الكفر أضرم في الإسلام جذوته	وليس يرجى لنار الكفر إخماد
واضيعة الملك والدين الحنيف	وما تلقاه من حادثات الدهر بغداد
أين المنية مني كي تساورني	فللمنية إصدار وإيراد
من قبل واقعة شنعاء مظلمة	يشيب من هولها طفل وأكباد

Heresy fanned a fire, Islam was burnt,
 No hope of the fire being quenched.
 Oh grief, what a loss for the kingdom, for the true religion,
 What a loss — Baghdad struck with misery.
 Death is touching me,
 Death is doing what it wants.
 The threat of a dark cruel catastrophe
 Turns a child, even livers, gray-haired.¹⁰¹

Standing in Abadan, Sa'dī Shirāzī (1219–1294) looked into the water of the Tigris and, seeing "red blood flowing to the sea," he started weeping:

حبست بجفني المدامع لاتجري	فلما طغى الماء استطال على السكر
نسيم صبا بغداد بعد خرابها	تمنيت لو كانت تمر على قبري

I kept closed my eyelids to prevent tears flowing;
 When they overflowed, the intoxication could not stop them.
 If only after the destruction, Baghdad's eastern breeze
 Had blown over my grave!

Shirāzī describes how women's honor in captivity was violated by the Mongols and how

عدون حفايا سببا بعد سبب	رخائم لا يسطعن مشيا على الحبر
لعمرك لو عابنت ليلة نفرهم	كأن العذاري في الدجي شهب تسري
وإن صباح الأسر يوم قيامة	على أمم شعث تساق إلى الحشر
ومستصرخ يا للمرأة فانصروا	ومن يصرخ العصفور بين يدي صقر
يساقون سوق المعز في كبد الفلا	عزائر قوم لم يعودن بالزجر
جلبن سبايا سافرات وجوهها	كواعب لم يبرزن من خلل الصدر

They ran barefoot from desert to desert,
 They were so tender; thus they could not walk even on ink.
 By your life, had you seen them on the night of their flight;
 It was as if virgins were stars falling into darkness.
 The morning of the day on when they were chained, as on a Judgment Day
 Coming to disheveled nations led for resurrection.
 A cry is heard: Oh lost sense of honor, help!
 But who would help a bird in a falcon's grip?
 They were led like sheep in the desert's midst,
 Noble women unused to being chided.

¹⁰⁰ Al-Nawrasī 2009, p. 82.

¹⁰¹ Al-ʿAzzāwī 1996, I, p. 286.

They were dragged away, their breasts raised, their faces unveiled,
Driven out from their private abodes.¹⁰²

As with the civil war following the death of Hārūn al-Rashīd, the events of 1258 were described as *mundus inversus*, such as in a poem by Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd Allāh al-Kūfī:

يا نكبة ما نجا من صرفها أحد من الورى فاستوى المملوك والملك

Oh, what a catastrophe, no one saved himself from its
Calamities, kings and slaves are equal.¹⁰³

Shams al-Dīn Maḥmūd ibn Aḥmad al-Hāshimī al-Ḥanafī addresses the destroyed abode:

يا دار أين الساكنون وأين ذاك البهاء وذلك الإعظام
يا دار أين زمان ربك موتقاً وشعارك الإجلال والإكرام
يا دار مذ أفلت نجومك عنا والله من بعد الضياء ظلام

Oh house, where are your dwellers? Where
Reside the glory and honor?
Oh house, where are the days of your elegance and kindness,
Days when your slogans were greatness and respectfulness.
Oh house, by God, since your stars have set,
Darkness has covered us following light.¹⁰⁴

On the whole, all that was written about the destruction of Baghdad, both at the time and in the succeeding decades and centuries, reflects the paradigm that sees political changes as pivotal in their effects on religious and cultural life. Hulagu has been engraved on the Arabs' memory as the fundamental reason for the destruction of their great medieval civilization and the cause for the cultural stagnation of the Arab world until the renaissance (*nahḍa*) in the nineteenth century. Arabs place emphasis, prompted by European orientalist, on the descriptions of the destructions of cultural institutions and libraries, the burning of books by the Mongol army, their throwing of books into the Tigris and using them as a bridge to cross the river, and the killing of many of the scholars and men of letters in Baghdad.¹⁰⁵ We find this not only in modern historical books, but also in literary histories and even in poetry and prose. Not a few modern Arab officials have used the Hulagu myth for their own aims, as did, for example, the late Egyptian president Jamāl ʿAbd al-Nāṣir (1918–1970). A well-known Swiss writer on Middle Eastern affairs even quotes "a high Syrian government official" as saying, "in deadly earnest": "If the Mongols had not burnt the libraries of Baghdad in the thirteenth century, we Arabs would have had so much science, that we would long since have invented the atomic bomb. The plundering of Baghdad put us back centuries."¹⁰⁶

Bernard Lewis (1916–2018) explains that this is an extreme, even a grotesque formulation, but the thesis which it embodies was developed by European scholars, who saw in the Mongol invasions "the final catastrophe which overwhelmed and ended the great Muslim civilization of the middle Ages." This judgment of the Mongols "was gratefully, if sometimes surreptitiously, borrowed by romantic and apologetic historians in Middle Eastern countries as an explanation both of the ending of their golden age, and of their recent backwardness."¹⁰⁷ Yet scholars now argue that this thesis is definitely

¹⁰² Snir 2013, pp. 156–158.

¹⁰³ Al-ʿAzzāwī 1996, I, p. 287; and al-Nawrasī 2009, p. 82.

¹⁰⁴ See al-Kutubī 1951, I, pp. 580–581.

¹⁰⁵ See, for example D'Ohsson 1834–1835, I, p. 387 as quoted by Browne 1951, II, p. 427; Nicholson 1956, p. 129; and Goldziher 1966, p. 141. Cf. Browne 1951, II, p. 463.

¹⁰⁶ Hottinger 1957 (as quoted by Lewis 1973, p. 179).

¹⁰⁷ Lewis 1973, p. 179.

unjustified, as the signs of the stagnation had appeared long before Hulagu appeared in Baghdad. The successive "blows by which the Mongols hewed their way across western Asia, culminating in the sacking of Baghdad and the tragic extinction of the independent Caliphate in 1258," as H. A. R. Gibb writes, "scarcely did more than give finality to a situation that had long been developing."¹⁰⁸ Even some modern Arab intellectuals and historians feel that the descriptions of the sacking of Baghdad as regards the cultural losses were much exaggerated. The Syrian intellectual Constantin Zurayk (Zureiq) (1909–2000) comments that "some of us still believe that the attacks of the Turks and the Mongols are what destroyed the Abbasid Caliphate and Arab power in general. But here also the fact is that the Arabs had been defeated internally before the Mongols defeated them and that, had those attacks been launched against them when they were in the period of growth and enlightenment, the Mongols would not have overcome them. On the contrary the attacks might have revitalized and re-energized them."¹⁰⁹

At any event, since the destruction of Baghdad, Hulagu and the year of 1258 have become a metaphor for the decline of Arab-Muslim civilization and even modern Arab poets have used his figure in order to allude to other catastrophes which have struck the Arab world. On one occasion the figure of Hulagu is described in Arabic poetry positively, and that was to serve a specific aim. While spending a sabbatical year in the United States, the Palestinian poet Mishl Haddād (1919–1996) missed his homeland and his town Nazareth. In his exile, he was surrounded by books he perceived to be in opposition to the natural order of things. After returning to his natural environment in his homeland, he wrote the poem "The Books" using the stories about Hulagu's burning of the books in Baghdad's libraries. The books are used here as metonym for the disasters that sciences and rational thinking have brought to mankind:

يأتي هولاء ويحرق الكتب
 قبل أن تكَلَّ العيون
 وتختلط الأفكار
 قبل أن تعلمنا لغاتها المزدحمة
 الاطمئنان
 قبلها يأتي.

Hulagu will come and burn the books,
 Before eyes grow feeble,
 Before ideas are muddled,
 Before their crowded languages teach us
 Tranquility,
 Before that,
 He will come.¹¹⁰

It seems that Haddad was inspired by William Wordsworth's romantic dictum:

Up! Up! my Friend, and quit your books;
 Or surely you'll grow double:
 Up! Up! my Friend, and clear your looks;
 Why all this toil and trouble?

Hulagu's destruction is described in terms of the demonic, his forces as "barbaric," similar to those forces that brought about the destruction of the Roman Empire, i.e. the Hulagu story has been united with the myth of the "anti-civilization barbarians." In all modern poems written about the destruction

¹⁰⁸ Gibb 1962, p. 141. Cf. Lewis 1973, pp. 179–198; Lewis 1968, p. 12; Wiet 1966, p. 243; and Smith 1963, p. 40.

¹⁰⁹ Zurayk 1956, p. 48. Cf. von Grunebaum 1962, p. 255; and Lewis 1973, p. 182.

¹¹⁰ Haddād 1985, p. 9.

of Baghdad by the Mongols there are inter-textual dialogs with modern non-Arabic literary works which refer to the myth of the barbarians, the most famous of which are "Waiting for the Barbarians" (1904) by the Greek poet Constantine P. Cavafy (1863–1933) and the novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1983) by J. M. Coetzee (b. 1940).¹¹¹ The Egyptian poet Ṣalāḥ 'Abd al-Ṣabūr (1931–1981), concluded his poem "The Tatars Have Attacked"¹¹² with the following:

بالحقد أقسمنا سنهتف في الضحى بدم التّار
أمّاه! قولي للصّغار
أيا صغار...
سنجوس بين بيوتنا الدّكّاء إن طلع التّهار
ونشيد ما هدم التّار...

We swear in hatred that tomorrow we will rejoice in the blood of the Tatars
O Mother, please tell the children:
Dear children...
We will walk amongst our grey houses, when day rises
And build again what the Tatars destroyed...

Sarkūn (Sargon) Būluṣ (1944–2007) used the metaphor of Hulagu in two poems, the first of which is "Hulagu Praises Himself":

أنا هولأكو
بحر من الأعشاب
تقطعه الخيول / بصمت
سيف يكره الانتظار في غمده
تحت أسوار تحلم بالغبان
أسوار، أسوار يراني اللّاجئون
في أحلامهم بين الخرائب
ويشحد الأسرى قشّة صغيرة من حصاني.

I am Hulagu!
A sea of grass
Crossed by horses / in silence.
A sword hates having to wait in its sheath.
Beneath walls that dream of crows
Walls, walls, the refugees see me
In their dreams amid the ruins
And prisoners sharpen a small straw from my horse.¹¹³

The second, "Hulagu (New Series)," conducts a dialog with the former:

والحتف يتكلّم باسمي
فأنا هولأكو:
سيف في غمده لا يستريح.
ظله أينما ارتمي

¹¹¹ On this myth and the intertextual dialog of these two literary works with a poem by the Palestinian Mahmud Darwish (1941–2008) dealing with the same myth, see Snir 2008, pp. 123–166.

¹¹² 'Abd al-Ṣabūr 1972, pp. 14–17.

¹¹³ Būluṣ 1985, p. 62; Būluṣ 1997, p. 94; and Būluṣ 2003, p. 80.

يستنسل غيمة من العقبان الجائعة
تطفو فوق البيوت

حيث يراني
اللاجئون في
كواييسهم بين الخرائب

ويشحد الأسرى
حفنة قش من حصاني

And death speaks in my name
I am Hulagu:

A sword in its sheath, never resting.

Its shadow, wherever it throws itself
Begets a cloud of hungry eagles
Hovering over the houses.

Where the refugees
See me in their
Nightmares between the ruins.

And the prisoners sharpen
A handful of straw from my horse.¹¹⁴

It is interesting to see how Hulagu's destruction of Baghdad appears also in comics for children such as in the comic book series *al-Tis'a wa-l-Tis'ūn* or *al-99* (The Ninety-Nine or The 99), created by Nāyif al-Muṭawwa' (b. 1971), where the first episode begins in 1258, with the siege of Baghdad, but unlike the usual narrative where the Mongols invaded and destroyed the Grand Library, in this episode its countless precious books are saved from being dumped in the River Tigris.¹¹⁵

In the next centuries after the city fell to the Mongols, Baghdad was pushed into the margins of the Arab and Islamic world. The Mamluk capital Cairo replaced her as the capital of the Muslim world, and for centuries the name of Baghdad was lost in Europe or confused with Babylon. After the invasion of Tamerlain (1401), al-Maqrīzī wrote in 1437 that "Baghdad is but a heap of ruins; there is neither mosque, nor congregation, nor market place. Most of its waterways are dry, and we can hardly call it a town."¹¹⁶ In 1534, Baghdad was captured by the Ottoman Turks and under their rule Baghdad fell into a period of further decline. European travelers visiting the city during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries reported that Baghdad was a center of commerce with a cosmopolitan and international atmosphere where three main languages (Arabic, Persian, and Turkish) were spoken — at the same time, mentioning neglected quarters where many of the houses were in ruins. Sir Thomas Roe, the British ambassador at Constantinople from 1621 to 1628 confused Baghdad with Babylon. The French traveler Tavernier, describing his journey down the Tigris in 1651, related that he arrived at "Baghdad, qu'on appelle d'ordinaire Babylon."¹¹⁷ Only after the French orientalist Antoine Galland (1646–1715) translated the *Arabian Nights* into French, did Europeans again take an interest in Baghdad. In 1774 we find a report that "this is the grand mart for the produce of India and Persia, Con-

¹¹⁴ Bülüş 2008, pp. 119–120.

¹¹⁵ Akbar 2015.

¹¹⁶ Raymond 2002, p. 18.

¹¹⁷ Levy 1977 [1929], p. 9; and Le Strange 1900, p. 348.

stantinople, Aleppo and Damascus; in short it is the grand oriental depository." However, in the overall picture, Baghdad was in constant decline; in one report, its population was at a low of 15,000. Only think that during the tenth century its population was around a million and a half! 'Abd al-Ghani al-Jamīl (1780–1863) expressed that comparison in his verse:

لهفي على بغداد من بلـدة	قد عشعش العزّ بها ثم طار
كانت عروساً مثل شمس الضّحي	لمستعير حليها لا يعـار
كانت لآساد الوغى منـزلاً	والخائف الجاني بها يستجار
واليوم لا مأوى لذي فاقـة	فيها ولا في أهلها مستجار

My condolences for Baghdad, what a town!

Once glory nested here; now, it has flown away.

She was a bride like the morning's sun,

Her jewels were not to be lent.

An abode for warrior lions,

A sanctuary for frightened fugitives.

Alas, no refuge now for the needy,

Her people offer no shelter.¹¹⁸

In 1816, Dawūd Pasha arrived on the scene and brought a degree of prosperity. He maintained control over the tribes and restored order and security. He took care of the irrigation system, established factories, encouraged local industry, built bridges and mosques, founded three *madrasas*, and organized an army of about 20,000 and had a French officer to train it. However, he imposed heavy taxes, and, after his fall along with floods and plagues, Baghdad still suffered from marginality. From 1831 to the end of the Ottoman period, Baghdad was directly under Constantinople and some governors tried to introduce reforms.¹¹⁹

Under Midhat Pasha (1869–1872), the leading advocate of Ottoman *tanzimat* reforms, a modern *wilayet* system was introduced, each divided into seven *sanjaks* headed by *mutasarrifs*, Baghdad being one of them. In 1869, under his influence, the first publishing house, the Wilayet Printing Press, was established in Baghdad. The same year, he founded *al-Zawra'*, the first newspaper to appear in Iraq as the official organ of the provincial government; it was a weekly that lasted until March 1917. In 1870, he founded a tramway linking Baghdad with Kazimayn.¹²⁰ With the exception of a few French Missionary schools, there had been no modern schools in Baghdad, but between 1869–1871, Midhat Pasha established modern schools, a technical school, junior (*Rushdī*) and secondary (*I'dādī*) military schools, and junior and secondary civil (*Mulkī*) schools.

Minorities in Baghdad enjoyed a rare tolerance for the times.¹²¹ In 1846, Rabbi Israel-Joseph Benjamin II said that "nowhere else as in Baghdad have I found my coreligionists so completely free of that black anxiety, of that somber and taciturn mood that is the fruit of intolerance and persecution."¹²² The Christian and Jewish communities became the pioneers in modern education in Baghdad. In 1864, the Alliance Israelite Universelle (AIU),¹²³ a Jewish School in Baghdad was founded; it offered a predominantly secular education and had a Western cultural orientation. It was to play a major role in the modernization of the local educational system. Visiting Baghdad in 1878, Grattan Geary, editor

¹¹⁸ See <http://alshajara.org/poemPage.do;jsessionid=44E5C8C07FBC108E46C7C7016A441F73?poemId=611159> (accessed on 7 January 2021).

¹¹⁹ Duri 2012.

¹²⁰ Unlike with most historians, there are Iraqi scholars who argue that Midhat Pasha's projects in Iraq did not leave positive outcome; see, for example, al-Wardī 1971, II, pp. 235–265.

¹²¹ Batatu 1978, p. 257 and the references in note 184.

¹²² Benjamin II 1846–1851, p. 84.

¹²³ On the role AIU played in the field of Jewish education in the Middle East, see Cohen 1973, pp. 105–156.

of the *Times of India*, wrote that instruction in the AIU School was of the best modern kind: "Arabic is the mother tongue of the Baghdad Jews," but many of them "spoke and read English with wonderful fluency," and, also, "they speak French with singular purity of accent and expression."¹²⁴

This was also the time when Baghdad started to regain its position as one of the great urban centers in the Middle East. The *Gazetteer of Baghdad* (compiled in 1889), mentioned in its chapter on the ethnography of the city that "the present population is now estimated at about 116,000 souls, or 26,000 families divided thus: — Turks, or of Turkish descent, 30,000 souls; Persians 1,600; Jews 40,000; Christians 5,000; Kurds 4,000; Arabs 25,000; Nomad Arabs 10,000."¹²⁵ The population of the city was gradually increasing and, in 1904, the population was estimated at about 140,000. In 1914 Baghdad was, numerically, a greater Jewish than Muslim city with its law-abiding, Arabic-speaking Jewish community.¹²⁶ According to the last official yearbook of the Baghdad *wilayet* (1917), the population figures for the city were as follows: Arabs, Turks and other Muslims except Persians and Kurds: 101,400; Persians 800; Kurds 8,000; Jews 80,000; Christians 12,000.¹²⁷ By 1918, the population was estimated as 200,000.

Baghdad remained under Ottoman rule until 1917, when it was taken by the British during World War I. The aim of Fayṣal, who became King of Iraq on 23 August 1921, was to create "an independent, strong Arab state, which will be a cornerstone for Arab unity."¹²⁸ Thus, the Iraqi constitution of March 21st, 1925 stated that "there is no difference between the Iraqi people in rights before the law, even if they belong to different nationalities, religions and languages."¹²⁹ Expressions overtly inclusive of all citizens are not surprising since Arab nationalists from their earliest phases had considered non-Muslims living among the Arabs as part of the Arab "race." Travelers were impressed with the great admixture of ethnicities, the diversity of speech, the rare freedom enjoyed by non-Muslims and the great tolerance among the masses. The free intermingling of peoples left its imprint on the dialects of Baghdad.

The British mandate from the League of Nations operated behind the facade of a native government in which every Iraqi minister had a British advisor. This was despite the fact that the entire Iraqi educational system at the time was harnessed to the ideas of Arabness and Arabization.¹³⁰ Sāṭi' al-Ḥuṣrī (1880–1968), Director General of Education in Iraq (1923–1927) and Arab nationalism's first true ideologue, argued that "every person who is related to the Arab lands and speaks Arabic is an Arab."¹³¹ With the aim of making the mixed population of the new nation-state homogeneous and cohesive, he looked upon schools as the means by which to indoctrinate the young in the tenets of Pan-Arabism, seeking the "assimilation of diverse elements of the population into a homogenous whole tied by the bonds of specific language, history, and culture to a comprehensive but still exclusive ideology of Arabism."¹³² The eloquent secularist dictum *al-dīnu li-llāhi wa-l-waṭanu li-l-jamī'* (Religion is for God, the Fatherland is for Everyone) was in popular circulation — it was probably coined in the Coptic Congress in Asyut (1911), by Tawfiq Dūs (1882–1950), a Coptic politician and later the Egyptian Minister of Transportation,¹³³ Qur'ānic verses fostering religious tolerance and cultural pluralism,

¹²⁴ Geary 1878, I, pp. 132–133.

¹²⁵ *Gazetteer of Baghdad, Compiled (under the orders of the Quarter Master General in India) for Political and Military Reference, 1889, by J.A. Barlow, A. Howlett, S.H. Godfrey* (Reprint by the General Staff, India, 1915), p. 3.

¹²⁶ Longrigg and Stoakes 1958, p. 29.

¹²⁷ Quoted in the *Arab Bulletin*, no. 66, 21 October 1917.

¹²⁸ Al-ʿAfif 2008, p. 65.

¹²⁹ For the text of the constitution, see al-Ḥusnī 1974, I, pp. 319–334; the quotation is from p. 319.

¹³⁰ Tibawi 1972, pp. 94–95.

¹³¹ Al-Ḥuṣrī 1965 [1955], p. 12.

¹³² Cleveland 1971, p. 63.

¹³³ See Carter 1986, pp. 290, 304, n. 2. The first part of the slogan appeared (also as *al-dīn li-l-dayyān*) in several writings, such as an elegy by Aḥmad Shawqī (1868–1932) for the assassinated Egyptian Coptic prime minister Buṭrus Ghālī (1846–1910) (Shawqī 1964, III, pp. 144–145) and an elegy for the leader of Egypt's nationalist Wafd Party

such as "there is no compulsion in religion"¹³⁴ and "You have your path and I have mine,"¹³⁵ were often quoted. The Iraqi writer 'Azīz al-Ḥājj (1926–2020), who worked in the education system, saw the composition of his own class (1944–1947) in the Department of English at the High School for Teachers in Baghdad (Dār al-Mu'allimīn al-Āliya), as a significant and symbolic representation of the harmony among the religious communities of Baghdad: out of eight students, four were Jewish, including one female student, two were Christian and two were Muslim. He wrote: "The coexistence and intermixing between the different communities and religious sects in Baghdad is exemplary."¹³⁶

As an offspring of a family who emigrated from Baghdad to Israel in the beginning of the 1950s, I will take as an example the Jewish residents of Baghdad, who played a major role in the life of the city during the first half of the twentieth century. The Civil Administrative of Mesopotamia, in its annual review for the year 1920, stated that the Jews were "a very important section of the community, outnumbering the Sunnis or Shias."¹³⁷ According to Elie Kedourie (1926–1992), "Baghdad at the time could be said to be as much a Jewish city as an Islamic one."¹³⁸ Jewish poets wrote about Baghdad from the 1920s onwards, even after the mass immigration of the Jews to Israel after its independence. The most famous of these Iraqi-Jewish poets was Anwar Sha'ul (1904–1984), who started to publish under the pseudonym of Ibn al-Samaw'al (the son of al-Samaw'al), referring to the pre-Islamic Jewish poet al-Samaw'al ibn 'Adiyā', proverbial in Arabic ancient heritage for his loyalty. According to the ancient sources, al-Samaw'al refused to hand over weapons that had been entrusted to him. As a consequence, he would witness the murder of his own son by the Bedouin chieftain who laid siege to his fortress al-Ablaq in Taymā', north of al-Madīna. He is commemorated in Arab history by the well-known saying "as faithful as al-Samaw'al." In one of his poems Sha'ul said:

سَأْظَلُّ ذِيَاكَ السَّمَوَّالَ فِي الْوَفَا أَسْعُدْتُ فِي بَغْدَادٍ أُمَّ لَمْ أَسْعُدْ

Faithful I will stay like al-Samaw'al
Whether happy in Baghdad or miserable.¹³⁹

And in another poem:

فَعَلَى الْفَرَاتِ طِفْلُوتِي قَدْ أَزْهَرَتْ وَبِدَجْلَةِ نَهْلِ الشَّيْبَابِ الرِّيقُ

My childhood blossomed by the waters of the Euphrates.
The days of my youth drank of the Tigris.¹⁴⁰

Sa'd Zaghāl (1859–1927), written in 1927 by Naṣr Lūzā al-Asyūṭī (1887–1965) (Kaylānī 1962, p. 167). It also appeared in the aforementioned manifesto of Arab nationalists (al-A'ẓamī 1932, pp. 113–114. Cf. Haim 1962, p. 86. See also al-Bishrī 1988, p. 62; Qilāda 1993, p. 239; and Bāsīlī 1999, pp. 165, 277, 281–284). The same slogan was also used by Egyptian-Jewish Communists such as Yūsuf Darwish (1910–2006) (*Al-Ahram Weekly*, 2–8 December 2004) and Marcel (Marsīl) Israel (Ceresi, Shīrizī) (1913–2002), the leader of *Tahrir al-Sh'ab* (The People's Liberation) (Shīrizī 2002, pp. 46–47). Also the Jewish-Egyptian journalist Albert Mizrāḥī (1916–1988) used it in his newspaper *al-Tas'ira* (The Price List) when Shaykh Aḥmad Ṭāhir insulted the Jews of Egypt on state radio (*al-Tas'ira*, 22 March 1954, p. 4; quoted in Beinīn 1998, pp. 78–79). The same slogan has even been used in recent years, e.g. a Usāma al-Bāz, the presidential political adviser, as quoted by the Egyptian State Information Service in 31 January 2000; *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 9–15 January 2003. In April 2004, President Mubārak himself used this slogan in a celebration on the occasion of the birth of the Prophet (*al-Ahrām*, 21 April 2005, 1). See also the slogan *al-waṭaniyya dīnunā wa-l-istiqlāl ḥayātunā* (patriotism is our faith and independence is our life) which is found in Coptic texts (Baḥr 1979, pp. 94–95, 100).

¹³⁴ *Al-Baqara* 256.

¹³⁵ *Al-Kāfirūn* 6.

¹³⁶ Al-Ḥājj 1999, pp. 125–131.

¹³⁷ Rejwan 1985, p. 210.

¹³⁸ Kedourie 1989, p. 21.

¹³⁹ Shā'ul 1983, p. 69.

¹⁴⁰ Shā'ul 1980, p. 336.

Another prominent Iraqi-Jewish poet, Mīr Baṣrī (1911–2006), feeling that, because of his Jewish faith, there were doubts regarding his faithfulness to his Iraqi homeland and the Arab nation, wrote:

يا رفاق العمر إن يدن حمامي
فادفنونني في حمى الأرض الرحبية
جنب آبائي الألى ناموا دهورا
في ثرى بغداد – ذي الأم الحبيبة

Oh friends of life, even as my death draws near,
Please bury me in the safety of the wide land.¹⁴¹
Near my ancestors who slept for ages
In Baghdad's soil – this is the beloved mother.

And Murād Mikhā'il (2006–1986), when he was only sixteen, wrote a poem entitled "Oh My Fatherland," which included the following verses:

روحي فداؤك يا وطن
فاسلم ولا تخشى الفتى
اليوم ربك لي سكن
وغدا ثراك يضمّني
يا وطني يا وطني

My soul is your ransom, Oh My Fatherland!
Be at peace, do not be afraid of any trials!
Today, your soil is my abode;
Tomorrow your soil will embrace my corpse.
Oh My Fatherland! Oh My Fatherland!¹⁴²

Likewise, another Jew, Ibrāhīm Obadyā (1924–2006), even when he suffered of the attitude of the Iraqi authorities never hesitated to declare:

أنا ابن بغداد حين تعرفني
أنا ابن بغداد حيث تلقاني

I am the son of Baghdad, whenever you meet me,
I am the son of Baghdad, wherever you see me.¹⁴³

Moreover, more than sixty years after their departure from Baghdad, this city is still alive in the minds and hearts of the Iraqi Jewish immigrants now in Israel. The poets among them write about Baghdad in both Arabic and Hebrew. When Iraqi missiles hit various parts of Israel in 1991, the Iraqi-born Israeli Hebrew poet Ronny Someck (b. 1951) wrote a poem entitled "Baghdad, February 1991":

ברחובות המופגזים האלה נדחפה עגלת התינוק שלי.
נערוה בבל צבטו בלחיי ונופפו כפות תמר
מעל פלומת שערי הבולגריי.
מה שנשאיר מאז השחיר מאוד,
כמו בגדד וכמו עגלת התינוק שפנינו מן המקלט
בימי ההמתנה שלפני מלחמה אחרת.
הו חידקל הו פרת, נחשי התפנוקים במפה הראשונה של חיי,
איך השלחם עור וחייתם לצפעים?

Along these bombed-out streets my baby carriage was pushed.
Babylonian girls pinched my cheeks and waved palm fronds
Over my fine blond hair.
What's left from then became very black.

¹⁴¹ Baṣrī 1991, p. 140.

¹⁴² The poem was published in the newspaper *Dijla*, 11 April 1922. Republished in Mikhā'il 1988, 181–182.

¹⁴³ Obadyā 2003, p. 75.

Like Baghdad and
 Like the baby carriage we moved from the shelter
 During the days of waiting for another war.
 Oh Tigris, Oh Euphrates — pet snakes in the first map of my life,
 How did you shed your skin and become vipers?

With the recognition of Iraq as an independent state, Baghdad had gradually regained some of its former prominence as a significant center of Arabic culture. This was a time when, on the political level, the relationship between the authorities in Baghdad and the West became a major issue, as also reflected in poetry. For example, in a celebration held in 1929 by the National Party on the occasion of a visit to Baghdad of the wealthy American businessman and the Arabist Charles Richard Crane (1858–1939), Ma'rūf al-Ruṣāfi recited a poem in which he says:

فانظر الشرق وعابن	جئت يا مستر كراين
أسر مديون لدائن	فهو للغرب أسير
ب لمغبون وغابن	إن هذا الشرق والغرب
-----	-----
هو في بغداد كائن	وإذا تسأل عما
ضرع غربي الملا بن	فهو حكم مشرق ال
معرب اللهجة راطن	عربي أعجمي
دن بالأمر مكامن	فيه للإيعاز من لن
ظاهر يتبع باطن	هو ذو وجهين وجه
نحن في المظاهر لكن	قد ملكنا كل شيء
لك تحريكاً لساكن	نحن في الباطن لا نم
غرب يا مستر كراين؟	أفهدا جائز في ال

You have come, Mister Crane,
 So please see the East and explore,
 It is a prisoner of the West,
 In a prison of a debtor to a creditor.
 East and West —
 Like a deceived and a deceiver.

 And if you ask about
 What happens in Baghdad,
 It is an Eastern udder,
 But the milk is Western
 Arab but dumb,
 Arabized language but gibberish.
 The advice coming from London,
 Full of secrets,
 There are two faces,
 One external, the other is internal.
 We are the owners, but this
 Is only the visible,
 In fact, we
 Own nothing.
 Is it possible in the West,
 O, Mister Crane?¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁴ Al-Ruṣāfi 1986, II, pp. 344–348.

All major modern Arabic poets referred to Baghdad in their poetry, and the emergence of modernist Arabic poetry, from the 1950s, accompanied the transformation of Baghdad as a physical and spatial entity into what al-Janābī considers in his afterword to be "an easy metaphor for revival and eclipse – for what disintegrates into a lulling daylight!"¹⁴⁵ This was also the time when different poetic forms dictated changes in the ways Baghdad was imagined and described. Until the mid-twentieth century, the basic poetic form of the poems written on Baghdad was the classical *qaṣīda*. This was the same poetic form that was developed in pre-Islamic Arabia and perpetuated throughout Arabic literary history. The *qaṣīda* is a structured ode maintaining a single end rhyme that runs through the entire piece; the same rhyme also occurs at the end of the first hemistich (half-line) of the first verse. The central poetic conception of the so-called neoclassical poets emerging from the late nineteenth century was basically the same: the *qaṣīda* is the sacred form for poetry, and the relationship between the poet and his readers was like that between an orator and his audience. It is when we come to the late 1940s and the rise of the aforementioned *al-shi'r al-ḥurr*, the Arabic development of "free verse," that we encounter significant deviation from classical metrics. As the new free verse succeeded in gaining some measure of canonical status, traditional poets and critics felt that this new poetry was in opposition to the accepted and ancient form of Arabic poetry they were used to. Based upon earlier experiments of Arab poets and influenced by English poetry, the essential concept of this poetry entails reliance on the free repetition of the basic unit of conventional prosody – the use of an irregular number of a single foot (*tafīla*), instead of a fixed number of feet. The poet varies the number of feet in a single line according to need. The new form was closely associated with the names of the two Baghdadi poets, Nāzik al-Malā'ika (1923–2007) and Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb (1926–1964). More recent developments in Arabic poetry, especially the type of prose poem known as *qaṣīdat al-nathr*, as well as its variant types and forms, have already gradually pushed free verse into the margins. The change in the poetry written about Baghdad since the 1960s demonstrates that modernity has taken hold and Arabic modernist poets are, to a certain extent, mainstream poets. The poets born of this decade, that is, those whose creativity became active in the sixties, are called the "generation of the sixties."¹⁴⁶ Instead of tribal membership, writes al-Janābī, "poets now felt that they belonged to a world-wide avant-garde. Baghdad figured as a metropolis, a state of mind, an explosive consonant." They no longer wrote "poetry about Baghdad; they wrote poetry of Baghdad. In the first instance, poets tinkled their bells in order that nostalgia be remembered, while in the second instance, poets nibbled the sun's black teat in order to set the limpid substance of the city ablaze and wave to the magnet of time!"¹⁴⁷

During the last three decades, Baghdad has suffered severe infrastructural damage, particularly following the First Gulf War, the Second Gulf War, the American-led occupation in 2003, and the sectarian violence and terrorist attacks. Nevertheless, the present population of Baghdad is now over seven million making it the second largest city in the Arab world after Cairo. Almost all poems written about Baghdad during the last decades are melancholic and reflect the political and moral collapse in the reality of existence in the city, though the ethos of the city as a metaphor for Arabism and Islam still clings, and poets combine the reality of immediate history with the city's ethos. There are also dialogs between modern and medieval poets. 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Bayyātī (1926–1999) referred to al-'Abbās ibn al-Aḥnaf's life and poetry:

أظلمت حانات بغداد
فلا جدوى
فعبّاس من الحب يموت

¹⁴⁵ Snir 2013, p. 310.

¹⁴⁶ See al-'Azzāwī 1997.

¹⁴⁷ Snir 2013, pp. 310–311.

Baghdad's taverns have darkened.

There is no use.

‘Abbās is dying of love.¹⁴⁸

Similarly, Sarkūn (Sargon) Būluş (1944–2007) revived the figure of Sa‘dī Shīrāzī in his poem “In the Garden of Sa‘dī Shīrāzī When He Was in Prison.” Buland al-Ḥaydarī (1926–1996), for example, who spent thirty years of his life in exile,¹⁴⁹ wrote about the dictatorship in Baghdad at the time of Saddām Ḥusayn. In his poem “al-Madīna al-latī Ahlakahā al-Ṣamt” (The City which the Silence Killed), he uses the myth of Troy:

طروادة ماتت من جرح فينا، من جرح فيها
من خرس أعمى شلّ لسان بنيتها
طروادة أهلكها الصمت
فليس لنا فيها، فليس لها فينا، إلّا الموت
وإلّا الجثة والمسمار.

Troy died because of a wound inside us, because of a wound inside her,

Because of a blind silence that tied her children's tongue,

Troy, the silence killed her,

We have nothing inside her, she has nothing inside us save death,

Nothing but the corpse and the nail.¹⁵⁰

In a later version of the poem, the poet substituted Troy with Baghdad throughout the poem.¹⁵¹ And Sarkūn (Sargon) Būluş (1944–2007) follows this with:

أيها الجلاد
عد إلى قريتك الصغيرة
لقد طردناك وألغينا هذه الوظيفة.

Oh Hangman,

Return to your small village.

We have expelled you today and cancelled your job.¹⁵²

In another poem, “I Have Come to You from There,” Būluş described a chilling encounter with one of the victims who re-visited him after death. One of the major contemporary Arabic poets whose poetry about Baghdad reflects the new poetic change in Arabic poetry and at the same time expresses the influence of that change on the new attitude toward Baghdad — is not Baghdadi. He is not even Iraqi; moreover, he visited Baghdad only once. This is the Syro-Lebanese poet Adūnīs (Adonis) (b. 1930), whose poetry has been accompanying the city of Baghdad throughout the last fifty years. In 1961, Adūnīs, who at the time thought of himself as the new prophet of the utopian Baghdad, published his poem “Elegy for al-Ḥallāj” in which he orchestrates a dialog with the poet-mystic al-Ḥusayn ibn Manṣūr al-Ḥallāj (who lived in Baghdad more than a thousand years before). The speaker in the poem addresses al-Ḥallāj, as a “star rising from Baghdad, /Loaded with poetry and birth.” Bagh-

148 <https://nesasysy.wordpress.com/2006/05/08/1140/5/>.

149 On his tombstone in London we find the following words:

إن متّ هنا في الغربة، في المنفى، إن متّ غداً، فسيحمل شاهد قبري: هذا وطني، هذا من أهلك يا وطني
If I die here in exile, if I die tomorrow, my tombstone will bear the following: This is my homeland, this is for you my homeland.” These words are the final line of the poem “They Were Four,” published before his death and dedicated to his Baghdadi friend the Jewish writer Nissim Rajwān (Rejwan) (1924–2017) (*Mashārif* [Haifa] 7 [1996], pp. 14–15).

150 Al-Ḥaydarī 1990, pp. 45–49.

151 Al-Ḥaydarī 1993, pp. 723–728.

152 Būluş 1997, p. 96; and Būluş 2003, p. 121.

dad, the place where al-Ḥallāj was executed in 922, symbolizes the glories of ancient Arab and Muslim civilization. Moreover, the star is rising from, and not over, Baghdad, i.e. there is an allusion to a possible universal message. The use of the active participle stresses the present relevance of the poem: the star *is rising now*, which is to say, the beginning of the 1960s. The very choice of the figure of al-Ḥallāj as the symbol of death and rebirth indicates the intention of the poet to stress the Arab and Islamic context of the poem as well as that of the entire collection in which it appears. Supposedly, according to its title, a lamentation for a personage who died more than a thousand years ago, "Elegy for al-Ḥallāj" is ironically transformed in the process of reading the poem into a vision of the Arab nation's rebirth. Since the star is rising now, from Baghdad, the death of al-Ḥallāj is the bridge which Arab-Islamic civilization crosses to reach a more perfect existence.

Soon hopes and expectations for Baghdad as a symbol of Arab rebirth had completely collapsed. Perhaps the most famous text with this message was written in 1969 but published only in May 2003 — the title being, "Please, look how the dictator's sword is sharpened, how necks are prepared to be cut."¹⁵³ It was published again in 2008 with the new title: "Poetry Presses Her Lips to Baghdad's Breast."¹⁵⁴ Adūnīs had written these verses after visiting Baghdad in 1969, his only visit to the city. He went as a member of the Lebanese Association of Writers' delegation, and stayed in Baghdad for several days, where he wrote these verses describing Baghdad's cultural and political atmosphere of fear and death. At the beginning of the text this atmosphere is presented plainly:

تحدّث همساً. كلّ نجم هنا يخطط لقتل جاره.
همساً؟ تعني كما لو أنني اتحدّث مع الموت؟

Whisper, please! Every star here plans to kill his neighbor
Whisper? You mean as if I'm talking with death?

Adūnīs walks in the streets of Baghdad of the *Arabian Nights* but sees men as mere "shapes without faces. Shapes like holes in the page of space" — men walking in the streets "as if digging them. It seems to me their steps have the forms of graves."

These lines and others may call to mind sections from *Istanbul* by the Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk (b. 1952) where he describes the empty city as mirroring the empty souls, the "living dead," the corpse "that still breathes," and the feeling that expresses "the sadness that a century of defeat and poverty would bring to the people of Istanbul."¹⁵⁵ Like Pamuk, Adūnīs describes the "sewage systems, in open air, facing stores. Bad smells plunder the empty space... embracing even the birds that revolt against him." But the resemblance is only superficial because Pamuk's sadness is in essence melancholic and the romantic sadness of a lover, "The Melancholy of Autumn,"¹⁵⁶ while Adūnīs' feeling is the sadness of a terrorized people.

Adūnīs describes the fear among people when informants could be anyone — a neighbor, a friend, a relative or family member or just a passerby. It is the atmosphere of an "upside-down society. The poet does not see any difference between the Baghdad of 1258, the year Hulagu destroyed Baghdad, and Baghdad of 1969, the year of his own visit:

- الأولى فتكّ بها التّار،
والثانية يفتكّ بها أبنائها.

The first, the Mongols destroyed,
And the second, her children do the same.

¹⁵³ See *al-Ḥayāt*, 10 May 2003, p. 12.

¹⁵⁴ Adūnīs 2008, pp. 140–156; and Adūnīs 2014, pp. 136–152.

¹⁵⁵ Pamuk 2006, pp. 253, 317.

¹⁵⁶ The title of a chapter in Pamuk's *The Museum of Innocence* (Pamuk 2009, pp. 197–204).

The speaker addresses Gilgamesh and accuses him of deluding the people that life in Baghdad has a secret to be revealed, while in reality "life here is nothing but continuous death. Please, look how the dictator's sword is sharpened, how necks are prepared to be cut." Against the background of the sayings, some of which are quoted above, that Baghdad is paradise, Adūnīs does not have any hesitation:

- بغداد جنة!
- الإنسان هو الجنة، لا المكان.

- Baghdad is a paradise!
- Man is a paradise, not the place.

He concludes the text with the following:

وكنْتُ، حتَّى تلك اللحظة من السنة 1969، أتعُبُ كثيرًا في التمييز بين البشر والشياطين والآلهة عندما أنظر إلى "أهل السلطة في العراق". ربَّما لهذا لم أشعر في بغداد إلا بالبرد، حتَّى وأنا في حضن الشَّمْس!
لكن، لكن، ضَع، أيُّها الشَّعر، شفتيك على ثدي بغداد.

Until that moment in 1969, I had tried hard to distinguish between human beings, demons, and gods, while watching 'the men of power in Iraq.' Perhaps, that is why in Baghdad, even when I was in the arms of the sun, I didn't feel anything other than absolute cold.

But, but,

Oh poetry, please press your lips to Baghdad's breast!

Some days before the American invasion of Baghdad in April 2003, Adūnīs wrote "Salute to Baghdad," which he opens with the following:

ضَع قهوتك جانبا واشرب شيئا آخر،
مُصغياً إلى ما يقوله الغزاة:
بتوفيق من السماء
ندير حرباً وقائية
حاملين ماء الحياة
من ضفاف الهدسون والتايمز
لكي تتدفق في دجلة والفرات.

Put your coffee aside and drink something else.

Listening to what the invaders are declaring:

With the help of God,

We are conducting a preventive war,

Transporting the water of life

From the banks of the Hudson and Thames

To flow in the Tigris and Euphrates.

And the poem is concluded thus:

وطنٌ يُوشكُ أن ينسي اسمه.
ولماذا،
علّمتني وردة جورية كيف أنام
بين أحضان الشّام؟
أكل القاتل خبز الأغنية،
لا تسَل، يا أيُّها الشّاعر، لن يُوقظ هذي الأرض
غير المعصية.

A homeland almost forgets its name.
 And why
 A red flower teaches me how to sleep
 In the laps of Damascus?
 The fighter eats the bread of the song,
 Don't ask, Oh poet, for nothing but disobedience
 Will awake this land.

In another poem, "Time Crushes into Baghdad's Body" written in 2005, Adūnīs contemplates the history of Baghdad against the background of her tragic present: "But, behold the river of history, how it flows into the language plain, emerging from / Baghdad's wounds. A history which flies in my imagination as though it were a black crocodile. / Except for the stars, does anyone know where Baghdad is and where the Arabs are?"¹⁵⁷ In his poem "Baghdad, Feel No Pain," the Egyptian poet Fārūq Juwayda (b. 1946) illustrates the tragedy through the eyes of Baghdad's children:

أطفال بغداد الحزينة يسألون
 عن أيّ ذنب يقتلون! يترنحون على شظايا الجوع
 يقتسمون خبز الموت ثم يودّعون

Children in grieved Baghdad wonder
 For what crime they are being killed, staggering on the splinters of hunger,
 They share death's bread, then they bid farewell.¹⁵⁸

Juwayda's poem was set to music and performed by the Iraqi singer Kāzīm al-Sāhīr (b. 1957) and became very popular. Bushrā al-Bustānī (b. 1949), in her "A Sorrowful Melody," describes the horrors of the occupation:

دبابات الحقد تدور
 منكفئاً مثل حصان مهجور
 جرحي
 تلفحه الشمس العربية
 ينخره الدود
 بيكاسو يرسم جرنیکا أخرى
 يرسم بغداد طريحة أقدام الغوغاء

The tanks of malice wander.
 My wound
 Is turned away like an abandoned horse
 Scorched by the Arabian sun,
 Chewed by worms
 Picasso paints another Guernica,
 Painting Baghdad under the feet of boors.¹⁵⁹

And there is the nostalgic Baghdad following the destruction: Sarkūn (Sargon) Būluṣ (1944–2007) wrote "An Elegy for al-Sindibād Cinema,"¹⁶⁰ and Sinān Anṭūn (Antoon) (b. 1967) wrote "A Letter to al-Mutanabbī (Street)" — this street was the cultural heart of the city. On March 5, 2007, after a suicide bombing had destroyed many bookshops and killed twenty-six people, he wrote:

¹⁵⁷ Snir 2013, pp. 242–243.

¹⁵⁸ <http://m.iraq-amsi.net/view.php?id=12025>

¹⁵⁹ <https://pulpit.alwatanvoice.com/content/print/96645.html>

¹⁶⁰ <https://soundcloud.com/iahmedmansour/sargon-boulus-3>

إنّه فصل آخر
ملحمة الحبر والدم

This is another chapter
In the saga of blood and ink.¹⁶¹

5 Conclusion

A study of poems and epigrams included in the *Palatine Anthology* about Greek cities, reaches the conclusion that the vast majority of them "are laments for a fallen city, destroyed by war, by nature, or the ravages of times. Others celebrate the mythology of a site."¹⁶² Retrospectively, readers of the present article might well arrive at similar conclusions in regard to Baghdad! The utopian city of Hārūn al-Rashīd, the realm of the *One Thousand and One Nights* was, in the end, a fallen city destroyed by wars and Time's calamities. As in the case of Greek cities, immediately after its founding, many poems celebrated the mythical city and its ethos as an Arab and Islamic city. Even before the ravages of the second half of the twentieth century, events had made reality more prominent than the romance, and people "brought reports eloquent of disillusionment," as Reuben Levy testified to in his *A Baghdad Chronicle* (1929).¹⁶³

Thus, as seen above, the history of Baghdad may be divided roughly into three periods: from its founding to its destruction by the Mongols (762–1258) — the city as the prestigious capital of the Islamic empire; from then to establishment of the modern Iraq (1258–1921) — and continuous decline and decay; and, finally the present period with its glimpses of flowering and thriving (such as those seen during the 1920s–1930s and 1960s), which have been buried under the ruins of decades of dictatorship and internal and external devastation. In the beginning of his book, *Baghdad: The City of Peace*, Richard Coke writes that the story of Baghdad is largely the story of continuous war and "where there is not war, there is pestilence, famine and civil disturbance. Such is the paradox which cynical history has written across the high aims implied in the name bestowed upon the city by her founder."¹⁶⁴ More than eighty-five years later, one cannot maintain that Coke was wrong in his historical judgment of Baghdad. In other words, the glorious Baghdad is only an image and memory of the remote past; Baghdad of the present evokes only sadness, distress, and nostalgia for bygone days.

The writer and journalist Ḥusayn al-Mūzānī (Hussain al-Mozany) (1954–2016), who lived in Berlin, wrote about the contrast between the Baghdad he left and the one he found after thirty years of absence, which "has become a non place, represented by concrete walls." Al-Rashīd street, "that some used to call Iraq's aorta, has committed suicide, and now all that is left is its long corpse stretched out along the scattered, blackened shops that mourn a street which bid its people farewell and then killed itself."¹⁶⁵ The poem "In Baghdad, Where My Past Generation Would Be" by 'Abd al-Qādir al-Janābī (b. 1944) encapsulates all that lovers of Baghdad must feel nowadays:

أين أنت يا سنواتي الأولى
سنوات الشّارع والمقهى
سنوات النّهار والمشي الطّويل
في مجرى التّمردات دون وخر ضمير
أين أنت يا سنواتي الأولى

¹⁶¹ Anṭūn 2010, pp. 49–51.

¹⁶² Hartigan 1979, p. 102. *Palatine Anthology* is a collection of Greek poems and epigrams from 300 B.C. until 600 A.D.

¹⁶³ Levy 1977 [1929], p. 1.

¹⁶⁴ Coke 1935 [1927], p. 15.

¹⁶⁵ Al-Mozany 2010, pp. 6–19; and Duclos 2012, pp. 399–400.

يا مدينتي المحمومة في فيضانات الذكرى
أين أنت في هذا الجدول المرسوم

Where are you, my first years
The years of streets and cafés
The years of days and long walks
In the course of the revolts with no pricking of conscience
Where are you, my first years
Oh my city, feverish with floods of memory
Where are you in that drawn stream¹⁶⁶

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¹⁶⁶ See al-Janābī 2012, p. 68.

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