

A TALE OF TWO CITIES AND **THE ABBASID CALIPHATE 132 – 656/750 – 1258**

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The murder of Ali B. Abi Talib (661 AD) the fourth of the Patriarchal Caliphs left Muawiya, his arch enemy, with no serious rival to the position of Caliph albeit there were other contenders. Equally unrivalled for the position of Chaliphal Capital was Damascus, the ancient capital of Syria, from which Muawiya ruled as governor since the days of the second Caliph Umar I (634 – 644 AD) and from which he challenge Ali B. Abi Talib to a stalemate situatiuon till the assassination of Ali did them part, the latter to heavens, the former to the positiobn of Caliph for a good many years (662 – 680 AD).

Mauwiya in the circumstances had no problem of a choice of a capital let alone the need to found one. From all aspects, political, military, strategic, economic, cultural etc. Syria was second to none as ruling province. Damascus had no rival as Caliphal Capital. The fate of the Umayyads, Sufyanids and Marwanids, was tied to the fate of both city and province. The fall of these to the rebel forces of what came to be known as the Abbasid Revolution (750 Ad) meant the fall of the Umayyads except for what survived far away in Muslim Spain.⁽¹⁾

Not so was the case with the Abbasids (750 – 1258 AD) in regard to the choise of a capital city if not of a ruling province. They did succeed in imposing themselves as the ultimate beneficiaries from the movement and the military engagements that brought about the downfall of the Umayyads. But strictly speaking neither the movement (Dawa)⁽²⁾ nor the wars were carried in their name. For most people the rebellion was supported more for its cause than for its leadership. Only a chosen few of the activists and the commanders knew that the undeclared leaders of the movement, carried out in the name of the “Accepted One from the House of the Prophet” – Al-Rida Min Ahl Al-Bayt– were Abbasid.⁽³⁾ In fact all evidence show that the majority of those involed in the clandestine movement and its wars expected an Alid successor as the movement was of Shiite origins. The Abbasids had control of the movement and masterminded the revolution. But they had no popular

base or province or city like the Umayyads. They had no sects, provinces or cities inclined to their cause like the Alids. But the rebellion was a success and they had control of its leadership especially the military commanders who brought them out of hiding and paid homage to them prior to the public declaration of their succession to the Caliphate once the end of the Umayyads was assured. One of their immediate problems was the choice of a capital.

By then Syria had lost its validity as a ruling province, Damascus its position as the most suitable for the Caliphate Capital. The 'drang nach osten' which culminated in the expansion of both state and religion well into Transoxania showed that the "New World" of Islam was in the east, and that the balance of power had shifted in that direction.

Appreciating the situation of the Muslim world on the eve of the Abbasid take-over Ibn Khaldun concluded that the fate of the Umayyads brought about in its wake the end of the unity of that world. He advanced his own explanation for that: "The affairs of Islam were all under one state during the time of the Four Caliphs and the Umayyads because of the unity of the Arab bond (asabiyya). But after that the cause of the Shia, and these are the ones who call for the rule of the members of the House of the Prophet, became apparent. But then the agents of the Abbasids prevailed, turning the Caliphate into a monarchical institution. A group from the Umayyads made it to Andalusia where they were taken care of by their clients as well as by those who fled with them. They did not recognise the Abbasids. The State of Islam was for that reason divided into two parts because of the rifts in the Arab bond. Then after that the agents of the Alids from amongst the members of the House of the Prophet appeared in the Magherb and Iraq challenging the Abbasid Caliphs and taking under their control distant parts of the lands of the Caliphate. The State of Islam was divided into several States." So said Ibn Khaldun.⁽⁴⁾

The first two Abbasid Caliphs Al-Saffah (749 – 754 AD) and Al-Mansur (754 – 775 AD) came at a critical period in that development noted by Ibn Khaldun. It was one thing to bring about the end of the Umayyads, exploiting a situation in which many took part. It was quite another thing to succeed in their place in the face of many odds, and to stay in power in reality or in name for five centuries and a few years more (750 – 1258 AD). The Umayyads had fallen. As things stood, the Alids compared to their cousins had a better claim

to succeed after them. But the Abbasids had all the chances. They had control of the military wing if not the political council of the secret organisation that led the revolution., They were united in themselves and many members of the Abbasid family were field commanders chasing the Umayyads in Iraq, Syria and Egypt. Most of the rest of the commanders were their clients. They had their candidate ready to be declared and assume command at the right time. They knew that as far as of the main stream muslims were concerned the Alids' cause was bedeviled by their implication with the Shia. Not only did the Alid leadership stand aloof during the revolution but they did not aspire to make use of it or even agree on a single candidate to lead their cause. All this is clearly demonstrated from the succession of events leading to the proclamation of Al-Saffah as Imam. It was in the eloquent and powerful accession speech which he delivered on that occasion that he gave himself the title of Saffah leaving people to wonder which meaning of that word he had in mind; the eloquent, the generous, the kind shedder of tears or the bloodshedder. Or did he mean all of them? The speech was in the fashion of accession speeches noted from the time of the first Caliph Abu-Bakr (632 - 634 AD).⁽⁶⁾ But since both circumstances and atmosphere were radically different, so was the speech. The Abbasid candidate was brought out from hiding. He was not known to most up to that time. The revolution was not yet complete. Wars were still being waged. He had to make good his venture when he had no refuge to go to; neither city nor province or by then a distinct party to look to for support except for his house, his clients and the loyals from their troops. All these the Abbasids had to make. Hence the search for a capital was almost like Shakespeare's Richard III's cry "A horse! A horse! My kingdom for a horse!"⁽⁷⁾

Kufa in which al-Saffah was declared Caliph and had homage paid to him was known to be pro-Alid. Basra was compromised. Iraq as a province was anti-Umayyad. It was the most suitable for the Muslim world with the situation described above by Ibn Khaldun and with the tilt in all aspects of power, peoples, wealth and strategy, in favour of the eastern provinces of the Caliphate. So the capital had to be in Iraq, and not far away from both two older muslim cities Kufa and Basra. The search for a suitable place for a capital to be founded a new started from the time of the declaration of the new Caliph Al-Saffah, a declaration ushering in its wake a new dynasty, the Abbasid⁽⁸⁾.

Al-Saffah did not stay long in office dying at the young age of 28 or 36, only four years after his accession. Those four years were however long enough for him to see the end of the fugitive Umayyad Caliph Marwan II in Egypt (750 AD), to have the succession secured in the Abbasids and to have that firmly in his own house by passing the Caliphate in style to his half-brother al-Mansur (754-775 A.D.). It was also at the beginning of those four years of his rule that he started the move to a new capital. Before that in his accession speech he declared the new state (dawla) open to all those who could prove their ability and loyalty. The old bond of kinship (asabiyya) then broken and discredited was to be replaced by a new bond of fidelity to the cause and service of the state. In the context a new bond of allegiance (wala al-istina) was being forged when (Abna al-Dawa) sons of the cause and the Khurasanis were coming to the fore⁽⁹⁾. It was on the shoulders of these that the Abbasids took the Caliphate. Their continuous support was crucial in preserving the Abbasid Caliphate and advancing its cause. A new capital for the new state and its supporters was thus not a matter of luxury but one of crucial importance.

Leaving Kufa as a result of an estrangement between him and his minister Abu Salama Al-Khallal whom he had to liquidate soon after al-Saffah started the building of his new capital, not far from Kufa, giving it the significant name Al-hashimiyya. But this did not satisfy him. Abandoning the place but keeping the name he tried again, this time near Al-Anbar. But both were as ephemeral as was the reign of their initiator. It was Al-Mansur ruling for a long period (754-775 A.D.) who was destined to found near the old site of Baghdad, the capital city of the Abbasids, which was given the name Dar-al-Salam (the abode of peace). So Dar-al-Salam, Al-Zawra (the slanted) or Baghdad is our first city⁽¹⁰⁾.

The immediate events that provoked Al-Mansur to start the search for a suitable site for his capital were those related to the unpredictable, unruly, heretical and dangerous behaviour of the Rawandiyya that nearly cost him his life and threaten the stability of his state⁽¹¹⁾. It may be assumed then that the need for safety and security was first as well as foremost in his quest for a new capital. The round, walled, gated and guarded city that came to be may strengthen this assumption. But true and important as those reasons were they do not seem to have been the only or the most important ones. Spelling out the qualities he looked for in determining the site one notes his

quest for other more basic qualities, requirements which reflect the depth of his thought and foresight. Healthy environment, expanse, easy spread, a complex strategy that catered for defence, economic growth, supply roots, easy access to and from, centrality were amongst the many qualities he looked for before committing himself to the site of this new capital city. Indeed as he wanted it "to be a communication centre, a gateway for the world (mashratun li-al-dunya)" show clearly that al-Mansur's concerns were not transitory, local or regional but universal in a fashion relative to his age⁽¹²⁾. Such thoughts could not have been but the results of long and deep reflection. In this respect one finds evidence in the many political speeches and addresses of both Al-Saffah and Al-Mansur in which they presented their credentials, defended their legitimacy and explained the nature of their state and basis of their rule. Al-Dawla Al-Mubarakah (the blessed state) the appellation given to their Caliphate, coming as a result of the "Revolt of Islam" as modern scholars describe the revolt against the Umayyads, was to be a state tailored on accepted Islamic traditions for good rule and correct practices. This in its turn demanded good administration carried out from an imposing centre, the capital, by able and loyal rulers and civil servants and within the laws of Islam.

The new capital was thus not only the physical structures of the city, magnificent, impressive and praiseworthy as they were, but what went inside the minds of those who lived and worked in them and the deeds that were the fruits of their thoughts and endeavours. The literature of the period shows that good government, state-craft and office practice had been the concern of many a writer and a ruler⁽¹³⁾.

Al-Mansur who according to Ibn Al-Tiqtaqa was the one who founded the state, fully controlled the realm and laid the basis of Abbasid rule is reported by Tabari to have said: "How much do I, need to have before my door four persons unsurpassed by any others in their propriety. Such are the pillars of my rule. A judge who will fear the blame of none in administering justice. The other is a commander of police who protects the weak from the strong. The third is a master of revenues who exerts himself without being unjust to the subjects as I have no need to be unjust to them. The fourth is a director of intelligence service (sahib barid) who writes accurate reports about these⁽¹⁴⁾". Both Baghdad and its founder Al-Mansur have been the subject of many chronicles and writers of old, and many scholars and students of

Abbasid history ever since. Al Mansur's concern for his capital city and its inhabitants, rulers, civil servants and the common people (Al-Amma) did not leave him till his dying days. Thus Baghdad's future in that all-embracing concept figures out very prominently in Al-Mansur' wasiyya (testimony) to his son and successor Al-Mahdi (775-785 AD). In the different versions of this reported by Tabari and others Al Mansur is said to have repeatedly advised Al-Mahdi to take care of Baghdad being the seat of his rule and the abode of his honour, to take care of his relatives, of his civil servants, of his troops, of his clients, of the Khurasanis, and of the common people. He is reported to have warned him not to seek an alternative capital⁽¹⁵⁾.

Baghdad was of course not the first administrative city founded in Islam. But it was the first to be founded to be the Caliphate Capital, not a provincial capital like Kufa, Fustat, Qairawan, Ramla and others⁽¹⁶⁾. It was not the first or only Caliphal Capital as the Abbasid were not the first or only Caliphs in Islam. Not even as an Abbasid capital did it remain unchallenged as the capital city. For a few years it was rivalled by Al-Raqqa at the time of Harun Al-Rashid (786–808 AD), challenged by Marw during the time of Al-Mamun (813 – 820 AD) and for about half a century it was replaced by Sammara (835 – 892 AD)⁽¹⁷⁾. But Baghdad was the longest ruling and reigning capital in Islam as so was the Abbasid Caliphate. The sack of Baghdad by the Mongols in 1258 AD spelt the effective end of the Abbasid Caliphate. But not that of the city of Baghdad which is still with us. And it was in Baghdad that the "Dawla" the revolution in the affairs of state and society took root and flourished influencing other Islamic and non-Islamic cities and peoples and playing the major and leading role in what came to be known as the Islamic civilization.

Yaqubi in his "Buldan" gives a graphic description of Baghdad. "I have begun with Iraq because it is the centre of the world and the umbilical cord of the earth. I have mentioned Baghdad as it is the centre of Iraq and the great city which has no equal, east or west, in its expanse, its greatness, its buildings, the abundance of its water and healthy climate. And because it was inhabited by different groups of people as well as people from other cities and hamlets. People from different places, far and near, moved to live in it preferring it to their homelands. No people from any country but they have a place, a shop or a quarter in it. Thus there gathered in Baghdad people like in no other city in the world. Then there ran on both sides of it the two great

rivers the Tigris and the Euphrates. Supplies and merchandise come to it by land and water in the easiest of ways that it has in it all articles of trade from the Islamic and non-Islamic Worlds. Merchandise is carried to it from India, Sind, China, Tibet, the lands of the Turks, the Daylamites and the Khazars; from Abyssinia and all other places. The situation is such that Baghdad will have from the merchandise of other places more than is found in the place of origin of that merchandise. It will be more easily available as if the fruits of all the world, its treasures, as well its blessings are gathered there. It has the famous name and repute. It is the centre of the world. Its people have good manners, resplendent faces and open minds that they excelled all others in learning and understanding; in literature, in comprehension, in expertise and in crafts⁽¹⁸⁾.” Much later Al-Maarrai (973-1058 AD) was very much involved in the intellectual, literary and social life of Baghdad. His love for the city and its life is reflected in many references to it in his “Luzumiyyat” and other poems. Some scenes in his Risalat Al-Ghufran are probably drawn from that experience⁽¹⁹⁾.

What is worthy of note in this respect, relative to the growth of Baghdad is that in fact Baghdad grew to be much more than Dar-Al-Salam which Al-Mansur founded in the first place. The round, walled, gated, guarded administrative city, prescribed for a clear purpose, was gradually being swallowed up by the great city that grew around it between the rivers having strong links to the hinter land beyond as far as Kufa, Basra and other cities. And while one can look for Caliphs, vizirs, courtiers, commanders and clients and the traditions that belong to them in Al-Zawra it is to Baghdad the city at large that one looks for the traditions of learning, industry, commerce, political thought, literature, ‘la dolce vita’ and such aspects of the rich urban society that had been in Baghdad. Thus it is not in one place that one looks for traces of Ibn Al-Muqaffa, Abu Nuwas, Bashshar, Jahiz, Al-Khalil, Buhturi, Abu-Tamman, Dibil, the Barmicides, the Banu Sahl, Tabari, Yaqubi, Al-Isfahani or Al-Mawsili⁽²⁰⁾.

It was that Baghdad that supported the Abbasids and always defended their cause, sometimes against the whims and policies of some Abbasid Caliphs such as Al-Mamun and Al-Mutasim. The city grew to have a will of its own. For Baghdad the Caliphate had to remain Sunni and Abbasid. The city had to continue to be a city of peace where people could live, earn their living and go about their ways uncoerced or molested by the whims of

ambitious but impatient or unwise Caliphs or the unruly behavior of troops⁽²¹⁾. Those were the guidelines. When Al-Mamun opted for an Alid Successor, changed the colour of the state to the green of the Alids in place of the black of the Abbasids, made his capital Marw and championed the cause of the Mutazila, Baghdad had no choice but to fight his policies to the bitter end⁽²²⁾. Defending itself against the siege of Tahir b. Al-Husayn in the last days of Al-Amin (809 - 813 AD) and managing its affairs by al-Urat and al-Ayyarun, the city elders put up their Caliph on the death of al-Amin and called him the Sunni Caliph. that was Ibrahim b. Al-Mahdi (817 - 819). Al-Mamun had to come to terms with Baghdad before entering Iraq. His religious policy, carried on after him by his successor al-Mutasim (833 - 842 AD) and the latter's son al-Wathig (842-847 AD), was partly the cause that made Baghdad to willingly ask Al-Mutasim to leave it in peace having realised that the cause of the Abbasids had won and that he would not go far from Baghdad⁽²³⁾. Here one does not fail to notice the important change in respect of the rulers and the ruled in relationship to the office of Caliph if not the Caliphate itself. The previous civil wars ending in the Abbasid revolution itself were a matter of concern to all the Muslim community. Now during the long period of the Abbasids in Baghdad and Samarra succession became a family affair. As one poet put it, "If life comes our way, we do not care who becomes Imam". Can it be said then that the Dawla, the ruling institutions, the Sharia and the social structures resulting from these is the key to understading the development? Is this something approaching the "withering of the state" envisaged by the Marxists? The Caliphate did not wither away. It was knocked on the head, the 'coup de grace', by the Mongols (1258 AD) and passed away unnoticed under the Mamluks (1518AD). However, having its capital move to our second city it continued to reign but only occasionally ruled.

Our second city is of course Samarra. Its fate is very much reflected in the different names by which it was known. First 'Surur-man-raa' then shortened to Surra-man-raa' and finally 'Saa man raa'. Respectively these meant "the delight of the seer", "delighted is the seer" and "grieved is the seer"! Better still it is often referred to as the 'Askar, the camp. A camp capital as it was founded Samarra remained during its years as Abbasid Caliphal Capital no more than a camp. Neither the city nor any of its Caliphs was in any sense a

match to Baghdad or its rulers. Its Caliphs did not succeed in patronizing distinguished administrators, literary personalities or learned men. What it did have was military commanders including its founder Caliph Mutasim himself whose ascendancy to the seat of Caliph ushered in the ascendancy of the generals in Islamic history, a phenomenon which seems to die hard amongst muslim communities⁽²⁴⁾. Its importance is in the way it came to be founded and the circumstances which brought about that sharp turn in Baghdad the city which fought so hard to keep itself as the capital of the Abbasids. The turn came when the presence of the Caliph, his court, his guards and his entourage were a menace to all that Baghdad stood for. No wonder it decided that it was better without them. Not for good, however. Baghdad continued to maintain a posture of opposition and challenge to the new capital as when its Caliphs supported the Mutazila, favoured the Alids or threatened its well-being. Samarra had the pomp and the power but only for sometime. Baghdad had the best of the Abbasid world. It continued to be the centre of culture and commerce very much unlike Samarra whose history is one of plots, murders and rebellions, although under its founder Al-Mutasim it celebrated resounding victories against internal and external enemies of the Caliphate⁽²⁵⁾. In Samarra and after the return to Baghdad, the Caliphs were gradually losing power to their generals and provincial governors. Descendants of Caliph Al-Mutasim continued to plot against each other thereby opening the door of intrigue amongst the soldiers, the administrators and the courtiers. This encouraged provincial governors and ambitious power seekers to capitalize on the situation especially in distant parts of the Caliphate as such parts were vulnerable at a time when the centre was weak and divided and could not afford to give any support to border provinces. Notwithstanding all this the Caliphate and the Caliphs continued to survive, reigning but not ruling. In that way provincial government had its legitimacy as it was maintained in the name of both Caliphate and Caliphs. Such was the case even when Abbasid Caliphs in Baghdad were under the Buyids (932 – 1062 AD) who were shiite. The jurists were quick to legitimise the situation recognizing the 'emirate by seizure' (Imarat-Al-Istila) so long as it maintained the Sharia⁽²⁶⁾. The move to Samarra was thus not the result of a change of dynasty or a shift in the balance of power as had been the case with Ali's move to Kufa, Muawiyah's stay in Damascus or Al-Mansur's founding of Baghdad. The founding of Samarra was a result of internal developments in the ruling circles of the Abbasid Caliphate. These

affected the Caliphs, the troops and the court and the administration. The Caliphate remained till its lasting days Sunni and Abbasid. The fate of the Caliphate was so much tied to the fate of its two capitals that often people speak of the sack of Baghdad in 1258 A.D. and not the effective end of the Abbasids at that date. This it seems is not because a kind of a shadow Abbasid Caliphate continued for long in Cairo under the Mamluks but because people rightly grasped the meaning of the sack of Baghdad. That meant the end of a long and glorious period in the history of the Abbasid Caliphate.

NOTES

1. For the "Abbasid Revolution" see Duri, pp. 36 – 54; E. I. s. v. Abbasids; B. Lewis, *The Arabs in History*; Shaaban, *The Abbasid Revolution*.
2. For Dawa, see Duri pp 9 – 34; Omar pp 7 – 22; E.I. s.v. Dawa.
3. As above.
4. Ibn Khaldun, p. 170.
5. Tabari, years 132 – 136 A.H; Omar, pp 23 – 29.
6. E. I. s. v. Abu Bakr.
7. Shakespeare, *Richard III* act 5, Scene 7.
8. Omar, pp 25 – 26.
9. E. I. s. v. Abna, Khurasanis.
10. Omar n. 8 above; E. I. s. v. Baghdad.
11. Duri, pp 70; Omar, p 114. See also E.I. s.v. Rawandiyya.
12. Duri, pp 75 – 78.
13. Of such are the works of Ibn Al-Muqaffa, Abu Yusuf, Jahiz, Jahshiyari, Imam Malik, Ibn Qutaiba, Suli and many others.
14. Duri, p 78; *Tiqtaqa* see al-Mansur; Tabari, p 297.
15. Duri, pp 81 – 82.
16. Masudi, p 357; Ismael, pp 109 – 115.
17. Ismail, pp 109 – 132.
18. Yaqubi, s.v. Baghdad.
19. For al-Maarri see E.I.
20. For all these see E.I.
21. Ismail, pp 19–58, 109–132.
22. Ismail, pp 109 – 132.

23. Ismail, pp 109 – 132.
24. Ismail, pp 184 – 186.
25. Ismail, pp 133 – 181.
26. For 'Imarat al-Istilaa' see Abu Yaali or Mawardi, al-, al-Ahkam al-Sultaniyya.

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