

Extracts from “Tarikh Baghdad”

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Here are comments on two excerpts (both cited) from the *Tarikh Baghdad aw Madinat as-Salam*, a history of Baghdad written in the eleventh century by the Arab intellectual al-Khatib al-Baghdadi; this is an original translation from the Arabic. “Histories” of that age often included a variety of genres such as poetry, philosophy, and hadiths. Original descriptive history constituted only a small part of al-Baghdadi’s work. The first excerpt is of a transmitted poem, and the second is Baghdadi’s original comment.

There was a legend, told by augurs and astrologers, that none of the Abbasid caliphs would ever die in the city of Baghdad. It was prophesied that every one of them would end their lives in some foreign country, or else outside of the city walls:

<i>Do you see in the length and width of the earth another land</i>	<i>like Baghdad? She is the heaven of the earth.</i>
<i>Life becomes clear in Baghdad and its branches become green.</i>	<i>Life without Baghdad is unclear and unfresh.</i>
<i>The Lord has ordained that a caliph will not die</i>	<i>in Baghdad, so, truly, he wills as his people judge.</i>
<i>The foreigner’s eye slumbers in Baghdad; you will not see</i>	<i>a foreigner in the land of Syria aspiring to close his eyes.*</i>

According to al-Baghdadi, historians debated over whether this legend was true; there was disagreement over whether a particular caliph died outside of the city walls.

Baghdad, once the capital of an Islamic state that stretched from the Loire Valley to the edges of modern Pakistan, began to decline dramatically in the eleventh century. Famine and plagues ravaged Iraq; dams and roads went decades without maintenance; law schools and public markets were demolished by sectarian rioters: Sunnis raging against Shi’ites, Sunnis raging against Sunnis. But al-Baghdadi loved his city, which he referred to as “the navel of the world,” and his people:

*So the types of people moderated in Iraq, and this extended to the peoples’ bodies, and they were free from the fairness of the Romans and the Slavs, from the blackness of the Ethiopians and other foreigners of Sudan, from the ruggedness of the Turks, from the rusticity of the mountain people and the Khurasanians, from the ugliness of the Chinese, and from the ways of nationalization and creation that shaped them; the Iraqis are free from all of them.**

The political dissolution of classical Islamic civilization was sealed by the capture and destruction of Baghdad by the Mongols in 1258. According to a story repeated by Marco Polo, the conquerors were so astonished by the amount of treasure in the city that they locked the last Abbasid caliph in a tower of gold and starved him to death. Perhaps al-Baghdadi’s sources would argue that this caliph did not technically die in the city, since he had expired *within its walls*.

*The text is translated from *On the Withdrawal of Caliphs from Baghdad*, Ummara bin Aqil bin Bilal in *al-Khatib al-Baghdadi* (vol. 1, p. 377), and al-Khatib al-Baghdadi (vol. 1, p. 320), from the edition published by the Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, edited by B. ‘A. Ma’ruf (Beirut, 1422/2001).