

CHAPTER 1



THE CITY

In a geographical treatise written in the late ninth century, the famous Arab geographer al-Ya‘qubi explained why he began his geographical account with a description of Iraq and its capital, Baghdad:

I begin with Iraq only because it is the center of this world, the navel of the earth, and I mention Baghdad first because it is the center of Iraq, the greatest city, which has no peer in the east or the west of the world in extent, size, prosperity, abundance of water, or health of climate, and because it is inhabited by all kinds of people, town-dwellers and country-dwellers.¹

Al-Ya‘qubi went on to describe the flow of luxurious goods carried to Baghdad by overland caravan trails and by river traffic from east and west. He describes, in great detail, the glorious “round city” founded by the ‘Abbasid caliph, al-Mansur (“the victorious”), on the west banks of the Tigris in 140/757–758: its quarters, gates, arcades, walls, the caliph’s palace, and the great mosque of al-Mansur surrounded by the houses of the caliph’s officers and followers.² His description conveys the portrait of a well-established city, laid out according to a remarkable and carefully thought-out plan. So perfect was its plan that “it was as though it was poured into a model and cast.”³

Approximately one hundred years later, the Arab geographer, al-Muqaddasi, described the characteristics of the various Muslim countries (*aqalim*):

Should anyone ask which of the numerous Muslim cities and provinces is the best, he will be provided with the following answer: . . . if he is devout and free from ambition, Mecca. If he seeks comfort, affluence, low prices, and fruits, he may be told: any country would serve you, or else, you have five capitals, Damascus, Basra, Rayy, Bukhara, and Balkh. . . . Choose whichever you please, for these places are the delights of Islam. It is said that Andalusia is a paradise, but the earthly paradises are four in number, the Ghuta of Damascus, the river of Ubulla, the Garden of Sughd, and Shaḥb Bawwan. Whoever desires commerce, should take Aden, ḤUman, or Egypt.

In regard to Baghdad, al-Muqaddasi added: "Know that Baghdad was great in the past but is now falling into ruins. It is full of troubles, and its glory is gone. I neither approve nor admire it, and if I praise it, it is mere convention."⁴

Al-Muqaddasi's account reflects profound changes in the conditions of Baghdad. By the early eleventh century, the caliphal city had long since lost the prestige of an imperial government it had enjoyed for nearly three hundred years, and was now forced to share its honors with cities such as Cairo, Cordoba, Ghazna, and Shiraz. Moreover, Baghdad had declined economically as a result of the loss of imperial revenues and income from the eastern trade, which by that time had shifted from the Persian Gulf route to the Red Sea route. In addition to its political and economic decline, the city suffered from sectarian differences fanned and incited by the Buyids, and from the turbulence of the *'ayyarun*, gangs usually made up of young men.

However, even Baghdad's scholars, witnessing the collapse of the ḤAbbasids and lamenting over the devastation of their native city by the Shi'i rulers, still portrayed their city as the most important center of Islamic thought. Al-Khatib al-Baghdadi's introduction to his famous work, *Tarikh baghdad*, is an excellent example of this sense of superiority: his view of Iraq as the "navel of the universe," and Baghdad as the geographical center of the Muslim empire and capital of a dynasty.⁵ The introduction and the successive biographical entries, which comprise the remainder of the work, are evidence of the author's desire to convey the imperial splendor of the city's physical image and, more importantly, the intellectual climate created by its thousands of scholars and pious individuals.

The Coming of the Turks

The sense of turmoil and general decline characteristic of Sunni compilations on the conditions of the Muslim world, particularly in Baghdad under Buyid rule, was also conveyed by accounts of the Turkish influx into the central regions of Islam during the second half of the eleventh century. Contemporary writers described the Iraqis' fear and suspicion at the appearance of the Seljuks in Khurasan and their advance toward Iraq, and complained about the impoverishment of their native cities by the Turkish nomads. Sibṭ b. al-Jawzī wrote that in 442/1050, as a result of the arrival of the Ghuzz east and southeast of Iraq, people from Basra and Wasit fled to Baghdad.⁶ According to the chronicler, the arrival of the Seljuks in Baghdad in 447/1055 worsened the situation. More people fled to the city from the surrounding areas, and bands ruled by the Seljuk chieftain, Tughril Beg, found quarters in homes in the eastern areas of Baghdad, forcing the inhabitants to supply them with food.⁷ The scarcity of food supplies resulted in epidemics and death increased rates. Ibn al-Jawzī related that a large number of men and women died daily, until few people were to be seen in Baghdad's streets.⁸ Natural catastrophes added to the dreadful situation, the most serious, known as "the year of the flood," taking place in 466/1073. The Tigris rose an unprecedented thirty cubits that year, destroying property and lives. According to Ibn al-Athīr, the extraordinary phenomenon was that people attributed the terrible flood to malicious deeds among the populace (namely wine-drinking and prostitution), perceiving the disaster as the wrath of God.⁹

These sources are replete with descriptions of human suffering as well as comments on the poor conditions in the city. When asked about these conditions, the famous Hanbali scholar, Ibn 'Aqīl (d. 513/1119) replied: "I will not describe to you what you might find hard to believe, but will simply give you a description of my city."¹⁰ His account expresses a keen sense of pride in his city. Yet at the same time it reveals the sorrow felt by the Baghdadis at their first sight of the city's caliphal palaces in ruins, and the loss of its imperial splendor, which they ascribed to the disappearance of the 'Abbasid central authority and the lack of the people's piety.

However, a closer examination of contemporary reports of the mid-eleventh century indicate that, beneath the stormy surface, signs of relative peace and prosperity had begun to appear.¹¹ The Seljuks began to restore order and rebuild the city immediately after the

suppression of the Basasiri revolt in 451/1059. In the same year, Sultan Tughril Beg appointed Abu al-Fath al-Muzaffar to the post of the provincial governor (*amid*), who immediately began rebuilding the city's economy. He restored the marketplace of al-Karkh quarter, ordering its inhabitants, who had fled to *Dar al-khilafa* (the official residence of the 'Abbasid caliphs) during the disturbances, to return. The marketplace soon recovered its former activity. The governmental residence, or *Dar al-mamlaka* (constructed by the Buyids in the eastern part of the city, north of *Dar al-khilafa*) was reconstructed and renamed *Dar as-saltana as-saljukiyya*; new buildings were also constructed in both east and west Baghdad. The governor, who supervised the construction activity, is said to have exhibited great concern for the city's welfare, winning the esteem of its inhabitants.¹² *Dar al-ilm*, the famous library founded by the Buyid vizier al-Sabur b. Ardashir, was also restored at this time. The library had been burnt several times, and many of its books plundered. Fearing that Baghdad's repository of knowledge might disappear, the governor ordered that the thousand volumes, rescued and sent to Khurasan, be returned to the city.¹³

Upon Tughril Beg's death in 455/1063, his nephew and heir, Sultan Alp Arslan, expanded the Seljuk empire until it included all the lands from the Mediterranean to the confines of eastern Iran. His vizier, Nizam al-Mulk (d. 485/1092) restored the peace and relieved Baghdad of external threats. Especially important to Baghdad was the destruction of the power exercised by the seminomadic Arab and Kurdish petty dynasties which had established themselves in the Jazira and had interfered with the grain trade.¹⁴ Within the city itself, older buildings, destroyed by the floods, were rebuilt and east Baghdad extended; new markets, palaces, mosques, and educational establishments were founded by Seljuk officials. Among these were the madrasas and the *ribats*.

Relations between Sunnis and Shi'is also improved. Ibn al-Jawzi reported a number of clashes which broke out between the Shi'is concentrated in al-Karkh and Bab at-Ta'q quarters, and the militant Hanbalis who gathered in the Bab al-Basra quarter. In 488/1095, however, the two factions reached a settlement, and the rival quarters, once kept locked, were reopened. Ibn al-Jawzi recalled: "the people of the two quarters began to exchange visits, to trust each other, and to drink in each other's company," a phenomenon he called "one of the remarkable (*'ajazib*) events."¹⁵ Clashes between adherents to the various *madhahib* early in the twelfth century are also rarely mentioned.

During the twenty years following the great flood of 466/1073, Baghdad enjoyed tremendous prosperity, reflected in an exceptional plenitude and low food prices. It is no wonder that Sultan Malikshah chose Baghdad as a place of relaxation after strenuous campaigning in 480/1087.¹⁶ Four years later, during his last visit to Baghdad, which coincided with his birthday, a great number of people gathered on the banks of the Tigris to welcome him. The sultan marked the occasion by building a new mosque adjacent to the sultan's palace in *Dar as-saltana as-saljukiyya*. The mosque, known as "Jami' as-Sultan," is often mentioned in the chronicles as one of the great congregational mosques in east Baghdad, where the Friday prayers continued to be said until the extinction of the caliphate. At the same time, Nizam al-Mulk and some other high ranking officials built houses in the city.¹⁷ Yet accounts of the reconstruction and building of mosques, palaces, and houses are usually brief, whereas the sources yield a veritable wealth of detailed information on the foundation of madrasas.

The Appearance of the Madrasa

Construction of madrasas in Baghdad began during the late eleventh century on a scale that increased during the course of the next century. During this period, madrasas were built for the three dominating schools of law: Shafi'i, Hanafi, and Hanbali (Figure 1.1, below). Of the twenty-four madrasas whose location, founders and beneficiaries are known, ten were built for the Shafi'i school—all were erected in the quarters on the eastern side of the city, at first by the sultans' Iranian-Shafi'i ministers and later by the caliphs. The famous Nizamiyya Madrasa, the first to be constructed, was located in the middle of Suq ath-Thalatha, adjacent to *Dar al-khilafa*. All other madrasas established for the Shafi'i school were situated either directly on the east bank of the Tigris or near the riverbank in one of the eastern quarters, often in main marketplaces, which served as the main street or highway at that time.

Madrasas for the Hanafi school were built as early as 459/1066, the same year the Nizamiyya Madrasa was founded, but most were constructed during the late eleventh and first half of the twelfth centuries. The first Hanafi madrasa was constructed adjacent to the tomb of Abu Hanifa, in Bab at-Taq, a quarter which, though populated by Shi'is, was the center of the Hanafi school. The Hanafi madrasas were founded by the Seljuk sultans, members of the royal

household and its entourage—all Turks affiliated with the Hanafi *madhhab*. Moreover, the madrasas were built in quarters adjacent to the east bank of the Tigris, the sites of palaces belonging to the patrons of both the Shafi'i and Hanafi schools.

This preferred area was not accidental; most of the founders were members of the ruling class, hence madrasas were often constructed in the quarters adjacent to the palaces in *Dar as-saltana* and *Dar al-khilafa*. Anyone of standing could sail up and down the river, ogling the great mosques, palaces, and madrasas which added glamor to the caliphal city. Designed as great enclosed spaces, the madrasas were viewed as fortresses of learning, symbolic of the Seljuk dynasty's role as defender of Sunni Islam and patron of the 'ulama'.

Female members of royal families also played a prominent role as patrons of religious learning and the 'ulama' during the eleventh century and the high medieval period in general. The allocation of private property to a religious or charitable purpose was one of the few public acts in which, in accordance with Islamic religious law itself, men and women could equally participate. Muslim women could own, inherit, and dispose of property. It is therefore no wonder that pious women—susceptible to the same concerns which encouraged Muslim men to support religious institutions—participated in the public act of religious charity by committing a significant portion of their wealth to the construction and endowment of a school of higher learning.¹⁸ Seljuk women, and women who married into the Seljuk family, possessed their own assignments, pensions, and landed estates, and were sometimes able to transmit these by inheritance. Some of these gifts, as evidenced by their charitable benefactions, were considerable.¹⁹

At least two madrasas, owing their endowment to female members of the Seljuk family, were established in Baghdad during the Seljuk period. The first, Madrasa Terken Khatun (princess of the Turks), a Hanafi madrasa, was endowed by the wife of Malikshah and mother of Sultan Mahmud, and was named after her. A woman of substance, she played an active role in the struggle of succession after her husband's death.²⁰ Her daughter founded another Hanafi madrasa, the Madrasa al-Waqfiyya. During the late twelfth century, female members of the caliphal family also became involved in the construction and endowment of schools of higher religious education. As-Siyada Binafsha, wife of the caliph al-Mustadi, founded a school for the Hanbalis, assigning the post of the professor of law (*mudarris*) to Ibn al-Jawzi.²¹ More important were the two schools endowed by

Zumrad Khatun, mother of the caliph an-Nasir li-Din, which taught classes in Shafi'i law.

The Hanbalis were at first reluctant to adopt the madrasa as a center for their teaching activities; thus the teachings of the *madhhab* appear to have been conducted in the mosques and private homes long after the spread of the madrasa "system" in Baghdad and in other Islamic cities.²² What appears to have been their first madrasa dates from the beginning of the twelfth century, nearly half a century after the first Shafi'i and Hanafi madrasas made their appearance in the city: the Madrasa of Mukharrimi (d. 513/1119), named for a Hanbali jurisconsult and Sufi who presented the celebrated 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani with the Sufi cloak, or *khirqā*. Al-Jilani assumed leadership of the madrasa after his teacher's death, and expanded it. The madrasa stands in Baghdad to this day, an object of pilgrimage, as is al-Jilani's tomb.

Seven other Hanbali madrasas were founded during the twelfth century; most of them were purely private establishments in the sense that they were built by Hanbali scholars themselves. Six of them were located in East Baghdad, particularly in Bab al-Azaj quarter, south of *Dar al-khilafa*. Although generally considered to be a Hanbali section of town, a Hanafi madrasa was established in this quarter by a grandson of Malikshah. Only one madrasa was built in the western part of the city, in Bab al-Basra, which was heavily populated by adherents to the school, and where the Mosque of al-Mansur, their stronghold, stood. This madrasa, the Madrasa al-Wazir, was founded for the Hanbalis by Ibn Hubayra, the Hanbali vizier of the caliphs al-Muqtafi and al-Mustanjid (d. 560/1165).

There are no deeds of *waqf* for the madrasas founded in Baghdad during the late eleventh and twelfth centuries, with the exception of a single document setting forth the budget for the Nizamiyya Madrasa and its beneficiaries. The deed of this glorious madrasa was read in public in April 1070, about three years after its inauguration, at a special gathering of the chief *qadi* and other dignitaries. It designated the members of the Shafi'i school of law as beneficiaries of the endowment, and named Nizam al-Mulk, and his sons after him, as the administrators. Its *waqf* provided for the appointment of a *mudarris*, a preacher and teachers of the Koranic science and grammar, as well as a librarian; it also specified the portion of endowment revenue to be received by each one.²³ During his last visit to Baghdad in A.H. 480, Nizam al-Mulk held a session for dictating prophetic traditions in the library of the Nizamiyya.²⁴

Figure 1.1
The Madrasas Founded in Baghdad in the
Late 5th/11th and 6th/12th Centuries

MADRASA	DATE OF INAUGURATION	BENEFICIARIES	FOUNDER	LOCATION
Al-madrasa an-nizamiyya	459/1066	Shafi'is	Nizam al-Mulk	east Baghdad - Suq ath-Thalatha
Madrasa Abu Hanifa	459/1066	Hanafis	Abu Sa'd al-'Amid	east Baghdad - Bab at-Taq
Al-madrasa at-tutushiyya	469/1076	Hanafis	Khimar Takin - mamluk of at-Tutush, brother of Malikshah	east Baghdad - Dard Dinar
Madrasa at-tajjiyya	482/1089	Shafi'is	Taj al-Mulk al-Mustawfi (the treasurer)	East Baghdad - Bab Abraz
Madrasa Terken Khatun	unknown	Hanafis	Terken Khatun - the wife of Malikshah	east Baghdad
Al-madrasa al-bahaiyya	unknown	Shafi'is	unknown	east Baghdad, close to the Nizamiyya
Al-madrasa al-waqfiyya	unknown	Hanafis	Daughter of Malikshah	east Baghdad - Darb Zakha (on the bank of the Tigris)
Madrasa as-sultan	unknown	Hanafis	Malikshah (d. 485/1092)	east Baghdad
Madrasa al-mughaihiyya	unknown	Hanafis	Mughaiith ad-Din Mahmud b. Malikshah (d. 487/1094)	east Baghdad
Madrasa al-Amir Sa'ada	unknown	Hanafis	Al-Amir 'Izz ad-Din Sa'ada (d. 500/1106)	east Baghdad
Madrasa ash-Shashi	unknown	Shafi'is	Abu Baker ash-Shashi ash-Shafi'i (d. 507/1113)	east Baghdad Qarah Zafar
Madrasa ath-thiqatiyya, or Madrasa Thiqa ad-Dawla	unknown	Shafi'is	Abu al-Hasan al-Anbari (d. 549/1154), husband of Shuhda al-Katiba (Fakhr al-Nisa')	east Baghdad

MADRASA	DATE OF INAUGURATION	BENEFICIARIES	FOUNDER	LOCATION
Madrasa Ibn Sa'd al-Mukharrimi, or Madrasa 'Abd Qadir al-Jilani	unknown	Hanbalis	Ibn Sa'd al-Mukharrimi (d. 513/1119)	east Baghdad - Bab al-Azaj
Madrasa Ibn Hubayra, or Madrasa al-wazir	557/1161	Hanbalis	Ibn Hubayra (d. 560/1164)	west Baghdad - Bab al-Basra
Madrasa al-kamiliyya, or Madrasa Hamza b. 'Ali	535/1140	Shafi'is	Hamza Ibn 'Ali b. Talha, the treasurer	east Baghdad - Bab al-'Amma
Madrasa Ibn al-Abradi	unknown	Hanbalis	Ibn al-Abradi al-hanbali az-zahid (d. 531/1137)	east Baghdad
Madrasa Ibn Dinar	unknown	Hanbalis	Abu al-Hakim b. Dinar al-hanbali (d.556/1160)	east Baghdad - Bab al-Azaj
Madrasa Ibn al-Jawzi	570/1174	Hanbalis	Ibn al-Jawzi, the famous Hanbali historian	east Baghdad - Darb Dinar
Madrasa darb al-qiyar	unknown	Hanbalis	Ibn Bakris al-Hammi al-hanbali (d. 573/1177)	east Baghdad - Darb al-Qiyar
Madrasa Binafsha	570/1174	Hanbalis	As-Siyada Binafsha - wife of the caliph al-Mustadi'	east Baghdad - Bab al-Azaj
Madrasa an-Najib as-Suhrawardi	unknown	Shafi'is	Ash-shaykh an-Najib al-Suhrawardi (d. 563/1167)	east Baghdad
Madrasa al-fahriyya, or Dar dhahab	unknown	Shafi'is	Fahr ad-Dawla al-Wazir (d. 578/1182)	east Baghdad
Madrasa Zumrad Khatun	589/1193	Shafi'is	Zumrad Khatun - mother of the caliph an-Nasir li-Din	east Baghdad
al-Madrasa al-qaysariyya	unknown	Shafi'is	Zumrad Khatun	east Baghdad

Notes:

1. For the location of the madrasas, see Map 2.

2. When the date of inauguration is unknown, the death date of the founder is indicated.

Descriptions of inauguration ceremonies further reflect the importance attributed to the new madrasas by contemporary observers and later writers, highlighting the good fortune of those legal scholars who assumed the chair of *mudarris*. Such ceremonies, which delighted the public, usually included an inaugural lecture or lesson by the appointee, and were attended by government and scholarly dignitaries. A typical example is the inauguration of the Iqbaliyya Madrasa, founded in Baghdad in the early thirteenth century. The historian Ibn Kathir, without naming the appointee, reported that the inaugural lecture was attended by a large crowd, including noted legal scholars of the different *madhab*. Sweetmeats were prepared for all the guests, and sent to the other madrasas and *ribats* of the city, and robes of honor were bestowed on the new appointee, his assistants, followers (*ashab*), and pupils (*talaba*).²⁵

By the thirteenth century, the madrasas proliferated to such an extent that they appeared in descriptions by chroniclers and travelers as an almost integral part of the city, together with the rulers' palaces, mosques, and bazaars. The famous Magribi traveler Ibn Jubayr visited Baghdad in 580/1184, making note of no less than thirty madrasas in the eastern part of the city. The most famous were the Nizamiyya and the madrasa of Abu Hanifa (founded by the head of the Sultan's tax bureau, Abu Sa'd Muhammad b. Mansur al-Khwarizmi, Sharf al-Mulk).²⁶ Ibn Jubayr noted that the Nizamiyya's endowments, derived from domains and rents belonging to the madrasa, were enough for teachers' salaries, building maintenance and support for poor scholars.²⁷ By Ibn Jubayr's time, the Great Seljuk empire had long been dissolved and Baghdad had been reduced to the mere capital of Iraq. Yet his account of east Baghdad, with its magnificent caliphal palaces and gardens, excellent markets and over thirty madrasas, all housed in excellent buildings with plenty of charitable endowments for their upkeep and for students' expenses, implies that for all its political decline, the caliphal city still enjoyed a considerable economic and cultural prosperity.

Marshall Hodgson has convincingly argued that in this confused and unstable world, the result of the loss of the caliphate's political framework and the decline of Baghdad's central role, a more institutionalized educational framework was required to meet the old threat of disintegration.²⁸ The importance of the madrasa to contemporary writers, and their perception of it as a fortress of learning, designed to disseminate the community's Islamic heritage, is underlined by the Baghdadi poet Abu Ja'far al-Biyad. Entering the magnificent shrine college of Abu Hanifa on the day of its inauguration, the poet

wondered at the beauty of the building and the considerable equipment placed at its disposal: "Knowledge (*ilm*) was about to vanish, until the revelation of this hidden (*mughayyab*) person who gathered it in this tomb. This country, too, was declining, until this prominent *'amid* [Abu Sa'd Sharf al-Mulk] appeared and brought it back to life."²⁹

Did the madrasas come to dominate religious learning in Baghdad as envisioned by the Baghdadi poet? Or were madrasas only glorious buildings signifying the role of the Great Seljuks as the protectors of "true" religion? This is a question central to the understanding of the world of learning during the early madrasa period in Baghdad.