

# **The Abbasid Gardens in Baghdad and Samarra**

**7-12<sup>th</sup> Century**

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# THE ABBASID GARDENS IN BAGHDAD AND SAMARRA

7-12TH CENTURY<sup>1</sup>

by Professor Qasim Al-Samarrai<sup>2</sup>

The love of gardens during the Abbâsid period, whether in Baghdad or in Samarra, was born within the already existing cultural tradition of Mesopotamia, where the art of gardening had been perfected many centuries before by the Christian monks around their monasteries, rather than having been directly influenced by either the Persian or Byzantine art of gardening for a very simple reason; the land topography and weather conditions of Iraq are, in many ways, different.

Practically the Abbasid horticultural art responded just as much to its surroundings as the Assyrian or the Persian one did in the arid and hilly country in north Mesopotamia or Persia. Or just like the Babylonians who are accredited with inventing the hanging gardens: an invention, which is also shared by the Assyrians. As conditions must always be determined by reason of utility, there must have been a reason underlying the introduction of the hanging gardens into Mesopotamia by the Babylonians or by the Assyrians or even spontaneously by both. As one might expect, the art of gardening was not introduced ready-made by the Abbasids into the architectural design of either Baghdad or Samarra, rather it was the creation of many people of different and diverse origin and culture: Arabs, Persians, Turks and others. Nor was it even purely Islamic, for many Christians, Mandaens and Zoroastrians were among its creators. In other words the Abbasid Empire was no primitive upstart, but came into a world that was already very old and very civilised. Despite this diversity of its origins, however, the Abbasid art of gardening was rather a new creation, in which all these elements were fused together into one new and original artistic whole by the transformation into Islamic form. Such a transformation was mainly due to the assimilative power of the Abbasid culture, often misrepresented as merely imitative. By this is meant its tendency of comparative tolerance and receptivity. Unlike the Umayyads before them, the Abbasid regime was generally liberal and tolerant, in so far that it depended for its cultural success and achievements not on one particular race or creed but on all, leaving all of them their religious, economic and intellectual freedom, and the opportunity to make a considerable contribution to the Abbasid civilisation<sup>1</sup>.

Not long after the collapse of the Umayyad dynasty in 749, whose seat of the Caliphate was in Damascus, at the hands of the Abbasid house, the new victors soon transferred the seat from Syria to Iraq. And thus the first, Abbasid Caliph al-Saffah (ruled from 750 to 754) set up his capital in the small town of al-Hâshimiyya, which he built on the east bank of the Euphrates to house his family and his guards. Later on he transferred his capital some distance southward not far from the monastery of Mâr Yûnân, of which its delightful gardens had attracted every Caliph and official dignitary who happened to pass by on their

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1. A revised version of a paper read at the symposium 'The Authentic Garden' edited by Y. L.Tjon Sie Fat & E. de Jong, and published in the proceedings, the University of Leiden, The Netherlands, 1991, pp.115-122.
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journey, to take up quarters in this monastery<sup>2</sup>. Those gardens had inspired a contemporary poet to write the following verses<sup>3</sup>:

*Like a lover's eyes watching his beloved so the narcissus are, without fear or caution And when the red anemones appear in full bloom glowing like fiery flames; or like a vast red carpet unrolling in honour of a mighty king. And the tender violet in the garden resembles a pinch brought on a virgin's cheeks; Daisy, lily of the valley beautifully blossoming together with ox-eyes and wormwood gloriously brilliant...*

Now, it was left to al-Mansur (754-775), the second Abbasid Caliph and in many ways the founder of the new dynasty, to establish the permanent seat of the Abbasid capital in the new city on the west bank of the Tigris river not far from the ruins of the old Sassanid Persian capital of Ctesiphon. The new city soon acquired an official name: Madinat al-Salam (the city of peace) or Dar al-Salam (the abode of peace), an appellation which occurs twice in the Koran (6:127; 10:26) to mean: the Heavenly Paradise. As the Abbasid dynasty came to power through a religiously motivated movement, and sought in religion the basis of unity and authority, the Koranic meaning was certainly in their mind. Be that as it may, the new city was and still is known by the name of a small village that previously occupied the site; Bag-Dad and scholars are still hopelessly at variance as to the origins of the name<sup>4</sup>.

To be sure, one of the theories stresses the Aramaic origin of Baghdad; by arguing that since most of the inhabitants of the area were Aramaic as to race and language, as is clearly revealed in the names of some towns such as Ba'quba, Baquqa, Ba'shiqa, and since the area was swarmed with Christian monasteries, the name Baghdad must have been of Aramaic origin<sup>5</sup>.

This hypothesis is born out by the vast number of Christian monasteries mentioned by Arab historians and geographers, and the fact that some of them even devoted entire works to them<sup>6</sup>, in which they vividly described such monasteries and their delightful gardens by collecting poems and stories relating to them. Most of these monasteries were either inhabited by Nestorians or Syrian (Jacobites) monks and nuns such as Dayr Mar Fathion (the Monastery of Master Fathion), Dayr al-Cathallq (the Catholicos Monastery), Dayr Bustan al-Qass (the Monastery of the Pastor's Garden), Dayr al-Tha'alib (the Monastery of the Foxes) and Dayr al-Athara (the Monastery of the Virgins). Of this monastery and its particularly splendid gardens the poet Ibn Tahir, addressing his drinking companion, says<sup>7</sup>:

*Don't you perceive, O' Sa'id, what a joyful time we were having Cheerful and sunny together with gardens beautifully arranged  
Like an embroidered garment adorned with new colours every day  
The poppies in them appear like a lover and the ox-eyes like a pale beloved  
Behold the staggering branches like maiden figures and the blossoms like their pearl necklaces  
And the fruits when covered with green leaves like swelling breasts hidden under green garments.*

This being the case it is then no wonder that the first Royal Abbasid palace was built in the gardens of the Mar Fathion Monastery by the founder of Baghdad soon after the completion of the city<sup>8</sup>. This palace was called Qasr al-Khuld, meaning: 'The Abode of Eternity', that is Paradise. Only seven years later, the second palace was built in the gardens of the former and was called: Qasr al-Qarar, meaning: 'The Palace of

Repose' which is again a Koranic designation reminiscent of Paradise<sup>9</sup>. When asked about his choice of the site to build his first palace, al-Mansur replied:

*'I chose this site for its delightful gardens and so that I might be able to enjoy the landscape of the Tigris river'*<sup>10</sup>

In fact, this is not an isolated event but records show that in Baghdad as well as in Samarra Royal Palaces were actually built in gardens belonging to monasteries, the most prominent among them was the Caliphate Palace (Dar al-'amma} in Samarra<sup>11</sup>. Even Christian or Jewish architects were entrusted with laying out Royal Palaces and gardens<sup>12</sup>. Most if not all of these monasteries were reputed to have been rendez-vous for Muslim libertines and men of pleasure who were attracted to them on account of the taverns usually attached to them. There they were free to drink as much wine as they wished and enjoy the monastery's gardens and the company of a dayrani or a dayraniyya (that is a monk or a nun as they were called then), particularly during the annual festivities which were held in every monastery on various occasions.

On the whole, the history of the Abbasid art of gardening is almost exclusively connected with two cities, namely: Baghdad and Samarra, the second Abbasid capital built some 110 km north of Baghdad in 835 CE by the Caliph al-Musta'sim to house his Turkish army. Here I must point out that in spite of the numerous allusions in literary and historical works to gardens and fountains, to flowers of various kinds, to pools and even lakes having been laid out in palaces in Baghdad and Samarra, there are rarely any specific references to the architectural design of an Abbasid garden, let alone to a monastic garden. There remains, nevertheless, certain invaluable archaeological data which, combined with literary descriptions may permit for the reconstruction, in some detail, of the Abbasid garden<sup>13</sup>. Evidently the monastic art of horticulture, as it seems, was a major factor in influencing the Abbasid style at the beginning, but it soon began to be transformed into something more splendid and elaborate under Persian influence. This was characterised by a taste for costly and glittering materials, ostentatiously displayed to impress the visitor with rank, wealth and pomp of the owner. This is very much in evidence in the palaces in Samarra and then in Baghdad. soon after the Caliph al-Mu'tamid abandoned Samarra and finally returned to Baghdad in 892 CE. Two years later, his nephew al-Mu'tadid laid the foundation of al-Tag palace (the Crown Palace) on the Tigris nearby, but he later on decided to build another palace, two miles to the north-east. There he built the magnificent and stupendous al-Thurayya palace (the Pleiades palace), linking it with an underground passage of more than three kilometres to his first palace. He surrounded it with magnificent gardens; and in the middle of these gardens he ordered an immense lake to be dug out, to which he brought water through a canal connecting two rivers; the Musa river to the east of the palace and the Tigris to the west<sup>14</sup>. He moreover, ordered a large zoo to be built which housed all sorts of animals, imitating of course his grandfather al-Mutawakkil's style of building palaces in Samarra. With this state of affairs in mind, it seems, therefore, natural to direct our attention temporarily to this city and its short-lived horticultural art.

In the ninth century, a son of Harun al-Rashid's who, in the minds of the people of western Europe, has forever become inseparably linked with the Tales of the Thousand and One Nights, founded a new' Abbasid capital, which was first called: Surra man Ra 'a (pleased is he who sees) and later on just plainly Samarra, on the Tigris which exceeded even Baghdad in luxury and splendour. Of this city, the geographer, al-Ya'qubi, writing in 889 CE reports that 'the whole land was converted by al-Mu'tasim into gardens for the upper class'. In every garden there had to be a palace and herewith halls, ponds and playgrounds for riding and for the game of polo<sup>15</sup>. His son al-Mutawakkil, who was exceedingly fond of roses<sup>16</sup>, exceeded his

father in building palaces with marvellous gardens. Archaeological data combined with literary sources suggest that one of al-Mutawakkil's seventeen palaces called al-Jawsaq al-Khaqanf consisted of 432 acres, 172 of which were gardens with pavilions, halls and basins, the whole complex being surrounded by a wall. In most, if not all, archaeological data concerning the architectural design of the Abbasid garden in Samarra, one feature which will prove of great importance to the architectural form of the garden is wanting, namely the irrigation system. In reality, the water level of the Tigris in Samarra was, and still is, much lower than the adjacent area, even at the time when the water level reaches flood level in Baghdad. The first step the founder of Samarra took was to build an extensive irrigation system to bring water from the river. This he accomplished by digging huge underground canals some 40 km up the river and at the same time using the noria (waterwheel) technology to pump the water through the town by means of smaller sub-canals, which in their turn were conducted to almost every garden and pond in the city, and the rest of the water, if any were left, would end its journey in the river again.

We were informed that, in some gardens, waterwheels were erected and that not oxen were employed to rotate the waterwheels but ostriches. The court poet al-Buhturi had occasion to write the following verses praising al-Mutawakkil and at the same time describing the newly built palace called al-Sabih and its pond. This is what he wrote<sup>17</sup>:

*And the stream being replenished with gushing water, glittering like a luminous sword  
When it bursts into the middle of the beautiful pond its marble colours the water would assume  
And the waterwheels rotate with no animal of plough but with ostriches  
These gardens make us long ardently for Paradise and thus we eschew more sins and shun evil  
deeds  
Behold the two lofty pavilions, and in between there rest circuits of gardens of veritable multi-  
colours just like what embroidery needs  
Of all manner of colours and charm, its luxuriant narcissus, its fragrant myrtle and its saffron shine.*

So far, the only palace unearthed at present, and that imperfectly so, to the south of present-day Samarra, is Balkuara palace, a well known palace often mentioned in literary works. It was built by al-Mutawakkil for his son al-Mu'tazz. One of its reception halls is reported to have been 100 dhira' long and 50 dhira' wide<sup>18</sup>. The area on which the palace was built covered one and a third square kilometres. It is entered by means of wide courts, which are paved, and decorated with flowering plants, perhaps in big pots. These courts one would walk through before arriving at the state-rooms; on both sides there were the courtiers' apartments. A large courtyard that might possibly have been rose gardens, leads directly to two larger courts which were used as gardens or for games<sup>19</sup>. Like every, Abbasid palace in Samarra, this palace looked towards the river and therefore it must have had large gardens in front. Its most striking feature is the strict axial plan, which makes it possible to get a view on every side owing to the raised site of the palace. The gardens on the riverside are enclosed by a wall, having pillars and ending on the bank in finely decorated pavilions. In the middle there must have been a kind of large pond or very big basin. At the very extremity of the front gardens there is a harbour for boats which seems to have been a common feature of the Abbasid palaces of Samarra and Baghdad. In the palace of the Caliphate to the north of present-day Samarra, so far very superficially excavated, one can observe the same axial design. Here again, both the palace and its courts stand above the high riverbanks on a prominent platform, which may possibly have been a set of gardens. Further inland one passes through an immense door into a great ornamental garden court, which gets its water from a basin in the centre by means of a long canal stretching from the north



down to south-west; that is in the direction of the river. At the end of the garden there is a large sort of square grotto with an underground tunnel on both sides. In each wall there are three speciously constructed niches, dug out in each of the walls and richly ornamented with flowers and animal motifs<sup>20</sup>. It was meant to be the Caliph's private swimming pool probably to be used during the day, and the other one situated to the north-west of the first seemed to have been allocated to the Royal ladies and to be used during the night because the entire structure must have been roofed, a stately overture to the grandeur to follow: an esplanade of a completely walled garden<sup>21</sup>. A definite favourite of al-Mutawakkil in Samarra is his Hair al-wahash (*Plate 1*), that is his zoo (or zoological park), which he built for his own pleasure to the south of the city to house more than two thousand kinds of different animals, both wild and domesticated ones (*Plate 2*)<sup>22</sup>. Furthermore, an extraordinarily handsome country palace was built with a huge pool. This pool of 200 metres long and 200 metres wide was laid out in front of the palace. In terms of its plan, it functions as an utterly opulent display of richness as well as a piece of engineering genius. The whole area covered by the park is about 53 square kilometres. A man-made river called Nayzak was brought to flow from the northern part of the Tigris through the park and finally through the pool to end again in the river. The whole park was densely planted with trees and bushes imported from every corner of the empire and the wild animals, we are told, were kept in extremely large cages and were looked after by especially trained keepers<sup>23</sup>. In the pool itself, not only all species of fish were swimming freely, but even some dolphins were to be seen there and some cascades appeared to have been added to complete the scenery. Such scenery inspired a court poet to portray it like a 'rushing bunch of horses', while the gardens encompassing the pool are 'resembling the peacock's tail feathers in beauty and colours'<sup>24</sup>. One may well imagine how, in times past, the master of such a park, palace, and pool together with his royal guests were wont to sit in such place so as to enjoy the gentle breeze and delightful vistas while listening to their musicians and pretty looking singers.

The same pattern can be observed in almost every Abbasid palace in Baghdad. But as there is little or nothing left of the Abbasid palaces in present-day Baghdad, we are forced to rely heavily on literary descriptions, which are above all tenuous in the extreme. Baghdad was the residence of the Abbasid Caliphs for nearly five hundred years, with the exception of the period of less than fifty years spent in Samarra. By reason of its favoured situation, Baghdad retained its importance and remained the great centre of commerce and cultural activity, lacking only the immediate attention of the Caliphs during their brief absence in Samarra. Once the seat of power had been moved back from Samarra to Baghdad, an active time of building began again, to such an extent that within a few years an enormous array of caliphial palaces sprang up on the east bank of the Tigris river, practically creating a town of its own, with many edifices and gardens, all encompassed by a circular wall, with gates of its own and the bank of the river forming its radial line. There were twenty three palaces within the Royal precincts; the most conspicuous among them were the Qasr al-Tag (the Crown palace), Qasr al-Firdaws (the Paradise Palace) and the House of the Tree<sup>25</sup>, often mentioned in literary and historical sources in connection with a certain Byzantine embassy to the court of the Caliph al-Muqtadir in the year 917 CE. The Byzantine ambassadors reported that the gardens of the palaces reached down to the Tigris. They furthermore were amazed at the magnificence of what they saw. First they passed through marble halls and corridors of the so called Riding House, beside which there was a great animal park, with special houses, containing various wild beasts such as elephants, hundred lions, giraffes and leopards. Some of the animals at the Zoo were tame enough to eat out of a visitor's hands<sup>26</sup>.

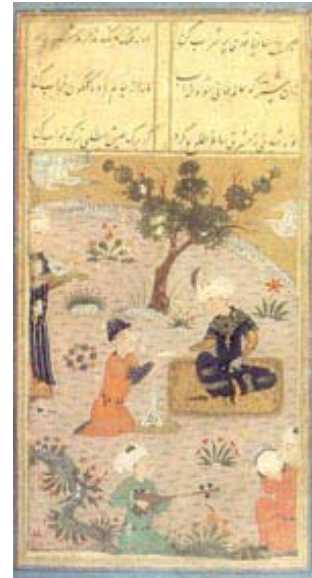
We are furthermore told that the House of the Tree stood in the midst of lovely gardens, and took its name from a tree made of gold and silver, standing in the centre of a great pond in front of a large reception room of the palace ground among the trees in the garden. This tree had eighteen boughs of gold and silver, and innumerable branches all covered with all sorts of fruits that were actually precious stones. On the branches sat birds which were made of gold and silver, and when a breeze passed through, they whistled and sung in a wonderful way. At the side of the palace, right and left of the pond there were statues of fifteen knights on fifteen horses, dressed in silk and brocades and girt with swords while in their hands they carried lances. They were able to move back and forth in a straight line so that it looked as though each knight was trying to hit his neighbour<sup>27</sup>. To add to the novelty of the Abbasid love of gardens, the historian al-Mas'udi reports that the Caliph al-Qahir (ruled 932-934) was extremely fond of gardens. At his behest a garden was laid out for him in one of the courts of the Crown Palace. The size of this garden was only about 1500 square metres, but it contained orange-trees imported from Basra and many other trees brought from 'Oman and India. On the thickly but regularly planted trees the fruits gleamed yellow and red, bright as the stars of heaven in a dusky night. Around the trees grew all kinds of shrubs with strong-scented and sweet-smelling herbs, various sorts of flowers and other plants. He, moreover, added to his garden many kinds of birds including turtle-doves, pigeons, blackbirds and parrots, brought to him from foreign lands and distant countries. It is said that this garden was indeed the fairest one could set eyes on<sup>28</sup>. We have already alluded to the fact that the art of gardening was not brought ready-made by the Abbasid to the architectural design of Baghdad or Samarra, but that it was the creation of several by gone civilisations, whose artistic roots and schemes, once given a chance, flourished again, whether they were Assyrian or Babylonian, or Byzantine or even Persian. Be that as it may, the scanty archaeological data and literary descriptions at our disposal with regard to the Abbasid garden seem to point rather to a monastic influence than to a Persian design because the Abbasid garden never contained 'four rivers' the most characteristic feature of a Persian garden. True enough, the straightness of the main lines of the layout is there both at Byzantine as well as at Samarqand, thus resembling the Persian style, but the decoration in plantation, water devices, zoological gardens, very large ponds and fountains, however, point to a mixture and infusion of ideas and trends, which at their best created what we call the Abbasid garden', lacking a specific reference.

To conclude this topic, a translation of the poet al-Sanaubari's verses concerning the preservation of gardens and the vandalism they suffer at the hands of the 'evil-doers', seems to be appropriate here. This is what he says<sup>29</sup>:

*The eyes perceive as flirting damsels, frivolous and gay  
The Cypress trees, tucking up their skirts in bliss and joy  
And their legs, they show slim and bare  
When the Eastern breeze stirs one of them to move  
It looks like a girl dallying her mates up there  
If I ever possess power to protect the noble gardens and conserve  
No wicked man would ever set a foot inside or dare!*



**Plate 1. Hair Al-Wuhush, the zoological garden of al-Mutawakkil in Samarra, based on the poems of Al-Buhturi as they appear in his Diwan Al-Buhturi, Bairut 1911.**



**Plate 2. Taking a drink outside at dawn.**  
From: Hafiz, *Diwan*, Leiden University Library, Ms. Or. 856, dated 894/1489, fol. 155b.



**Plate 3. The courtyard of a royal pavilion with a view of the garden.**  
From: Sana'i, *Kitab-i Hadiqa*. Leiden University Library Ms.1651, dated 987/1579, fol. 1b



**Plate 4. A drinking-bout on a garden terrace.**  
From: 'Urfi, *Divan*. Leiden University Library, Ms. Or. 8800, 17th century, fol. 190b.



## REFERENCES AND ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Lewis, B., *The Arabs in History*, London 1970, p.140.
- <sup>2</sup> Yaqut, *Mu' Jam al-Buldan*, Bairut 1956, 2, p.537; al-Shabushti, *Kitab al-Diyarat*, ed. G. 'Awwad, 2nd. ed., Baghdad 1966, p.109, 258.
- <sup>3</sup> A1-Shabushti, op.cit. p.259.
- <sup>4</sup> Jawad, M. and Susa, A., *Dalil Kharitat Baghdad*, Baghdad (Iraqi Academy) 1958, p.16-19.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.18; E.I2., s.v. 'Baghdad'.
- <sup>6</sup> E.I2., s.v. 'Dayr'; Yaqut, op. cit., 2, p.495-543.
- <sup>7</sup> A1-Shabushti, p.109.
- <sup>8</sup> Jawad and Susa, op. cit., p.9, 56,75.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid., p.36-37, 75.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>11</sup> *Tarikh al- Tabari*, iii, p.1180; Yaqut, op. cit., 3, p.174; al- Ya'qubi, *Kitab al-Buldan*, Leiden 1861, p.29, 32.
- <sup>12</sup> Like the Christian Dalil ibn Ya'qub who was entrusted by the Caliph al-Mutawakkil with building al-Ja'fari palace in Samarra (Yaqut, op. cit., 2, p.143) and the Jew Sanad ibn 'A1i to build al-Mu'izziyya House in Baghdad, (Jawad and Susa, op. cit., p. 116).
- <sup>13</sup> Most of the archaeological data concerning the' Abbasid gardens in Samarra have been taken from Ahmad Susa's work, *Rayy samarra' fi 'ahd al-Khilafa al- 'Abbasiyya*, Baghdad 1948, and E. Herzfeld's, *Geschichter der Stadt Samarra*, Hamburg-Berlin 1948, together with his *Samarra, Aufnahmen und Untersuchungen zur Islamischen Archeologie*, Berlin 1907, and my own observations of the sites.
- <sup>14</sup> Yaqut, op. cit., 2, p.77; Jawad and Susa, op. cit., p.120-124
- <sup>15</sup> A1-Ya'qtibi, op. cit., p.39.
- <sup>16</sup> It is reported by al- Tha'alibi that he used to say 'I am the King of Kings and the Rose is the king of all flowers', cf *Kitab Lata 'if al-Zurafa' min Tabaqat al-Fudala'*, my edition, EJ. Brill-Leiden 1978, p.25
- <sup>17</sup> *Diwan al-Buhturi*, Cairo 1911, 2, p.268, 271. See his fascinating description of Al-Kamil Palace of the Caliph al-Mu'tazz in Samarra, 2, p.124.
- <sup>18</sup> A1-Shabushti, op. cit., p.150-156.
- <sup>19</sup> See note 14 above
- <sup>20</sup> Susa, A., *Rayy Samarra'...etc.*, op. cit., 2, p.287; *Diwan al-Buhturi*, 2, p.321.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid., p.298-299.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid., 2, p.296-309; 608; *Diwan al-Buhturi*, 2, p.321
- <sup>23</sup> Susa, A., op. cit., 2, p.299.
- <sup>24</sup> *Diwan al-Buhturi*, 2, p.319.
- <sup>25</sup> E.I2., s.v. 'Baghdad', with references.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibn Kathir, *al-Bidaya wa'I-Nihaya*, Bairut 1983, XI, p.127-128.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid
- <sup>28</sup> Jawad and Susa, op. cit., p.127
- <sup>29</sup> *Kitab al-Rawdiyyat*, Halab 1933, ed. Raghil al-Tabbakh, p.21. Al-Sanaubari (died in 945 CE) was a Syrian poet.