Baghdad: A Journey Back to Madinat al-Salam with Assassin's Creed Mirage

After overthrowing the Umayyad Caliphate, the Abbasids ruled the vast Islamic Empire from 750. In 762, Al-Mansûr, the dynasty's second caliph, decided to establish a new capital city.

He chose a location on the west bank of the Tigris River, in present-day Iraq, near a village called Baghdad ("given by God" in ancient Persian), in the middle of fertile plains and at the intersection of caravan routes. A majestic round city was built, with the Caliphal Palace at its center. Four avenues dividing the circle into quadrants of equal area led to the city's four gates, which provided access through the impressive city wall at the mid-points between the cardinal compass points.

How can we recreate this global city that stood as a political, scientific, cultural and commercial capital and which was razed to the ground by the Mongols in 1258, on whose ruins modern Baghdad was built? In the absence of significant archaeological remains, information about its urban planning and its grandeur was preserved by historical chronicles and by the narratives of travelers of diverse origins.

This exhibition offers an answer to the question, drawing on the contents of the video game Assassin's Creed Mirage. This latest in the series by Ubisoft takes place in 9th-century Baghdad. More than just a setting, the city is a veritable protagonist in the game. Its digital recreation, imbued with both historical authenticity and creative freedom, was one of the major achievements of Ubisoft's development team, who met the challenge of bringing to life Madinat al-Salam, the "City of Peace," as residents at the time called it.

From sketches to concept arts

A "concept art" or conceptual design is a form of illustration used to express an idea or to convey an overall atmosphere. These illustrations, created by artists, are the result of in-depth research and guide the visual style of a video game throughout its production, serving as a constant reference for developers.

The two types of illustrations presented here show the progression of the artists' work, from black-and-white sketches outlining the environments, the architecture and the urban setting of the game's plot, to their finalized, colored versions. They demonstrate the challenge of recreating the city and its suburbs without any reference images from the period.

Concept arts created by the Assassin's Creed Mirage teams, Ubisoft.

Madinat al-Salam, the intermittent capital of the Abbasid Caliphs

Al-Saffah, the first Abbasid Caliph (r. 749-754), first established the dynasty's capital in Kufa, on the banks of the Euphrates, before transferring it to Al-Anbar, near present-day Fallujah, 70 km west of Baghdad.

Al-Mansur (r. 754-775) founded Madinat al-Salam in 762. Its circular layout, which was not new in the Near East, facilitated the surveillance and defense of the city but limited its expansion. His successors built their palaces on the east bank of the Tigris River, where a settlement developed over some 10 km, protected by a first wall, erected in 865 by Caliph al-Mustain (r. 862-866) and extended to the south in 1095 by Caliph al-Mustazhir (r. 1094-1118).

Harun al-Rashid (r. 786-809) transferred in 796 the seat of Abbasid power to Al-Rafiqa (present-day Raqqa, Syria), a city built on a horseshoe plan by al-Mansur in 772, ten years after Madinat al-Salam, which regained its status as capital in 809 upon the death of al-Rashid.

Al-Mutasim (r. 833-842) left Madinat al-Salam in 836 to escape the continual unrest there. He settled in Samarra, 125 km north of Baghdad, which he had built three years earlier for his army of Turkish mercenaries. Samarra remained the political and administrative capital of the caliphate until 892.

Al-Mutadid (r. 892-902) returned to Madinat al-Salam when he took power. The Abbasid capital was invaded by the Mongols on February 21, 1258; its population was massacred and the town razed to the ground.

The Abbasid Caliphate

In 749, the Abbasids founded the second hereditary dynasty of the Muslim world. As descendants of the lineage of Abbas, an uncle of the Prophet, they considered themselves to have a legitimate claim to the caliphate, unlike their predecessors, the Umayyads (661-750), who had made Damascus their capital.

When Baghdad was founded, the dynasty shifted the Muslim empire's center of gravity from Syria to Iraq. Even if its borders changed little, the Abbasid Caliphate's political unity began to erode in the 10th century, with governorates becoming quasi-autonomous and, above all, two rival caliphates emerging. The Umayyad Caliphate of Spain in Andalusia (929-1031) was founded by Abdelrahman III, the heir of a man who had survived his family's massacre by the Abbasids. As for the caliphate introduced by the Fatimids (909-1171), which was established first in North Africa before they conquered Egypt and Syria; it promoted Ismailism, a rigorist branch of Shiism.

The caliph fulfilled both spiritual and temporal functions. The latter gradually diminished as political power devolved to the Bouyid emirs in 945 and then the Seljuk sultans in 1055. The last reigning Abbasid was put to death in 1258 by Hulegu Khan, the grandson of Genghis Khan, when the Mongols took Madinat al-Salam. The surviving members of the family fled to Cairo, where the dynasty lived on in name only under the protection of the Mamluk sultans. Al-Mutawakkil III, the last of the bloodline, was in turn exiled to Constantinople after the Ottoman conquest of Egypt in 1517.

Baghdad, a multi-lingual capital

Over two centuries, from 632 onwards, the territorial victories of the caliphs who succeeded the Prophet formed an empire that encompassed part of the Iberian Peninsula, North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, Western Asia and Central Asia. In these territories lived and cohabited populations of multiple ethnicities, denominations and languages: Amazigh, Coptic, Syriac, Aramaic, Hebrew, Kurdish, Turkmen, Persian and Urdu, not forgetting different Arabic dialects. These tongues were spoken in daily life and in worship by all strata of society, such as slaves, craftsmen, merchants, scholars, concubines, and army officers. The linguistic Arabization of administrative documents, as requested in 697 by the Umayyad Caliph Abd al-Malik, and then formalized under the first Abbasids, made Arabic a veritable lingua franca, a language that gave rise to brilliant religious, scientific and secular literature.

The developers of Assassin's Creed Mirage paid special attention to the linguistic environment in the game, reflecting the diverse origins of characters encountered in the city of Madinat al-Salam; its residents or travelers from the empire's provinces and beyond its borders. We invite you to listen to a selection here.

Languages spoken in Madinat al-Salam. Duration: 3 min.

Madinat al-Salam, the "Round City"

After the site was selected, the date for founding the city was not left to chance. Al-Mansur consulted his court astrologers, and the day chosen was likely to have been July 30th or 31st, 762.

The "Round City of Baghdad" represented the universe, as well as the navel of the Muslim world. Its layout was inspired by the ancient East. Inherited from the traditional Roman grid plan, the two orthogonal axes led to the city's four gates.

The palace and the mosque occupied the center, within a garden. Surrounding the center and spreading outwards, were the quarters intended to house the members of the court, the government offices and the military barracks. The city was surrounded by a double wall about 35 meters high. The outer wall was flanked by 114 tours and topped with crenellations. The city's diameter is estimated at two to three kilometers. Around 100,000 engineers and workers were employed in this colossal construction.

In a land poorly endowed with stone and wood, the main building material was raw brick, a sun-dried mixture of clay and straw. While raw brick permitted rapid construction, it also required constant maintenance because of its vulnerability to the elements. Thus, the floods of 1076, due to high waters in the Tigris, devastated the original Round City and its outskirts. Madinat al-Salam (City of Peace) was constantly being renovated, rebuilt and enlarged. Along with Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine Empire, Madinat al-Salam was the largest city in the known world at the time, with an estimated population of between 500,000 and 1,000,000 inhabitants.

Al-Jahiz (ca. 776-867)

This writer, known by his nickname "The Bug-eyed," was born in an impoverished family in Basra. In the city's mosque, he was introduced to philology, lexicography and poetry. Al-Jahiz was recognized as a master of *adab*, or Arab *belles lettres*, whose mission was to convey knowledge in an understandable form. His writings treated, without pedantry and often with a humorous touch, subjects as diverse as the institution of the caliphate, the imamate, grammar, rhetoric and zoology.

His qualities earned him an invitation to Baghdad by Caliph al-Mamun (reigned 813-833). He spent time there frequently, as well as in Samarra. Al-Jahiz reported an interview with Caliph al-Mutawakkil, who was considering appointing him his children's tutor before being repulsed by his ugliness. He died from illness in the city of his birth, or, according to other sources, crushed under the weight of his library's books.

The Great Mosque of al-Mansur

In Islamic civilization, the Caliph was the "successor" of the Prophet on earth and the "Commander of the Faithful." Originally, this role was to be assumed by the most meritorious member of the community, rather than being hereditary. With the Abbasids, the caliphate became a politico-religious system which made the Caliph the charismatic guarantor of the Muslim theocracy.

The sermon (*khutbah*), delivered at collective prayers on Fridays, called for honoring the first four Caliphs, known as the "Rightly Guided" (*Rashidun*), as well as the reigning Caliph. In placing the palace and mosque at the center of the Round City, al-Mansur privileged the Calipih's double authority: temporal (military, judicial, civil) and spiritual.

The encyclopedist al-Khatib al-Baghdadi (1002-1071) recounted that the Great Mosque of al-Mansur, constructed from raw brick, was demolished in 808 on the orders of Harun al-Rashid and rebuilt in fired clay.

Caliph al-Mutawakkil (reigned 847-861)

The tenth Caliph of the Abbasid Dynasty was born in 822. Unlike his predecessors, he had less interest in the arts and sciences and preferred architecture. In 847, he built the Great Mosque of Samarra, the largest of the time, with its unique 55-meter-high spiral minaret. In addition to the palaces and parks that he had constructed and fitted out in Samarra, he undertook to extend the city to the north. This new quarter took the name of al-Jafariyya, where he was buried in 861 after being assassinated by his eldest son, al-Muntasir.

As a devoted Sunni, al-Mutawakkil fought Shiism in the name of orthodoxy. In 850 he issued a decree discriminating against Jews and Christians. On the contrary, his predecessors had established a climate of religious tolerance, granting a role to reason in interpreting revealed texts.

The Caliph's Palace

Like the plan of the Round City, the Caliph's Palace is a conjuncture of spaces, structured and ranked in importance around the axis leading from the portal to the throne room or the court room. The ruins of Samarra, ephemeral capital of the Abbasid Caliphate, reflect the architecture of the Palaces of the kings of Sassanid Iran, who were defeated by the Muslim invasion of 651. Their capital was Ctesiphon, on the Tigris River, about 30 kilometers south-east of Baghdad. From there, the builders of the Round City took some of the materials needed for their own construction.

As the setting of official life, the palace displayed an ostentatious luxury that legitimized the Caliph's authority. Public events and receptions for ambassadors and delegations from the provinces were occasions for displaying the riches of the treasury as part of a ceremony imitated from the Byzantines and Sassanids. The palace riches were comprised of gold and silver coinage, jewels and precious stones, arms and armors, costumes and drapery.

Luxury permeated the sovereign's private life as well as his official actions. The highest quality of goods were brought from across the empire and abroad to satisfy him and give him pleasure. The culinary arts, music and dance, public speaking contests, and hunting and polo, all provided enjoyment to the Caliph and his court.

Muhammad ibn Tahir (825-867)

Son of the military governor of Baghdad, he became chief of police (*sahib al-shurta*) and governor of Baghdad in 851. In 862, he was named governor of the Holy Places Mecca and Medina. He is also said to have occupied the function of chamberlain to Caliph al-Mutawwakil who was assassinated in 861.

In 863, Muhammad ibn Tahir faced riots in Baghdad. They were provoked by the announcement of the victory of the Byzantines at the battle of Poson, which solidified their eastern border against the Muslims. Entering the service of Caliph al-Mustain, in 865 Muhammad ibn Tahir defended Madinat al-Salam when it was besieged by partisans of al-Mutazz, brother of the reigning Caliph. Almost lynched after his surrender, he owed his survival to the personal intervention of al-Mustain, who abdicated in favor of his brother in January, 866. Nevertheless, Muhammad ibn Tahir retained his functions up until his death.

His contemporaries considered him a scholar of grammar and philology, as well as a poet.

The suq

The popular image of the merchant-caravanner has been, since ancient history, associated with the Arab world and then the Muslim world. The Prophet himself exercised the trade of merchant in Mecca. The land-based routes, which linked the heart of the Abbasid Empire to Africa and Central Asia, should not make us forget the maritime links, which were just as important. The Arabian-Persian Gulf led all the way to China via the Indian Ocean. The Red Sea gave access to the East African Coast, and from Egypt and Syria to Europe via the Mediterranean. We should not forget rivers such as the Tigris, by which boats traveled as far upstream as Madinat al-Salam.

Commercial activity has an impact on the design of cities, of which some – Aleppo until recently, Fez, Sanaa, Ispahan and Istanbul – have kept their layout of old. In the city center, the market (*suq* in Arabic, *bazar* in Persian) was located next to the Great Mosque. Workshops often adjoined the stalls in which trading took place. They were topographically distributed according to their specialties and trades, which were organized in corporations. The polluting artisanal industries (dyeing, metalworking and pottery) were carried out on the city outskirts. The caravanserai, which was either situated in the city or at its edge depending on its importance, served as a warehouse, trading center and inn.

Alongside the trading of raw materials and manufactured goods was the trading of slaves, permitted by the Koran and Islamic law, which called for them to be treated humanely and urged that they be freed, especially if they converted to Islam. Slaves also had the ability to buy their own freedom. This did not prevent revolts such as that of the African slaves, called the Zanj, forced to labor in the salt mines and farms of southern Iraq. Between 868 and 883, they threatened the authority of the Caliphate.

Arib al-Mamuniyya (ca. 797-890)

Arib was bought as a slave at the age of 14 by the equerry of Caliph Harun al-Rashid. He provided her with an excellent education. An accomplished calligrapher, she excelled in playing the oud and in singing. Her beauty and sharp wit made her a favorite of eight caliphs, from al-Amin (r. 809-813), the eldest son of Harun al-Rashid, until al-Mutazz (r. 866-869). In the meantime, al-Mutasim (r. 833-842), the third son of al-Rashid, had granted her freedom.

In his *Kitab al-Aghani* ("Book of Songs"), the scholar al-Isfahani recounts that besides being a fine musician, Arib was also a talented writer. Always on the lookout for new poems, whether among the courtiers or the Bedouins, she incorporated them into her own compositions of unforgettable melodies.

Arib left this world at the age of 93 in Samarra, alert and in control of a fortune that she had accumulated during her extraordinary career.

The House of Wisdom: translating and theorizing

The Prophet encouraged Muslims to pursue knowledge. Following in his footsteps, the Abbasid caliphs became patrons of the Sciences. Al-Mamun (reigned 813-833) is reputed to have founded in around 815, the "House of Wisdom" (Bayt al-Hikma), an institution financed by the public treasury in Madinat al-Salam. The first task that he assigned to this new institution was to translate the Greek, Hellenistic, Persian, Syriac and Sanskrit manuscripts found in his library into Arabic. These manuscripts were about philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, astrology, the natural sciences, geography and mechanics. The work of translators and copyists benefited from the spread of paper, whose manufacturing secrets were supposedly revealed by Chinese prisoners captured during the battle of Talas in 751.

Scholars of all origins and faiths were welcomed in the House of Wisdom (Grand Library of Baghdad) As well as coming to do translation work, they used it as a center to validate ancient scientific

knowledge, as well as a place for observing and theorizing, which contributed to the development of sciences written in Arabic.

This model spread throughout the empire, with Houses of Science (*dar al-Ilm*) appearing in Baghdad, Mosul, Basra, Damascus and Cairo, among others.

As a keen astronomer, Caliph al-Mamun also set up an observatory in the House of Wisdom of Baghdad. He asked the Banu Mussa brothers and other astronomers to calculate the Earth's circumference – a way of claiming territorial authority, as expressed in the world map that bears his name.

The Banu Musa brothers

The three brothers called "Sons of Musa" were some of the most brilliant scholars to have worked – and intrigued – at the court of the Abbasid caliphs in the 9th century. Muhammad, the eldest, was an astronomer; Ahmad, the middle brother, a mechanical engineer; and al-Hassan, the youngest, a surveyor. Their father, a highwayman, became friends with al-Mamun before he became Caliph. This friendship allowed the brothers to be placed under the Caliph's protection and assured them an excellent education.

In 859, al-Mutawakkil asked them to design canals which would lead to al-Jafariyya, the urban extension he was planning to the north of Samarra. In their *Book of Ingenious Devices* – the Arabic name for the Greek concept of "mechanical technology" – the brothers, also hydraulic engineering specialists, set out a hundred or so mechanisms using the force of water for utilitarian purposes (fountains, lifting devices, clocks, etc.) as well as for pleasure (automatons and toys). When Byzantine ambassadors were received at the Caliph's palace, they were notably quite impressed by a moving tree inhabited by singing birds.

The House of Wisdom: from knowledge to practice

Between 637 and 651, the Arab conquerors overthrew the Sassanids in Persia. They seized Gundeshapur, a major scientific and medical center of the Middle East, founded in the 3rd century. The collection of Hellenistic, Persian and Indian knowledge about medicine and pharmacopoeia fertilized research in the mold of Islam which emphasised hygiene and dietetics, notably through the book *The Medicine of the Prophet.* The Abbasid caliphs dispatched missions, led initially by Christian and Jewish scholars, to acquire manuscripts. They went to Constantinople where medical treatises occupied a preeminent place. This collection enriched the library of the House of Wisdom, where veritable "dynasties" of Nestorian Christian physicians, such as the Bukhtishu and the Masawaih, took part in an intensive translation movement. Al-Tabari (d. 850) wrote the first complete medical treatise in Arabic, entitled *Paradise of Wisdom*.

Copies of medical manuscripts which circulated throughout the Abbasid empire provided a framework for medical and paramedical practice in the hospitals that spread from Madinat al-Salam throughout the Caliphate. Surgeons, orthopedists, oculists and even veterinarians benefited from

advances in the detailed knowledge of anatomy. As the head of Baghdad's main hospital, al-Razi (d. 925) innovated by introducing a psychosomatic dimension into clinical observation. Pharmacists, druggists and embalmers had access to compounded medicines resulting from chemical research, alongside the simple mineral, plant and animal-based treatments identified by Galen in ancient history.

Hunayn ibn Ishaq (808-873)

This Christian scholar mastered Greek, Syriac, Persian and Arabic. He masterfully translated the main medical texts of Galen, Hippocrates and Dioscorides into Arabic. His work considerably enriched the Arabic scientific vocabulary, as demonstrated by his works such as: *Questions on Medicine for Students,* a manual he wrote in a question-and-answer format, his *Book of the Ten Treatises of the Eye* and his *Book of Simple Drugs*, among many others. He trained his son and nephew in the art of translation, and they in turn went on to have brilliant medical careers.

The son of a pharmacist, he studied medicine at Madinat al-Salam, where his skills earned him the appointment as head of the court physicians by Caliph al-Mutawakkil. His colleagues' jealousy brought undeserved disgrace upon him, along with the loss of his library.