

Hello there, it's Tom Holland here. And I am delighted to say that I've got a guest joining me for a brief chat on his new true crime podcast venture London based consulting detective, Mr Sherlock Holmes. Sherlock, thanks so much for joining us. Listen to the show, please. Thank you very much. Goodbye. Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. He's gone. No, no, no. Brilliant. You're back. Sherlock, you're back. Listen, we just thought it would be a good idea to put this little interview together. Gold hanger that is. They just want to why to promote your show, your podcast, so people will listen. Then please instruct your listeners to do so. I can't just tell them what to do, Sherlock. I just think it's best that we give them a flavor of your show and then they can make their own minds up.

A flavor of the show. Good God. Just read that. Read that now. Sorry, who's that?

My flat mode. Sherlock and Co is an thrilling weekly show documenting high crimes, high stakes, and high jinx of me, Sherlock Holmes, and my companion, Dr. John Watson, MD.

You know, don't put the MD after the name if you've prefixed with a doctor.

Oh, do you not? No. Are you sure? So it's a weekly true crime documentary, is that right?

Correct. And it follows your adventures?

Indeed. And people can listen wherever they get their podcasts?

Can people listen wherever they get their podcasts?

Yes. Yes. Excellent. Brilliant. So that's Sherlock and Co, starting with the adventure of the illustrious client. Thank you for joining me, Sherlock Holmes, Dr. Oh God, they've both gone.

They've gone. For the first time ever. I'm a consulting detective.

Every single Sherlock Holmes story. Do you know what?

God help me. We'll be retold.

We believe there is a bomb on a tube train heading to Clapham.com. I know this.

Yeah, sorry, I was speaking to the listener. For goodness sake, hold this. Oh my God.

Just don't pull the pin. Why on earth would I pull the pin? The game is afoot, Watson.

A new weekly podcast from Gullhanger.

Sherlock and Co.

Probably won't be a bad episode, actually. Gonna have to be a three-parter,

I think. Three-part problem for a three-pipe problem.

Sherlock. Sherlock, I said. I heard it.

Sherlock and Co.

Out now, wherever you get your podcasts.

Assuredly, this island of land between the two great rivers, bounded on the east by the Tigris and on the west by the Euphrates, is destined to become the very crossroads of the universe.

Ships from the great trading cities of the south sailing up the Tigris will land and drop anchor here. Here it is, that merchandise will arrive from Mosul on the lands of the north.

Here, too, will come products transported from Syria, Egypt, and beyond.

The city will also lie on the roads taken from the east, from Iran and Khorasan.

By God, I will build this city to be my capital, and it shall be my residence for the rest of my life. It shall be the residence, too, of my heirs. No city in the world will ever rival it for a prosperity. That was the Caliph Al Mansur, declaring his resolve to found a city at Baghdad, and, Tom, that was as quoted by the ninth-century geographer and historian Yacoubi.

Of course it was. What listeners don't know is that this is the second version of that introduction, because your first introduction, Dominic, your first version, achieved the ignominious fate

of being the first impression that has been canned for being terrible.

No, no, that's absolutely not true at all. It was a very nuanced and sensitive reading, because I did it in what I thought was a ninth-century, yeah, Theo, the producers writing the chat, it was too accurate. I did it in an authentic ninth-century Baghdadi accent.

And when we listened to it back, Tom, I couldn't help noticing that you were, you seemed beside yourself with enjoyment listening to it.

Yes, well, it was so bad that it's been put in a lead-lined container and buried in the grand cellar beneath Goldhanger Towers, never to be brought out again.

The truth of the matter is, I've been cancelled by my own woke producers.

Right, well, let's just draw a line under the whole business and, Dominic, your second version was wonderful. We should crack on, because we've got lots to do.

We do. So, we ended last time on a bit of a cliffhanger, didn't we, because you brilliantly, dare I say, sketched the world of the Umayyad Caliphate, so this great empire, almost unprecedented in world history, all the way from the Straits of Gibraltar and the Pillars of Hercules, virtually to the borders of China, a colossal Islamic realm ruled by this dynasty, who were there in Damascus with kind of their silks and their slave girls and their kind of luxuriating. They're sherbet. They're sherbet. I was thinking of sherbet and golden goblet and babbling fountain-ist on this. So, there they are. Meanwhile, there are all kinds of things going on. They've suffered a few defeats. There are sectarian uprisings and kind of cults and religious movements that are challenging their supremacy. There's the emergence of this new class. You described them last time as a new class of lawyers who are kind of developing this alternative code, I suppose, of Islamic laws based on the sayings of the Prophet that challenged the supremacy of the Umayyads. And you ended last time by saying, maybe all this would have been manageable. Were

it not for the emergence of a rival dynasty? Now, as far as I remember, the stuff going on in the Far East, which I'm sure you're going to explain, but this is going to lead to a massive transformation in the Islamic world, in medieval world history, and it will, of course, lead to the foundation of the city of Baghdad. So, take it away, please, Tom.

Right. So, I guess the point to emphasize that we were looking at in the previous episode is that this is a world in which it's incredibly diverse. Diversity is the essence of the caliphate, all kinds of different peoples. So, you talked about how the Umayyads have their capital in Damascus. But at the end of the last episode, we talked about how the Umayyad Caliph Marwan has actually made himself so unpopular in Syria by destroying all his relatives and carving out his rule by means of civil war, that he's actually retreated from Syria to a city to the north called Heran, which enthusiasts for the late Roman Republic will have come across when

they read about the Battle of Karay, where Krasus was killed. Karay and Heran are the same city. And Heran is an absolutely kind of classic example of the way in which, you know, this is still very, very far from being a Muslim neary. So, Heran is actually still full of pagans. There are people who are worshipping what seem to be Babylonian gods there. So, they're worshipping sin, the Lord of the

moon, they're sacrificing bulls, they're inspecting entrails. And you may be wondering, how on earth can this be going on in a Muslim empire? Well, the answer is that the Heranians, the Heranian pagans,

are passing themselves off as Sabaeans. And the Sabaeans are a mysterious people mentioned in the Quran as one of the three peoples of the book, along with Jews and Christians. And actually, the Christians are very cross about this and keep saying to Marwan, you're being fooled, they're not the Sabaeans, but Marwan's fine for them to carry on. He's got bigger problems, because basically rebellion is brewing in Iraq, but also in Korazan, this vast kind of region stretching between Iran and up to the Oksus River. So, for those people who don't know, this is Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Eastern Iran, Uzbekistan, maybe a sort of amorphous, huge region.

Yeah. And again, it's a bit like Heran in that this is a region that's so far from the centres of power in the Caliphate, that again, it's a kind of very, very obvious melting pot, because up there, Serastrianism is still very vital. There are still fire temples burning. There are still people who yearn for the return of the Sasanian dynasty. And we talked about this in the first episode that the Persian Empire that had been swallowed up by the Arab conquests, that the Persians, the Serastrians had been ruled by a dynasty that reached back centuries and was seen by the Serastrians as having a kind of holy bloodline, a sacral bloodline that had been ordained by God, and its extinction had been very, very traumatic for Serastrians for the Persians.

And so what you have in Korazan is this constant process by which Serastrian and Muslim traditions are fusing and blurring. And there's a brilliant, brilliant book on this by the late great Patricia Crona, the great historian of early Islam, the nativist prophets of early Islamic Iran, which is such an interesting book. It was her last book before she died. And I commend to anyone interested in this subject. And the implications of this is that it explains why when the rebellion against the Umayyads comes, it does not originate in Iraq, even though that is kind of bubbling with resentment. And Iraq is where the Abbasids are actually waiting, this dynasty that is laying claim to the rule of the world because they are descended from Abbas, the uncle of Muhammad. It actually happens in Korazan. And both Muslims and Serastrians there are seeing the world in rather similar ways. They're seeing the world as being divided into rival spheres of good and evil. They are convinced that a great monarch is going to emerge who will be a defender of truth, a defender

of God's ways, and that the man who lies, he is an oath breaker, he is a person who has trampled on the truth that he must be brought down and humbled. And these doctrines, which are very, very ancient in Zoroastrianism, are also being increasingly applied by devout Muslims towards the Umayyads. And so I think that this explains the slightly mysterious quality of the outbreak of the Abbasid Revolution. Because in 745, a figure appears in Korazan by the name of Behaffarid. And Behaffarid dresses in green, which is the color of a Zoroastrian deity called Meir. He brandishes a book written in Persian. He claims to be an agent of light. He's clearly a very, very Zoroastrian figure. But he is also claiming to be the messenger of God, which is the title of Muhammad. So you can see there the kind of the fusion of Zoroastrian and Islamic traditions happening. And Iranian peasants flock to him. That seems that the whole of Korazan is going to be consumed by a revolution led by this mysterious figure clad in green. But he gets captured in 749. He gets hanged outside a mosque. But here's the thing, Dominic, the people, the Muslims who have captured Behaffarid and put

him to death are themselves the followers of a figure who is very, very like Behaffarid. And this is a very, very enigmatic figure called Abu Muslim, the father of a Muslim. And he is a very mysterious figure, charismatic, proclaims himself to be the agent of God. His identity

is unknown. It's unclear whether he's an Arab or a Persian, whether he's an aristocrat or what is much like a reformer slave. And when people ask him, well, you know, who are you? Where do you come from? He replies in enigmatic terms, the knowledge of my deeds better for you than the knowledge of my pedigree. That's the kind of thing David Cameron used to say. When people you say to him, how can a former, you know, old Atoni and run the country, you say, it doesn't matter where I'm from, it's where I'm going. I was thinking, I was thinking more about Batman. Oh, Batman. Yeah, he's a kind of a mysterious superhero who's emerged and, you know, cloaked and masked. We have very different images of Abu Muslim.

I think that the listeners want to put David Cameron from their minds. Abu Muslim is nothing like David Cameron. He is much more like Batman. Okay, continue. He's a mysterious enigmatic figure

and he is an agent of the Abbasids. This is the key thing. That's the thing. He's not working for himself, right? Has he been suborned? Has he been put up to this by this emerging rival dynasty? He may well be, I mean, the likely series is actually he was a slave, probably a person in Iraq, and he gets sent to Korazan precisely because he is able to appeal to the Iranian and because he will be a kind of neutral figure. And that's why he kind of preserves his mysterious identity, but it enables him basically to cast himself again as an agent of God. And he is able to preach to the Iranians out there that the Abbasids are a family appointed to world rule by God exactly as the Sasanians have been. So they're kind of tapping into that.

Right. So they're picking up on the Persian tradition, but Tom, just remind us from last time, who are the Abbasids again? The Abbasids are the descendants of Abbas, who is the uncle of Muhammad. Right. And they have been doing what in the interim since those days? Are they like minor dignitaries? Are they governors? They've been kind of hanging out, you know, being Arab warlords. Right. They haven't been persecuted or anything. But because you have

this, it's articulated by the Shias who think that it's the bloodline of Ali. It's still very much present in Persian popular imagination. The idea of a family with a sacred bloodline who can be appointed by God to bring about an age of equality and justice is very, very potent, particularly in the Eastern reaches of what had been the Persian empire. And this is what the Abbasids are tapping into. And that's why they send their agent basically to the kind of the old Zoroastrian heartlands. And it's why it's so successful there, I think. I think that what Abu Muslim, even though he suppressed the Zoroastrian prophet and he himself, there's no question, is a very devout Muslim. Nevertheless, he is making play with Zoroastrian traditions and telling the mass of the Iranian peasantry, look, the Abbasids are the embodiment of what you want. Yeah. You know, these are the people who have been appointed by God, you know, they share the blood of the prophet in their veins. They have been appointed by God to bring about this new age of justice.

And he does this in this incredibly dramatic moment, doesn't he? The 9th of June, 747.

He unfurls this flag and both the color of the flag and the place that he does it are significant, is that right? So it's a black flag. Like a pirate. The black flags of the Abbasids.

But he does it in a village outside the great city of Merv, where the last Sasanian king had perished while he was fleeing from the Arabs.

So that would kindle Persian memories, would it? Right. So again, it doesn't imply that Abu Muslim has any sympathy whatsoever with the Sasanians. He's not interested in them,

as I say, he's a Muslim. But it does tap into kind of buried loyalties. And he's trying to transfer those loyalties to the Abbasids. And this is a tradition that is commemorated for many centuries. So long, long later in the Seljuk era, you have a tradition that are, whenever he was alone with the Zoroastrians, he would say, according to one of the books of the Sasanians, which I have found, the Arab empire is finished. Now, this isn't true. You know, there's no way that he's trying to bring about the return of the Sasanian empire. But it does suggest that it's recognized by people in these lands that it's going with the grain of Zoroastrian traditions. And it's kind of offering Iranians a chance to redeem their dignity that had been lost for so long. And it's a very, very potent strategy. And it proves highly successful. So the fires of rebellion, Dominic, we love a fire of rebellion, don't we? It spreads very, very fast. Absolute tinderbox. So by 748, actually on Valentine's Day, so the 14th of February, Abu Muslim has captured Merv. The following year in March, he has marched into Iran, he defeats an Ameid force at Isfahan in Western Iran. And that effectively secures him the whole of the Iranian plateau. By August, he has gone down into Iraq, into Mesopotamia. He's gone across the Euphrates. And by September, he has captured Kufa, which is this great city founded by the Arab armies, great kind of sectarian breeding ground for Karajites and Shiites and Sunni lawyers and all kinds of people. And it's there on the 28th of November that Abu al-Abbas, who is the great grandson of Muhammad's uncle, is proclaimed as Caliph. And he is one of many brothers. He's not, by any means, the eldest brother. So he has older brothers. He's in his late 20s. He had arrived in Kufa prior to the arrival of Abu Islam's forces, but had been kept in a safe house. But this doesn't imply in any way that he's a kind of, you know, he's a wuss or a coward or whatever. He's not at all. He's a very forceful, very driven, and as events will prove very brutal figure. And this will be exemplified by his throne name. So when a Caliph extends, he takes a throne name and his Dominic is Asafah, the Shedda of Blood. Good title. Very good title. So meanwhile, this has all been going on in the East. But the Umayyad Caliph, Mahwan, who you described last time, Curly Head Fellow, grizzled and experienced an accomplished soldier, by the way, not a whim or a waste of space. What's he up to while all this is going on? Well, he's got a problem because the basis for Umayyad power are the Syrians. And the Syrian soldiers are the elite, but they're thousands of miles across the Caliphate. And so it's going to take him time to gather them. But he doesn't have time. So essentially what he does is he gathers what forces he can. It's still massively outnumbered the Abbasid army. And he heads out from Heran, heads down towards the Euphrates. And on the 25th of January, 750, he sees Dominic on the horizon, the Black Banners of the Abbasids. So Mahwan leads his troops across a river called the Great Zab. Good name. Which is a brilliant name, and a tributary of the Tigris. And he burns the bridges to ensure that his troops, you know, won't run away, that they'll have to stand and fight. As I say, hugely outnumber the Abbasids. They have a great force of cavalry, but the Abbasids have brought pikemen. And pikemen are always very effective against cavalry. So when the Umayyads charge the Abbasid lines, they form a shield wall, pikes bristle out like porcupines. And an Abbasid who fought in the battle, he remembered how the Syrians attacked us like mountains of iron. But when we knelt down and prepared our spears, they turned from us like a cloud. And Mahwan's army tries to flee, but they can't. They can't get across the bridge. Because you burn the bridges. It's about the bridges. So kind of classic error. So it's a kind of comprehensive defeat for the Umayyads. Mahwan himself seems to have received a head injury, but he's not going to give up. He

manages to get across the river. He flees to Heran. He then goes down to Damascus. No one in Damascus really wants to help him. No one in Jerusalem wants to help him. He flees to Egypt, being pursued the whole way by Abbasid agents. So very like Dominic, Alexander pursuing Darius, if you remember. Yes. Yeah.

Kind of same kind of dynamic. And then Bessus after that into Afghanistan.

But Mahwan actually gets cornered by his pursuers at a village in Egypt. His head is chopped off. His tongue is removed and fed to a cat, which is a splendid detail. And Mahwan's head is then brought to Safa, the bloodshedder, the caliph. And Mahwan's death is announced on the steps of the great mosque in Kufa by al-Safa's brother, Daoud. Praise be to God with gratitude, gratitude, and yet more gratitude. Praise be to him who has caused our enemies to perish and brought us to our inheritance from Hamid, our prophet, God's blessing, and peace be upon him. And Safa merits his name by absolutely obsessively hunting down every last Umayyad that he can, so the shedder of blood. I mean, he sheds a lot of blood. And I think we actually talked about this in our episode on the worst parties. The kind of the last living Umayyads are brought into Safa's presence and he orders them to be completely butchered, you know, all wiped out. And then the bodies are kind of laid out. A carpet is laid over the bodies and a table's laid kind of on the carpet. And it is said those who were present at the scene ate while the death rattle still sounded in the throats of the expiring victims. Crikey. That's a dinner party. So the living are extirpated, but so too, Dominic, are the dead. So Safa orders the tombs of the Umayyad caliphs to be dug up. Corpses were scourged with whips. Some of them were crucified. Arches used the skulls for

target practice and then smashed into little pieces. And then all the remains of the Umayyad caliphs were gathered up and burnt to ashes. So very, very comprehensive extirpation of the ruling dynasty. And the only one who escapes, you may remember, Abd al-Rahman, who makes all the way to

Spain, where in the long run, his dynasty, the Umayyads will survive and set up a new caliphate. And we did that in the World Cup, didn't we, for Spain? We did. But Spain is so far away that this doesn't really impinge on the glory of the Abbasid triumph. And Safa basically spends the four years that he's granted of ruling as caliph, killing as many of his enemies as he possibly can. And then in 753, he dies of smallpox. And he is succeeded by his elder brother, Abu Jafar, who takes the throne named Dominic of the victorious one, al-Mansur. And people remember

the brilliant rendering of exactly how he spoke at the start of this episode.

They will. So that is al-Mansur. And I think we should take a break at this point. And when we come back, we will get to the founding of Baghdad, which is the great achievement of al-Mansur. Brilliant. So come back after the break and al-Mansur will be founding Baghdad. See you then.

Hello, welcome back to the Rest is History. So we ended last time with the arrival on the scene of al-Mansur. He is a very impressive man, isn't he? He's in his late 20s. People say he's a very tall, lean, sort of regal-looking figure. But he's not a great party animal, is he? He's a very pious Muslim. No. So the Amayeds had been great ones for getting drunk, having sex, kind of party shacks out in the desert. And that, of course, is part of what makes them so unpopular with pious Muslims and has contributed to the Abbasid Revolution. Al-Mansur is a very, very pious Muslim. So he doesn't drink. He very much disapproves of music. And people may be wondering,

are there going to be any eunuchs in this story? Well, there are. So one day he hears the sound of a mandolin being played in his palace. Absolutely shocked and tracks it down, discovers that it's a eunuch playing the mandolin. So he orders the instrument to be broken over the eunuch's head and the miscreant to be hauled out of the palace and sold in the slave market. So that is how he treated musicians, Dominic. Right. So. Okay. That's a great one there for, yeah. Yes. For any, anybody making music? Yeah. He's also like Safa, the Shedder of Blood. He's also pretty brutal. So Justin Morozi, whose book Baghdad, City of Peace, City of Blood, is a wonderful history of the entire city. He says of Al-Mansur, the Caliph's executions were so numerous that there were times when the historian wonders how he found the time to attend to other affairs of state. And you've read that, haven't you? There's a brilliant story about what happens after Al-Mansur has died. And he's given a key to his daughter-in-law and said that, you know, this is the key to the storeroom. You must on no account open it until I'm dead. And then he actually dies on pilgrimage to Mecca. And the news comes back to Baghdad, which he's built by this point. And the daughter-in-law and her husband, the new Caliph think, oh, brilliant. Let's go and find out what daddy has left in the storeroom. And do you want to take up the story? Yeah. So they go in and they think it's all going to be treasured, aren't they? And they go in and they actually find it's piles and piles and racks and racks of the dead bodies of the descendants of the Caliph Ali. That's right, isn't it, Tom? Yes. So the Shia? Yeah. Then lovely details. They've all been labeled and tagged to say who. Because there must be rotting by this point. So it's like, oh, this is great uncle Ibrahim. This is so and so. This is so and so. I love the fact that he's been so diligent. So I'm about collating and identifying all the bodies. Well, it's the fusion of brutality and bureaucracy. Yes. But sadly, probably didn't happen. No, it almost certainly didn't happen. But it's the kind of story that his reign generates. Because he very rapidly becomes the archetype of a great ruler, which of course is exactly what the Abbasid Revolution was supposed to stop. The Abbasid Revolution was supposed to be all about introducing a reign of justice and equity and making the teachings of the Quran manifest on the earth. But actually, Al-Mansur is having none of that. So one of the reasons why he is persecuting the family of Ali is that he wants to enshrine the rule of his own family, the Abbasids. And it becomes clear very quickly to disillusioned supporters of the Abbasid Revolution that basically, here's the new boss, same as the old boss. They had appealed to the Shia? Yeah, they had. Wasn't that part of the thing? And now they're basically suckers? Yeah, right. Oh dear. But I mean, you know what I'm saying? He's brutal. He's faintly hypocritical. He doesn't like music. But he is a hugely impressive ruler. He's probably the most impressive ruler since Abdul Malik, the greatest of the Umayyad caliphs. And he marshals the economy very effectively. So the extravagance that had been the hallmark of the Umayyads, he stops that. He's nicknamed Abu Dawanik, which one translation is Daddy's small change, because he counts every last diram, every last dinar. You need that in a rule of thumb? You do. There's a kind of famous maxim of his that is quite kind of mafiosi. He who has no money, has no men. And he who has no men watches as his foes wax great. So he's aware of what the basis of his power is that it's money and it's men. But he does also have an absolutely authentically global sense of his mission, which is an Islamic one. You know, as I say, he's very pious Muslim. And he feels that to set his own dynasties and the caliphate's power on a firm footing, he needs a capital. And so that then begs the question of where should the capital be? So there are various options. He could have Damascus.

There you Myad's capital, basically. The Amayyad capital, beautiful mosque there, which still stands, famous Muslim city, but very associated with the Amayyads. And there's a further problem with that, that the Abbasid power base basically is Iranian. They came to power by means of the revolution in Corazan. So really, Damascus is too far to the west. And the need to keep Iran and Corazan on side explains why Abu Muslim, for instance, is very rapidly dispatched. Well, yeah, I was wondering what happened to him. So he comes on pilgrimage from Corazan, and he gets invited to Al-Mansur's party. And that's the end of him. And even though there's a revolt in Corazan, Al-Mansur is able to suppress it. So he's good at taking calculated risks, I think. But that just emphasizes for him the fact that he needs a capital that's going to look eastwards rather than westwards, as the Amayyad capital that Damascus had done. So he could found it in Kufa. But the problem that Kufa has always been that it's absolutely rife with sectarian tensions. There are so many Shiites there, there are so many Karajites there. It's a real problem. And basically, Al-Mansur comes to the conclusion that Kufa breeds heresy. So he establishes a camp on the outskirts of Kufa. And his Persian guards end up reclaiming Al-Mansur a god. And when he objects to this, they try to kill him. And so he has them all killed. But he decides, you know, this is no good either. Haran, the capital of Marwan, again, rife with pagans. And so he decides that he's going to build a new capital from scratch.

And he decides it's got to be in Mesopotamia. Mesopotamia is the richest possession in the entire Caliphate. It's very conveniently connected to the east. And so he goes sailing up and down the river Tigris looking for the perfect spot. And he settles on a tiny village called Baghdad. Baghdad is not an Arab word. It's a Persian word, meaning a gift from God. It's one of a number of very Christian villages, lots of monasteries. Al-Mansur buys up the whole lot and decides that this is where he is going to found his capital. And aside from the fact that it has very, very convenient links to Korazan, it's also on the trade links between the Persian Gulf, so Basra and the Mediterranean. And this is why in the passage that you so beautifully read at the start, he says this city is going to be the crossroads of the universe. And basically, that's what Baghdad becomes. Al-Mansur's aim is that Baghdad will be the center of the world. And that's basically what it does indeed become. Because it becomes the most popular city, the richest city on earth, doesn't it, for a time? It does. But before we get to that, Tom, tell us how it's built. So Al-Mansur arrives in the spring of 762. And his engineers outline that the new city's walls incenders. And then the day that is chosen for the foundation, it's chosen by two royal astrologers. And the date is variously given as the 30th of July or the second of August. It's sometime around then. And it's Mansur, of course, who lays the first brick. And it takes four years to complete the initial stage of the capital. And then 768, he starts to build an extension on the far side of the Tigris. And these are linked by pontoon bridges. Lots of land around the city are given to soldiers from Korazan. So basically, you know, it's kind of free land. This solves the problem of how do you keep your soldiers on board and give them land? And very rapidly, you're starting to get slums develop as well. Because it's obvious that this is going to be the place to be. And Baghdad is given the official name of Madinat Assalam, the city of peace. Now, what does it look like? The problem we have is that the foundation established by Al-Mansur, nothing has survived at all. So we're dependent on written sources. And a lot of these, you know, there's a reason why Baghdad becomes the fabled city of the Arabian Nights. So clearly very tall stories are told about it. But having said

that, you know, there is a kind of consensus in the sources that you can kind of arrive at. And the most striking thing about it is that the city that is initially built by Mansur is a circle, an absolutely perfect circle. So Al-Jahiz, who is a famous essayist, who actually ends up being crushed to death when a great pile of books fall on him. That's a warning to us all, Tom.

Warning to us all. He says of Baghdad that it's such a perfect circle that it is as if it was poured into a mold and cast. So you have a moat, you have two massive walls. These walls are estimated to have been anything from one to four miles in circumference. The outer wall is 60 feet high. The inner wall is 90 feet high. So these are massive, massive walls. There are only four gates. These gates are located midway between the four cardinal directions, so northeast, south, and west. And the gateways are spectacular. So you have cupolas. These are over the gatehouse. These are supported by columns of teak. The coloring of these gatehouses, green on the outside, gold ceilings. So to go into Baghdad, you know that you are entering the most spectacular, the most beautiful city on the face of the planet. Each of these gates, straight roads leading to the very center of the city, lined with vaulted arcades. And beyond these arcades, there are various bazaars, which are of course incredibly rich because Baghdad attracts merchandise from across the world. And these are there for the first years of Baghdad's existence, but then a Byzantine emissary comes and points out to Mansur that bazaars breed mobs and that mobs are capable

of turning on emperors. And this, of course, is something that the Byzantines are well aware of. And so Mansur, you know, he says, whatever, no one would attack me. And then a few months later, he orders all the bazaars out and they are moved to a place called Kark, which becomes the kind of the great commercial industrial hub of the city. And that's outside the circular walls. And actually, the west part of Baghdad is still nicknamed Kark to the state, isn't it?

To this day, yeah. From that, yeah. And then you have this kind of third innermost wall.

And beyond this innermost wall, you have a great central enclosure. And inside it, you have a mosque and a palace. And this is a pious recreation of how Muhammad had lived at Medina, where he had a mosque and there were living quarters for his various wives.

So even though the buildings here are massive, there is a sense in which

Al-Mansur is paying tribute to the Prophet because both these buildings are on a massive scale.

So 360,000 feet is Justin Marazzi's estimate in his book *Mosque*, so vast. And the palace, it's called the Palace of the Golden Gate. It has an enormous 120-foot-high green dome above the main audience chamber. This is an emulation of what the Amayad's done. So Amayad palaces had green domes. But again, absolutely nothing on this scale. And again, you get a sense of the way in which the stupendous quality of this very rapidly starts to shade into myth because there are stories that on the top of the dome, there is a statue of a horseman with a lance and that this horseman will turn and point the lance in whatever direction the next enemy to confront the Caliph is expected to come from. And within this great central enclosure, no one except for Mansur himself is allowed to ride a horse. So even his relatives, if they're ill, they're not allowed to get on a horse.

And Tom, the people who moved to Baghdad, so the Caliph moves in his bodyguards, his nobles, whatever his advisors. But all the people who are piling in, are they what?

Economic migrants from other parts of the empire? Are they largely from Iran or from Mesopotamia?

Do we have any sense of that? You have his courtiers and you have the soldiers from Corazan who've been given lands rather like Octavian gives lands to his legions after he's defeated Anthony, same kind of idea. But inevitably, you have people who are flocking to where the Caliph is. I mean, this is where the action is. So yeah, you have people from across the entire world coming to Baghdad. And that means that the city is endlessly growing. So Mansur himself, I mean, amazingly, he decides he's a bit fed up with his palace in the middle of the round city. So he builds another one called the Palace of Eternity down by the banks of the Tigris. I guess because it's cooler there, you're getting the airs from the river. And he also builds another extension, another palace on the far side of the banks, so on the western banks of the Tigris. And it's just enormous. And even Byzantine ambassadors coming from Constantinople are kind of stupefied by it, stupefied by the wealth, by the beauty, and by the absolute perfection of the round qualities of these great central walls in the heart of Baghdad. And this becomes a great source of pride to Baghdadi's later in centuries on. So one of them who writes a history of Baghdad in the 11th century, he says of Baghdad, there is no other round city that is known of in all the regions of the world. So he sees it as being completely unique. But Dominic, here's the thing. It's not at all unique. Oh, Tom, what a twist.

Because actually, various cities in the Sasanian Empire had been circular. So even Iran had been kind of oval. But the Sasanians had actually been very keen on circular cities. And that's a reflection of the fact that although we think Baghdad is an Arab city, the designers and the architects seem almost certainly to have been Persian. So the design of the mosque, the mosque does not have a dome in the center of the round city. It's actually modeled on Persian exemplars of architecture that goes ultimately all the way back to Persepolis. There's a little touch of the court of the king of kings in the great mosque in the center of Baghdad. And if the association of palace and mosque in the middle of Baghdad echoes the example of Muhammad, it also echoes the example of the Sasanian kings who had kind of fused fire temples with palaces in their own cities. And even one of the astrologers who fixes the date for the founding of Baghdad, he's a Zoroastrian convert. So the weird thing about Baghdad is that almost everything about it suggests a culture that is ultimately Persian and therefore actually much older than Mansur himself. So even though Baghdad is a new city, its roots are actually surprisingly deep. And it reflects a seismic development in the history of Islam and therefore of the world, which is that the orientation of Islam from this point on will definitely be Persian rather than Roman. So Tom, just to focus in on that.

So in Islam emerged, it emerged in a world heavily influenced by the Romans on a frontier, I guess. At first, the Romans themselves thought it was a kind of those first fragmentary sources say, well, is it a kind of Jewish heresy? Is it an offshoot to Christianity? Who knows what it is? So the Arabs have taken over a lot of the old Roman Empire, North Africa, the Levant and so on. But would it be an exaggeration to say that with the Abbasid takeover, with the founding of Baghdad,

there is a massive fracture point, which is that now what we think of as the Middle East is looking away from the West, from the Mediterranean, and looking more towards Persia, basically. Yes, I think so. The Amirids were notorious for impersonating Caesar's. This was one of the many accusations that were leveled against them. If you think of the Dome of the Rock, it's like a Byzantine church. Yeah, it's like the great church in Constantinople, right?

Yeah, the great mosque that the Amirids built in Damascus, that had originally been a cathedral, but before a cathedral, it had been a temple to Zeus. So it's literally built within the shell of a Roman pagan temple. And there is a sense that the endless attempts to try and capture Constantinople are because the Amirids feel that they can only properly be world emperors if they're ruling it from the capital of Caesar. But with the Abbasids and with the founding of Baghdad, that orientation, that sense that it's the Roman example that is there to be emulated or to be rather to be drawn on, perhaps I should say, for cultural and ideological sustenance, that fades. And increasingly, it's the Persian example. But it's not just the Persian because I'm sure people who have heard the episodes that we did on Babylon, when I'm talking about the great walls, the great religious structures and palaces in this heart of the city, will be reminded of Babylon. Now, this is not conscious, but Babylon is only about 40 miles from where Baghdad is. And there are other cities as well. So there's Selukia, which had been the great Hellenistic capital, Tossiphon, which had been the Sasanian capital. These are pretty much on the doorsteps of Baghdad. And in fact, Tossiphon provides kind of raw materials for the building of Baghdad. And even if Mansur himself is not consciously drawing on these exemplars, scholars in Baghdad do recognize the fact that the placement of Baghdad in what they can recognize as the great birthplace of civilization is significant. So there's the court astrologer in the earliest days of Baghdad. He writes that the people of every age and era acquire fresh experiences and have knowledge renewed for them in accordance with the decree of the stars. So there's that idea that Baghdad is the latest iteration of cycles of great cities that have risen and fallen, but that Baghdad is the culmination of it because it can absorb the learning and the experience of all the cities that have gone before it.

That's the kind of climax of world history.

Yes, because just as Jews and Christians and Zoroastrians have been absorbed into the Caliphate, just as the Roman and Iranian provinces have been absorbed into it. So is the past being absorbed into an Islamic future? Baghdad is the summation of all the civilizations that have gone before it. And this is basically why representatives of the superseded faiths are perfectly welcome in Baghdad. So I said one of the astrologers that says the date on which it should be founded is Zoroastrian. The other one is a converted Jew. The court physicians are Christian. Christians are famous as doctors. And within only a few decades of the founding of Baghdad, the Eastern Patriarch will be enshrined in Baghdad and made very welcome. But there's also a sense in which symbolically trophies are being brought to Baghdad that symbolize kind of older civilization. So the gates on the four great gates that lead into the circular city, the story goes that originally they were made by demons out of iron for Solomon. And one is said specifically to have been of pharaonic workmanship. And by pharaonic, it doesn't mean it comes from Egypt, but from a pagan temple probably in Syria.

Right.

So these gates are pre-Islamic, but the point is that they have now been absorbed into the urban fabric of an Islamic city. And so you can see economically in terms of trade policy, in terms of its ability to command the high roads that lead out to the limits of the frontier, in terms of psychogeography, in terms of culture, in terms of architecture, Baghdad is a brilliant, brilliant foundation. Everyone immediately recognizes that this is a city that even though it's a barely been existence, so Mansur dies, as we said earlier on pilgrimage to Mecca in 775. By the time of his death, everyone absolutely accepts that Baghdad is the place to be,

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that it is a beautiful haunted place. And that's kind of amazing considering, you know, it's, it's the Milton Keynes of...

I'm glad you said that at the end, not at the beginning, because we wouldn't have any listeners, apart from people in Milton Keynes, of course.

Actually, in Milton Keynes, they were very keen on psychogeography as well. The chief designer was a druid.

I've written about Milton Keynes, Tom. I'm actually quite a big fan of Milton Keynes.

Anyway, listen.

He gets a bad press.

This is an unexpected development. Let's just leave this episode by saying that Baghdad has been founded. The boast of Mansur, that it will become the crossroads of the universe, has been fulfilled. You know, it's, it's a global crossroads, but it's also crossroads where past and future, where various traditions, various understandings of the divine all meet.

And that this sets it up for what will become an absolutely dazzling golden age. And it's the reason why, I guess, Assassin's Creed have decided that Baghdad deserves to rank alongside Alexandria as one of the totemic urban centers of human civilization.

So the good news is, Tom, we've finally got within 100 years of the period that the introduction to the last episode was set in. At last, we are approaching what we'll be talking about next week, which is even more exciting than what we've done so far. So we will be talking about the golden age of Baghdad, the Islamic golden age, this extraordinary zenith of arts and philosophy and mathematics and science and all kinds of drama. And of course, the world of the Arabian Nights and Haroun al-Rashid and all of this stuff. So we've got all that to look forward to next week. Of course, if you remember the Restless History Club, you know, the drill, you get all kinds of lovely sherbets and sort of dancing sweetmeats and all that kind of stuff, don't you? And you also get the chance to listen to episodes early, which is the real attraction. But the rest of you, we will, well, we will join you next week, hopefully. And Tom, thank you very much. And on that note, goodbye. Goodbye.