

[Transcript] The Rest Is History / 378. Baghdad: The Golden Age

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.

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The garden was called the Garden of Delights, and in the middle of the garden was a palace called the Palace of Marvels, belonging to the Caliph Haroun al-Rashid. Whenever the Caliph felt his chest constricted, he would come to this garden and this palace to breathe freely, to amuse himself and forget his cares. The entire palace was formed of one immense chamber, lighted by 80 windows. This chamber was opened only when the Caliph came. Then all the lamps and the great chandelier would be lighted, and all the windows flung open, and the Caliph would sit on his great divan, covered in silk, velvet, and cloth of gold, and cause his singers to sing and musicians to delight him with their music. And thus, in the calm of the night, and amid the warm air sweetened with the scent of the flowers in the garden, the Caliph could feel true contentment

in the city of Baghdad. So that, Tom, was the Arabian Knights, and that is a description of the Caliph Haroun al-Rashid, the person who is the embodiment of the Golden Age of Baghdad, the

subject of the new Assassin's Creed video game, and a subject that you've long wanted to do on the rest of history, Tom, with two episodes in, and this is the high point of medieval Islamic civilization, isn't it? It is, but I think it's also seen as that passage that you read suggests. It's seen almost as a city of myth, and that, I think, is largely because of the Arabian Knights that we'll talk about in our final episode. But the sense of Baghdad as a place of romance, of poetry, of myth is a crucial part of the resonance that it has, I think, because it is one of those great imperial cities like Rome, or indeed, you know, the London of Sherlock Holmes, that lives in the imagination as well as in the history books. Do you think, I mean, were you an Arabian Knights fan? Absolutely. But I think the interesting thing about it is that the Arabian Knights, whether it has the currency now that it would have done 50 or 100 years ago, I think, in Western households is dubious. I mean, it was very much the sort of stuff of the middle or upper class nursery, wasn't it? I think it would have been nice.

They loved it, yes.

So if you'd asked me, actually, Tom, where were the Arabian Knights set? If you'd asked me before this podcast, I would probably have struggled to tell you. I would have said Baghdad, Cairo... And you'd have been right, because a lot of them are set in Cairo, but the kind of the foundational ones are set in Baghdad. And Harun al-Rashid is the embodiment of it, because he is the Caliph who kind of lives in his palace, often goes out into the streets. And that is because, as you said, he is identified as this kind of peak moment in the great civilization of Islam.

Yeah.

That, of course, opens up the question of, well, is it accurate as so often? You know, again and again over the rest of history, we've kind of looked at the way that the past is mythologized and then asked, well, what is the reality behind it? And I think there's a kind of particular challenge with trying to work out whether the Baghdad of Harun al-Rashid really was the kind of the shimmering dimension of wonder that it is in the Arabian Knights, because it's completely vanished, partly because the Mongols obliterated it when they conquered it in the 13th century. But also, as with Babylon, because it is made of mud brick, not of stone. And so it's all kind of melted away into sludge.

So the question of how golden was the golden age, how great a Caliph was Harun al-Rashid, I think is a very interesting question. And today's theme, Dominic.

Great. So, Tom, give us, for those people who didn't listen last week, give us a bit of context. We're in the Middle East, obviously, we're in modern day Iraq. You talked last time about the foundation of Baghdad, but we're now well into the Abbasid Caliphate. So these guys who had toppled

the previous rulers, the Amayads. So just sort of sketch that out a bit for us.

So we're in the city of Baghdad, founded by Al Mansur, which we talked about in the previous episode, the first great Abbasid Caliph. Harun al-Rashid, which is Harun is the Arabic form of Aaron, the brother of Moses. And al-Rashid means the rightly guided. He is Al Mansur's grandson, and he rules between 786 and 809, according to the Christian calendar. And his grandson of Al Mansur,

as I said, which means that he is the son of the guy that we talked about in the previous episode, Al Mansur's heir, who finds all the bodies of the descendants of Ali in the storeroom with the tags in the area, if you remember. So this is a guy called Al-Mahdi, and he is much more easy going than his rather austere and terrifying father. He's a great one for the wine and the sherbet

and the dancing girls. And also, Dominic, he's a particular fan of pigeon racing. So Gordon Cruller, I'm pleased to hear that. So he loves his pigeon racing. Pigeon racing, by this point, has become a massive obsession in Baghdad. Everyone's gambling on it. Harun himself will love it. And Al-Jahiz, who is a great scholar, ends up being crushed to death beneath a huge pile of books. He writes that a pigeon could fetch as much as a farm. So this is the kind of the world that Al-Mahdi is ruling over. And Harun is his son. But the story of Harun's reign is marked by all kinds of shenanigans that are very, very caliph. They're very caliph. Yeah. They're the kind of stuff that people will probably remember from the previous two episodes, that there are certain themes over the course of caliphal history that become quite familiar. So one of them is disputed succession. So Harun is the younger son of Al-Mahdi. And his elder brother, Al-Hadi, he succeeds Al-Mahdi. He's very young. He's kind of 25. But Harun is Al-Mahdi's favorite son. And so Al-Mahdi has appointed him the crown prince, meaning that he will definitely succeed Al-Hadi when Al-Hadi dies. But Al-Hadi doesn't like this at all. He's not keen on this arrangement at all. Because he has a son. He has an infant son. Obviously, he wants to get rid of his brother. So this is kind of alarming for Harun, who is clearly not very popular with his elder brother. And what makes it more dangerous for him is that Al-Hadi is a very menacing figure. So Al-Mahsudi, who's a great historian writing in the 10th century, says of Al-Hadi that he was hard. He was coarse in his habits. He was difficult to approach. He was the first caliph to be preceded by bodyguards carrying naked swords, clubs, and bows ready strong. And part of this, Tom, is because in the caliphal system, it's not premature. It could be anybody who succeeds. There's an inbuilt inherent struggle for power. So there's not an assembly that chooses. It's just whoever garots these siblings first. Yeah, pretty much. Because the figure of the caliph and his relationship to the mass of the Muslim people is something also that is constantly open for negotiation. And so therefore, the corollary of that is that the qualifications to be caliph are kind of a movable feast. But ultimately, of course, it depends on raw power. But if you are in position of the caliph or throne, then your power to get rid of unwanted younger brothers is pretty extensive. So this is alarming for Harun. And there are various accounts of how much danger he's actually in during Al-Hadi's reign. There are reports that he ends up in prison. We don't really know. They're very mythologised these stories. But what is very clear, and again, an absolute theme of early caliphal history, is that the role played by very powerful women in the background is absolutely key. So Al-Hadi and Harun share the same mother. And this mother is a very, very significant player. So she is called Al-Kaizaran. She's a former slave from Yemen. She had been bought by Al-Mansur, so the founder of Baghdad, in Mecca. And he had then given her as a kind of present to Al-Maldi, his son. And she was incredibly beautiful, slender and graceful as a reed, she was described as. And she is very smart, very witty, very, very politically savvy. She has great tongue. She really is great, I think. And Al-Maldi becomes besotted by her, makes her his legal wife. And that means that when he dies and Al-Hadi succeeds, she is the queen mother. She is a figure of considerable power. Al-Hadi, of course, becomes very resentful of this, a bit like Nero, becoming very resentful of his mother, Agrippina.

Because she's pretty autonomous. I mean, she's inherited lots of wealth.

She has a great palace. She has lots of petitioners who are constantly asking her for favours.

And she is then coming to Al-Hadi and demanding that he do what she wants him to.

And he becomes very, very resentful of this.

And so, again, a bit like Nero, he ends up trying to kill her. At least, there's the story.

The story goes that he sends her a dish of rice, saying that he had found this dish of rice so tasty that he wants her to have a bit of it.

And Kaiser ran by this point, he's getting a bit nervous, so she feeds a little bit of it to her dog that probably keels over, frothing at the mouth and dies. And so, she then sends back, saying, yes, it was delicious. I love it. So, this is tense. And it's, I guess, not surprising that soon after this, after Al-Hadi has tried to poison his mother, that Al-Hadi himself goes down with terrible stomach pains and dies soon afterwards. The official statement is that he's died of a stomach ulcer. But of course, there are lots of people who say, oh, well, he was poisoned by his mother. And there are other excellent stories that say that he's choking, breathing his last, and Kaiser ran his mother, absolutely finishes him off by getting a very large buttock to slave girl to sit on his face and smother him to death.

Brilliant, Tom. Brilliant. So, that's exactly the kind of conduct that I expected would be taking place in Baghdad in the eighth and ninth centuries or whatever. But listen, so this is also very Roman. Yes, it is. It's very similar to the kind of Julio-Claudian behavior. So, with the Romans, the period you've written about, the sources are all very dodgy and propagandistic. Is that also the case with all this, with this whole period? I think so. They're written about a century later.

So, I'm absolutely not going to say it didn't happen. We all hope it did. But

treat it with a pinch of salt, maybe. Treat it with a pinch of salt. But of course,

there's no smoke without fire. These stories in themselves tell you about the dynamics that are operative in the court. And I think absolutely one of these kind of themes that these stories

does reflect is the fact that women in this period have a great deal of power, probably much

more power than they will in due course. And what Kaiser An was to El-Madi, Harun's cousin,

a woman called Zabida, is to Harun, his favorite wife. So, he has three other wives. He also has

200 women in his harem who give him over 20 children. So, he's very active. One of them

actually dominates is a Greek. So, she's called Helena. Oh, mother of Constantine. Yes. She becomes

mistress of the harem and she ends up so celebrated across Baghdad for her beauty that supposedly

she gives her name to a quarter of Baghdad, Helena. Oh, that's a nice word. I mean, whether that's

really where the name of that quarter comes from again. I mean, who knows. Yeah. But anyway,

the tradition is which is preserved in the Arabian Nights where Zabida is always going out with

Harun

on kind of expeditions across Baghdad. She's famously beautiful, of course. She has exquisite

taste. She's kind of the arch influencer in Baghdad. Yeah. Incredibly fond of luxury.

Rather brilliantly, she owns a monkey that has 30 attendants. And whenever people come in to see

her, they have to kiss the hand of the monkey. So, that sounds to me like the kind of detail

probably cannot be true. No, Dominic. It's definitely true because in due course, we know

for a fact that a general comes in is told to kiss the hand of the monkey and is so furious

that he draws his sword out and chops the monkey in two. How do we know the kind of detail that's

invented? I don't think so. Enough of your relentless skepticism. Yeah. So, the monkey has 30 slaves.

I mean, I raise an eyebrow at that, shall we say, Tom? So, weirdly, throughout Islamic history,

the possession of monkeys is seen as a marker of something that's not quite right. And earlier, Caliph had had a monkey and this was one of the black marks that was leveled against him to justify rebellion. So, I think that it could be the sense of Zabeda as having, you know, jewel slippers, lots of extravagance, having a monkey is deliberately hyped because what's undoubtedly the case is that she is simultaneously very pious. So, I think there's a kind of Jekyll and Hyde representation there in her character because she is famous for her generosity to the poor, in obedience to the mandates of Islam. Yeah. And she also sponsors the building of hostels along the Great Road that leads from Baghdad to Mecca. And so, this pilgrimage route comes to be known as the Darb Zabeda, the Zabeda Road, the Zabeda Trail. And she gives her ruin a son, Al-Amin. And so, obviously, she's very keen that Al-Amin will become the heir. So, Tom, you know Zabeda, who she reminds me of, great friend of the rest of history, is the Empress Theodora because she conforms to the same stereotype of being on the one hand kind of luxurious and sensual and erotic and on the other, kind to the poor. Yes. And pious and austere.

It's a formula, isn't it? I think it is.

It's a formula, a literary formula for describing queens and empresses, I guess.

I think it is. And I think, yes, I think it channels ambivalences that pious Muslim men feel about a female patron of charity and good works. I'm sure that's right.

The other thing, of course, that everyone knows about from the Arabian Knights is that Caliphs have viziers.

Of course. I love a vizier.

And Haroun has tremendous viziers. So, they all belong to a family called the Barma Kids, which I think is a great word. A great name for, you know, a toy shop or something.

Well, surely the Barma Kids is like some peculiar...

It's the Barma Kids.

Very good.

Hey, hey, for the Barma Kids.

See, I was thinking, is that some kind of weird northern word for a bap or a roll?

A Barma Kid. I think that's what they call baguettes in Rotherham.

I guess it could be. No, I think it's... I think you get it on Nickelodeon.

The Zani antics of the Barma Kids.

That's very good.

In fact, they're from Balkh in what's now northern Afghanistan.

Oh, yeah.

You know, they're a long way from the heartlands of Caliphate.

They'd originally been Buddhists and they had only converted from Buddhism relatively recently in generational terms.

And they had the kind of the patriarch of the Barma Kids, a guy called Khalid al-Barmaki.

He had joined the Abbasid Revolution because people remember that from the previous episode, the Abbasid Revolution kind of was incubating up in Korazan.

And so he becomes vizier to al-Saffa, who was the first of the Abbasid Caliphs.

And then under al-Mansur, he'd become a governor out in Korazan.

So he was a very, very able man, a brilliant kind of financial whiz,

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but also a great general, crushed his revolts impeccably loyal to the Abbasids.
And he has a son, Yaya, who is equally able and who is very intimately connected with Harun, because Harun as a baby is nursed by Yaya's wife.
And Yaya's wife has a son at almost exactly the same time as Harun.
And so the two boys are brought up.
And this boy, Jafar, becomes Harun's closest friend.
He's like a brother to him.
And of course, he regards Yaya as almost as a father, particularly during the dark days of al-Hadi's rule. Yaya stays loyal to him, to Harun.
And so when Harun becomes Caliph, he feels an incredible sense of loyalty to Yaya.
And Yaya is incredibly able and serves Harun very, very well.
And in fact, for centuries and centuries, he will be remembered in the Muslim world as the absolute model of a great, wise, pious, vizier.
Just as Jafar, Yaya's son, the almost brother to Harun, will be remembered as the model of a dashing...
He's kind of the embodiment of coolness, almost.
Right.
He's kind of almost a JFK figure.
Cranky.
He's charismatic.
He's good looking.
Is he like Charles Brandon Duke of Suffolk?
No, I don't think he is.
Because Charles Brandon Duke of Suffolk, Henry VIII's great friend, is, I mean, he's a lad.
He's a rugby player.
Jafar is...
He's a pigeon racer.
...is more delicate.
So the description of him, to find words for his beauty, think of the purest gold coin of ancient Egypt, the pearl which glowing from the shell's depths breaks the diver's heart, or gold leaf floating from the craftsman's hand to gild the pages of a wondrous book.
So that's not...
No.
That's not the Earl of Suffolk, is it?
That's like Hephaestian, Alexander the Great's pal, maybe, or Patroclus or something.
Yes, I think that's slightly closer, because Jafar is the most fashionable man in Baghdad.
He's very cultivated.
He's very sophisticated.
He is a great sponsor of learning.
He's very smart.

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He is the guy who opens the first paper factory in Baghdad using Chinese prisoners who've come from the distant Eastern frontier.

And in fact, a particular type of paper in the Arabic world is called Jafari after Jafar.

And basically, I think he's kind of...

He's tremendous fun.

And like Zabida, he is cast in the Arabian Knights and other stories as Harun's kind of companion in his adventures.

He's basically seen as the ideal best friend, the model of a best friend.

But then, in 803, it all goes horribly wrong.

Oh, no.

The Barma kids are wiped out on Harun's order.

Jafar is actually executed.

Yahya is thrown into prison, and he dies there three years later.

And the question of why this brilliant family who Harun has loved and who have served him so well, why they are brought down is a topic of much, much debate, understandably.

There seems to be no definitive answer.

So there are stories that Jafar had been having an illicit affair with Harun's sister, and that this had offended him, both on the personal and the political level.

That Harun had worried that the Barma kids were coming too powerful, that they were a potential rival dynasty to his own.

Or possibly, another theory is that they weren't actually powerful enough, that they didn't have...

Because they were outsiders, because they had come from Korazan, they didn't have the roots in Iraq that more powerful families had.

And that made them easy to sweep aside.

And there is one theory that no historians really accept, that they were still secretly infidels that they had.

They're still Buddhists.

Well, they were said to be Zoroastrians, and they weren't Zoroastrians.

They'd originally been Buddhists.

So that's probably why the theory, almost certainly, isn't true.

But we don't really know.

Because all of these stories, as we've discussed before, are essentially operating on the margins of the fantastical.

You have archetypes, as you've been saying, of the over-mighty queen mother, of the beloved queen, of the vizier, of the best friend who becomes a kind of a figure of tragedy. And of course, Harun himself, amid all this,

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is cast as the flower of Caliphs.

And so it becomes hard to get a sense of the historical Harun.

But I think the sources are good enough that you get a sense of a very, very able, very austere, very pious figure.

So actually, not really like the Harun that you described in the opening passage with the sherbet and all that kind of stuff.

Dancing girls, yeah.

Because actually, he'd made his name as a military man.

He was a very, very keen soldier.

So one of the ways that he'd dealt with his unpopularity with Al-Hadi, when he was a young man, was that he'd gone off and fought with the Byzantines.

And actually, he'd gone so far that it was said he had rested his spear against the walls of Constantinople.

And over the course of his life, he's very, very keen on doing that.

So he's leading campaigns against the Byzantines almost every year.

And in fact, he's so committed to it that he ends up abandoning Baghdad altogether, amazingly.

For someone who's so associated with the city,

he ends up setting up a new capital in Raqqa.

And Raqqa is where the Islamic State made their own capital.

But back in the time of Harun, it was very much a Christian city.

But it's more convenient for launching campaigns against Byzantium.

So he's a hardened military figure.

He's a very able diplomat.

He's famous in Frankish history for having sent Charlemagne an elephant.

Oh, that's a lovely story.

Puzzling.

I mean, getting an elephant all those hundreds of miles west.

But very doable.

Well, clearly.

Well, because he sets up an excellent postal system.

Well, rather, he revives an excellent postal system.

The Sasanians, the Persians, had had a very...

So I guess I'd take an elephant to Akin or whatever.

The postal service under Harun were capable of doing it.

But obviously, he's also very hard.

I mean, one thing we can be absolutely certain about

is there's no room for sentimentality in his life

because he's ready to get rid of the Barma kids.

And he's a very tireless man.

There's a revolt in Korazan.

He goes off to suppress it.

He does it.

And then he dies and is buried in Korazan.

So definitely a very able figure.
And his rule will be remembered by subsequent generations
as a golden age because it is so stable,
because it is so successful.
But I don't think that he ranks
as an absolutely game-changing ruler
in the way that Augustus or Constantine or Abdul Malik are.
He's famous because people look back
and are nostalgic for the order that he had represented
and because of his association with Baghdad
at the absolute pinnacle of its greatness.
And I think in the second half
we should look at what Baghdad was actually like.
Brilliant.
To the extent that we can tell under Harun al-Rashid.
Okay, brilliant.
So join us after the break for a deep dive
into the world of Baghdad.
Welcome back to The Rest is History.
We are about to plunge into the seething markets
and sooks of Baghdad.
The Hammams.
The Hammams, the steam rooms.
It's all to come.
So come on, Tom, provide us with some steam, please.
Well, you were skeptical about the portrayal of the family life
of Harun al-Rashid and asked how mythic it is.
And the same problem, of course, hangs over Baghdad
because, as we've been saying, it's so mythologized.
But we do have sources for it.
Basically, there are three main sources,
all of which come from around by the Christian Reckoning 900.
So we have Al-Yakoubi, who I think we've mentioned before,
who's a geographer and historian,
and he describes all the various kind of the quarters.
He's kind of the Lonely Planet Guide or something like that.
Right.
Gives you a sense of what it would be like actually to visit it.
Then there is a guy called Ibn Sarapion,
whose great thing is canals.
So he loves the canals and we will come to the canals.
Baghdad, in a way, is kind of the Venice of Iraq.
I mean, it's kind of come to that in a minute.
And then our third source is a historian called Al-Tabari,

who describes the tragic events that follow Harun al-Rashid's death. Because, again, there is a spectacular succession crisis involving two brothers, both of whom who hate each other. So we mentioned that Harun and Zabida had a son, Al-Amin, and in due course, he does indeed become Caliph. But Al-Amin inevitably has a younger brother, who also has aspirations to become Caliph. And this is a guy called Al-Mamun, who is the son of Harun by a Persian concubine. And Al-Mamun had been born on the very day that Harun himself became Caliph. And so Harun is superstitious about this, thinks it may be a sign, a mark of favour from God. And so favours Al-Mamun as well. And Al-Mamun is given by Harun al-Rashid, the governorship of Korazan, which of course is the great incubator of rebellions. It's where the Varsid Revolution had begun. And sure enough, history repeats itself. Al-Mamun sends an army to attack Al-Amin in Baghdad. Al-Amin gets defeated in open battle, holds himself up in the round city in Baghdad. There's a year-long siege. Al-Mamun's army storms the round city. Al-Amin is killed on the 24th of September, 813. He is decapitated. His head is exposed on the principal bridge of the three bridges that cross the Tigris. And Al-Mamun is proclaimed Caliph. Even though he doesn't actually come and live in Baghdad until 10 years after the death of Al-Amin. And Tabari's account of this gives very detailed descriptions of various quarters of Baghdad and kind of topographical points where key moments in this tragic story happen. So they're close enough, I think, to the time of Harun al-Rashid, to give us some sense of what the city was like under Harun al-Rashid's rule. And at this point, we think it's probably the largest city in the world. Is that right? Yes. So you'll remember that Al-Mansur's ambition

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was to make it the crossroads of the universe.
And this is pretty much what it's become.
And there are various suggestions as to how large it was.
So Andre Klott, who wrote a wonderful book
about Harun al-Rashid,
he suggests that it was perhaps a million,
which was the size of Rome in its imperial heyday.
Other accounts I've read suggest maybe 700, 600, 500,000.
But certainly very, very large.
And it is indisputably the most global city
the world has ever seen.
It has the broadest reaching trade routes
of any metropolis until this moment
because it has silks and porcelain from China.
But it also has slaves from the frozen shores
of the distant North.
We talked about the slave trade to Baghdad in our episode.
Yeah, and the Vikings.
But it also has slaves from the southern
most reaches of Africa.
So essentially there is no corner of Eurasia
that Baghdad is not feeding on.
And as a result of this,
there are massive, massive fortunes to be made
because there's endless land speculation,
constant process of gentrification
in previously run down areas,
massive housing developments.
And that means that people who had grants of land
right at the beginning,
notably the troops from Corazan
who had provided Al-Mansur with his backing,
they make absolute fortunes
because they're sitting in the center of this,
the most valuable real estate on the face of the planet.
So this is good for the Abbasids
because it provides them with a solid,
loyal bedrock of support.
Yeah.
But it's not just land that is a source of wealth.
There is also, of course, trade.
And merchants are very, very admired in Islam.
The prophet himself, of course, had been a merchant.
And it's possible to sail down the Tigris

and the Euphrates to get to Basra
at the mouth of the Persian Gulf.
And this is where Sinbad, of course,
Sinbad the sail down the Persian Gulf
and out into the Indian Ocean.
And certainly ships are going right the way to Vietnam
and to Indonesia and so on
and bringing all kinds of riches back to Basra.
But the real source of Baghdad's wealth
is the fact that the caliphate constitutes
an enormous single market spreading from the Atlantic
right the way up to the gateways of China.
And it's a single market in which there is a lingua franca
in the form of Arabic.
And Islam provides frameworks of law
that enable merchants in Fez or in Korazan
to know that there will be a single standard.
Yes.
And so this provides enormous scope
for Baghdad to basically globalize.
And as in all great imperial cosmopolises,
whether it be ancient Rome or contemporary New York,
a consequence of this is an obsession with exotic cooking.
So Baghdad is in pole position
to get all those spices from India
and from further afield into the Indian Ocean and beyond.
But it can also get crops from across the caliphate.
And of course, the soil in Mesopotamia
is incredibly fertile, so they can be planted.
And the caliphate plays an absolutely key role
in spreading new crops.
This is the period when Spain, for instance,
gets orange trees brought by agronomists in the caliphate.
But the key crop in Mesopotamia is sugarcane.
I would imagine if I was catapulted back
into an eighth, ninth century Baghdad
that there'll be a lot of sweet meats, cakes,
those kinds of things.
And this is where we get all these honeyed drinks
and sweetened snacks and stuff.
Yes, so these sugarcane fields that are outside Baghdad
across the southern reaches of Mesopotamia,
that is where all those rich cakes
that the odolists in their Haris are using

to plump themselves up.
That's where they're coming from.
And even Haroun himself in the Arabian Nights
is cast as a cook.
So there's a kind of wonderful description of him cooking a fish.
Rickstein.
Very Rickstein, yes, or indeed Jackstein.
When it was well cooked on one side,
he turned it over with infinite skill
and when the fish was cooked to perfection,
withdrew it from the pan
and laid it on broad green banana leaves.
Then he went into the garden to gather lemons,
which he cut and arranged on the banana leaves.
Oh, that sounds delicious.
So Haroun is definitely a foodie,
and Baghdad is, you know,
it's definitely the place to go if you want Michelin,
three-star restaurants,
probably the greatest concentration
on the face of the planet.
But of course, there are also extremes of poverty
as well as of wealth.
And a lot of the poetry that we get from Baghdad in this time
poets tend not to be very well-paid.
And so there's quite a lot of complaints
about the extremes of wealth and poverty.
So there's one, Baghdad is a marvellous place for the rich,
but for the poor, a place of misery and distress.
Long will I wander, confused through its streets,
lost like a karam in the house of an infidel.
And there are large slums spreading outwards
into the muddy fields that stretch around Baghdad.
There are beggars everywhere.
And in fact, rather like in Imperial Rome,
the very poor have less opportunity to get ahead
than domestic slaves,
because as in Rome, slaves are usually freed.
Domestic slaves are usually freed.
And it's a kind of religious obligation on Muslims.
It's seen as something that is a pious duty to free slaves.
And so this gives to the inhabitants of Baghdad
an incredibly multicultural quality
because these slaves are coming from all corners of the world.

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And essentially, if you are a slave who is freed in Baghdad, you have a religion Islam that is absolutely colour blind. All that matters is that you become a Muslim. There's huge scope for you to get ahead. And so Baghdad is incredibly, if not... I mean, well, it is multicultural because there are Christians and Jews there as well, but it's definitely very, very multi-ethnic. Again, and this is very like Rome, you are unlikely, however, to be freed if you are a labourer out in the fields. And we mentioned the sugarcane and the slaves who are working on the sugarcane fields. I mean, they have a horrible life. And as in the Caribbean and Southern United States in the 18th and 19th centuries, these slaves are generally from Africa. So they're called the Zanj, the same word from which Zanzibar comes. So they're brought from Southern Africa and they are draining the marshes, working in the sugarcane fields. So that is a source of potential danger. There are large, large numbers of resentful slaves beyond Baghdad. Tens of thousands, Tom, presumably. Yes, I would think so. And there are, of course, there are fires, there are floods, there are plagues, there are sectarian riots, there are mafiosi, there are gangs. So it's a dangerous place and very, very dependent on the kind of security that a strong Caliph like Haroun al-Rashid can provide. So the topography of it, we talked about the round city. That was built by Al Mansur. And there's a great, a great sense of what it had come to be by the time of Haroun al-Rashid in a wonderful book that was written in 1900 by, he's British, even though he has a Belgian name, Guy LeStrange, Baghdad during the Abbasid Caliphate. And he says that by the time of Haroun, the round city of Mansur based the same relation to greater Baghdad as the city of London now bears to greater London, which I think is a great place.

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So it's been swallowed up effectively in suburbia.
And it's been improved.
So the great mosque, it's been pulled down,
rebuilt by Haroun al-Rashid.
The Palace of the Golden Gate,
which listeners will remember stands at the heart of the round city,
Haroun did not like it.
It was used by Alameen, his son in his final stand
when the armies came of his younger brother.
And it was, I think, so badly damaged in that siege
that it was never used as a royal palace again.
And the great Green Dome
with its guy on the horseback with the spear,
that collapses in 941, is struck by lightning,
and then by heavy rainstorms, and it kind of disintegrates.
The arcades that had originally been built as markets,
they are used as barracks for the Caliph's guards.
And essentially, it kind of becomes a prison zone.
So you have a prison as well.
It's the center of the security apparatus.
And it kind of therefore ceases really to be the kind of place
that the Caliph all want to go.
So it has its heyday under al-Mansur,
but by the time of Haroun, it's again a bit like the city.
It's not a place that people kind of go.
It's there for the police and for the soldiers
and for criminals to be locked up,
but it's not a place to go and have fun times.
However, fortunately, beyond the round city,
there's lots of fun to be had.
Because I mentioned about these canals
and how it gives to Baghdad a sense of Venice.
These are being threaded off from the Tigris.
And of course, people in Mesopotamia are brilliant at irrigation.
And the Caliphs are the heirs of the Persian kings
who had been developing this enormous network of canals.
They have to be dredged, of course.
You can't allow them to become fettered
because that would then breed malaria.
But under a Caliph like Haroun who can organize all this,
there's a kind of magical Venetian quality to it.
And Al-Makdisi, who is a geographer writing in the late 10th century,
says that the people of Baghdad come, go, and move about on water.
So very like Venice.

And the saying in Baghdad is that every person should have an ass in his stable and a boat on the river.

And of course, who has the most boats?

Obviously the Caliph.

And Al-Amin, before he comes to his disastrous end, he had six processional barges in the form of, respectively, an eagle, a lion, a horse, an elephant, a dolphin, and a serpent.

Right.

And so again, it's like the doge going out on his great triumphal barge. So tremendous scenes, Tom.

And I see from your notes that the canals have names that give us some sense of the city.

So the canal of the clothes merchants, the canal of the cooks, the canal of dogs.

Tom was the canal of dogs, not kennels, presumably.

Well, that's named after the number of strays that are leashed in this particular quarter.

And there's also the canal of birds, which are songbirds in cages.

Well, you know, I mean, the otolists in the harem need songbirds in their pretty cages, don't they?

Yes, it all comes back to the harem.

So this is all very Arabian nights.

And I think the reason why geographers and poets alike go on about the water is, of course, that it gets very hot in Iraq.

And so the water is expressive of cool and freshness, beauty.

And of course, it's the caliphs who command the most glorious water features.

But there is a sense that it should be made available for everyone.

So the rich will donate pools or fountains for the use of the poor.

And the sense that also that gardens should be made available.

This is also something that I think makes Baghdad quite a livable city, despite all the heat and the stress and the dust and the stray dogs and all that kind of stuff.

And of course, you can buy anything in Baghdad.

I mean, that's also the reason why people come there, you know, this great global entrepot.

So the markets are focused in the region called Khark.

On the west, the western side, right?

It's south, it's south of the round city.

And it's bordered by the Tigris on the east side and by the Pilgrims Way, the Serbiders Road that leads to Mecca on the west.

Yes.

Its main market is enormously large.

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I mean, it's kind of miles long, almost a mile wide.
And anyone who's been to a kind of, you know,
bazaar in Istanbul or wherever, you know,
it's divided up into it has kind of a lot of avenues, courtyards,
you know, you buy silks in one place or sweet meats in another.
So you can know exactly where you've got to go.
And in turn, that means that all the roads
have incredibly evocative names.
So I think my favorite one is the market of the thorn sellers.
And the brambles are used to heat the baths.
So it's all kind of tremendous.
And the zoning, so the unpleasant trades
of which butchers would be an obvious example
with all the, you know, the smell of the blood and the flies.
They're kind of pushed out to the borders of the zone.
And this means that it's quite easy for areas
that in the time of Al Mansur had been regarded
as kind of working class to gentrify.
So you get quite a lot of gentrification has happened
by the time of Haruna Rashid.
You have quarters that previously had been used
by blacksmiths or whatever.
Start to become the homes of lawyers or judges or whatever.
So this is all on the western side of the Tigris,
where the city was originally founded.
But you also have mass developments on the eastern side.
Listeners may remember that Al Mansur had built Almadi
when he was the Crown Prince, a beautiful palace
on the banks of the Tigris on the eastern side of the city.
And this quarter, it's called Rousseffa.
By the time of Haruna Rashid,
it's one of the most glamorous quarters in the whole city.
It has the most beautiful and the largest mosque
in the whole of Baghdad.
The palace that had been given to Almadi,
Harun uses it, enlarges it.
There are gardens, there are fountains.
So the description of Harun that you read,
I mean, this is probably where he should be imagined
as kind of hanging out.
Right.
And there are various kind of distinctive quarters
that are but Rousseffa, this kind of great complex of palaces.
So north of it is the High Gate Cemetery of Baghdad,

where all kinds of famous people are buried.

So Abu Hanifa Dominic, who is a very famous Muslim scholar, who we'll be talking about in our final episode, he's buried there.

Ibn Ashaq, who is the author of the earliest surviving biography of Muhammad, is there, lots of caliphs will end up buried there.

So that's very swanky.

And then also on the Eastern Bank, you have the Christian quarter, the Dar Arum, the house of the Greeks, as they call it.

And just to say about the status of Jews and Christians in Baghdad, they have complete toleration.

You know, they are absolutely allowed to do what they like to celebrate their festivals and their rituals.

They have to pay the jizya, which is this distinctive tax.

But otherwise, they're very much kind of woven into the urban fabric.

Could you advance as a Christian or Jew within Baghdad society if you paid the tax?

Could you just grab the key going?

You could become a rich merchant.

You could become a commander of soldiers.

There's no prohibition against that.

Yeah, you absolutely could.

Christians were particularly famous as doctors, Jewish merchants, Christian merchants.

You could do very well.

And of course, they are, you know, they're as grateful to the security provided by Haruna Rashid as any Muslim.

So there are sectarian tensions within Baghdad, but they tend to be between different factions of Muslims rather than Muslims kind of kicking over Christians or Jews or vice versa.

Interesting.

Yeah, that is not a source of sectarian tension.

So I think you definitely get a sense that the kind of the great theme in the Arabian Nights, which again,

we're becoming to of a place of fabulous wealth and sophistication and a place of kind of teeming multitudes where terrible things can happen,

but also great wonders can be found that this is rooted in a certain historical reality.

It is a place of slums, of violence, of robbery, of theft,

but it is also a place where you have palaces kind of stretching along

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the banks of the Tigris.

So Jafar, for instance, the beloved friend of Harun, who he ends up killing, he kind of develops what in London terms,

perhaps would be Hampton Court, kind of great palaces along the river that are outside the main centre of Conurbation.

And these become again, a kind of an entire string of pleasure resorts, fountains, all the works that ultimately get swallowed up by the city.

It's got a polo pitch, I read here, Tom.

Yeah, it's got a polo pitch.

It's got a race course.

It has a kind of a park for wild beasts, which is a tradition that goes all the way back to the ancient Persian kings, the Babylonian kings, the Assyrian kings.

So the sense of Baghdad as the successor to those great ancient capitals is absolutely present there, I think.

And that is why I think it's remembered.

We kind of have a sense of Babylon as a great city.

And I think Baghdad is absolutely the heir to that sense.

And so, Tom, the obvious question is, if it's so fantastic, so brilliant,

I mean, Rome, it's splendid lasted for centuries.

Why doesn't Baghdad's golden age last longer?

Or does it last longer?

And I just don't know about it.

My sense is that there's all kinds of revolts and there's a lot of stuff with slave soldiers that goes wrong.

Yes.

So it does remain the great global capital for several centuries.

And that's why its destruction by the Mongols in the 13th century does come as the most incredible shock.

But by the time the Mongols come, the golden ages long, long vanished.

The caliph has basically become a cipher and the city itself is a much more turbulent and violent place than it had been under Haroun.

And that's in part because the challenge of securing a stable succession is never really solved.

So we talked about how the siege of Baghdad in 813 that ends up with the death of Al-Amin.

There are historians who compare it to Paris in the commune, the horrors of that, the kind of sectarian violence that breaks out, the sufferings.

And as we said, the destruction that's visited on the round city is never really repaired.

Al-Mamun actually proves to be a very strong and effective caliph,

but he is succeeded by his brother, a guy called Al-Mutasim.

And his reign, there are kind of endless conspiracies, endless revolts.

And he gets so alarmed by how unstable Baghdad is, how kind of beyond the ability of a caliph to impose law and order on it that he actually, he says, I've had enough of this.

I'm moving out of Baghdad.

I'm going to found a new city, which he does it at a place called Samara, which is famous above all for its great minaret, which is like a kind of helter-skelter.

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I'm sure people have seen it.

And of course, he now, he's left behind that bedrock of support that the Corazon troops have provided him.

So now he needs new troops.

And so he starts recruiting Turks.

And effectively, he ends up the prisoner of his own.

Yes.

So these are the slave soldiers that you mentioned.

And then you have escalating crises.

By 865, you've got two caliphs, one in Samara, one in Baghdad.

You have rebellions from Karajites and Shias, constant theme.

And then in 869, the Zanj, these black slaves who've been working out in the sugarcane fields, they launch a terrible uprising.

And Bazaar is sacked and armies rampage across Iraq for 15 years.

Tens of thousands of people die.

Meanwhile, chaos in the center, provinces out in the outer reaches of the caliphate start to disintegrate.

And basically, Baghdad never recovers the supremacy, the security, the geopolitical centrality that it had had under Haroun.

And that, I think, is why his name is particularly commemorated by Muslim scholars, but also by the tellers of stories and fables over the centuries that follow.

And that's what we'll be coming to next time, isn't it, Tom?

So we'll be looking at Baghdad's impact on the world's imagination.

We'll be looking at its impact on Islam and the way it shapes this transformative religion.

But also, we'll be looking at the Arabian Knights and the way in which Baghdad's luster endures in the world of the Arabian Knights and the history that lies behind all that.

So we'll be doing that on Thursday.

If you're a member of the Restless History Club, if you're a member of what I know Tom likes to think of as our own, if you're one of our Udelisks, then you will be able to listen to that right now. And if you're not, if you're living outside the round city, as it were, then you'll have to wait till Thursday.

And Tom, we'll be back with the Arabian Knights, which will be very, very exciting.

We'll see you then. Goodbye.

See you then. Bye-bye.