

Benjamin of Tudela on the Caliph's Court at Baghdad

Like Constantinople, Baghdad was in a period of decline when the Spanish rabbi Benjamin of Tudela visited in the later twelfth century. Nevertheless, again like the Byzantine capital, Baghdad remained an immensely prosperous city. Benjamin's report on Baghdad concentrated largely on the court and palace of the Abbasid caliph.

The caliph is the head of the Muslim religion, and all the kings of Islam obey him; he occupies a similar position to that held by the pope over the Christians. He has a palace in Baghdad three miles in extent, wherein there is a great park with all varieties of trees, fruit-bearing and otherwise, and all manner of animals. The whole is surrounded by a wall, and in the park there is a lake whose waters are fed by the river Hiddekel. Whenever the king desires to indulge in recreation and to rejoice and feast, his servants catch all manner of birds, game, and fish, and he goes to his palace with his counsellors and princes. . . .

Each of his brothers and the members of his family has an abode in his palace, but they are all fettered in chains of iron, and guards are placed over each of their houses so that they may not rise against the great caliph. For once it happened to a predecessor that his brothers rose up against him and proclaimed one of themselves as caliph; then it was decreed that all the members of his family should be bound, that they might not rise up against the ruling caliph. Each one of them resides in his palace in great splendor, and they own villages and towns, and their stewards bring them the tribute thereof, and they eat and drink and rejoice all the days of their life.

Within the domains of the palace of the caliph there are great buildings of marble and columns of silver and gold, and carvings upon rare stones are fixed in the walls. In the caliph's palace are great riches and towers filled with gold, silken garments, and all precious stones. . . .

The caliph is a benevolent man. On the other side of the river, on the banks of an arm of the Euphrates which there borders the city, he built a hospital consist-

ing of blocks of houses and hospices for the sick poor who come to be healed. Here there are about sixty physicians' stores which are provided from the caliph's house with drugs and whatever else may be required. Every sick man who comes is maintained at the caliph's expense and is medically treated. Here is a building which is called Dar-al-Maristan, where they keep charge of the demented people who have become insane in the towns through the great heat in the summer, and they chain each of them in iron chains until their reason becomes restored to them in the winter. While they abide there, they are provided with food from the house of the caliph, and when their reason is restored they are dismissed and each one of them goes to his house and his home. Money is given to those that have stayed in the hospices on their return to their homes. Every month the officers of the caliph inquire and investigate whether they have regained their reason, in which case they are discharged. All this the caliph does out of charity to those that come to the city of Baghdad, whether they be sick or insane. The caliph is a righteous man, and all his actions are for good. . . .

The city of Baghdad is twenty miles in circumference, situated in a land of palms, gardens, and plantations, the like of which is not to be found in the whole land of Mesopotamia. People come thither with merchandise from all lands. Wise men live there, philosophers who know all manner of wisdom, and magicians expert in all manner of witchcraft.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

Compare Baghdad and Constantinople on the basis of descriptions provided by Benjamin of Tudela.

SOURCE: Benjamin of Tudela. *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela*. Trans. by M. N. Adler. London: H. Frowde, 1907, pp. 35-42. (Translation slightly modified.)