

In A.D. 750, the Abbasid family seized control of the Muslim Empire in the east. The second caliph of the Abbasid Empire, Abu Ja'far al-Mansur, moved the capital city from Damascus to Baghdad. Baghdad, located in the center of the empire, grew to become the most important city in the Muslim world. Much of what we know about medieval Baghdad is the result of eyewitness accounts from visitors or citizens.

The passage below contains a description of 10th-century Baghdad written by a Muslim scholar and Baghdad resident, al-Khatib al-Baghdadi. Al-Khatib's work was a biographical dictionary of important residents of Baghdad. His description of the city is based on information from these residents. The names at the beginnings of the paragraphs are the names of his sources.

An Excerpt from al-Khatib al-Baghdadi, *History of Baghdad*:

They say, when al-Mansur built his city he constructed four gates, so that if one came from al-Hijaz he entered by way of the Kufah Gate; if he came from al-Maghrib [West] he entered by way of the Damascus Gate; if he came from al-Ahwaz, al-Basrah, Wasdit, al-Yamamah and al-Bahrayn he entered through the Basrah Gate; and if he arrived from the east he entered through Khurasan Gate. He, that is to say, al-Mansur, placed every gate opposite the palace. He capped each gate with a dome, and erected eighteen towers between each gate, with the exception of the wall between the Basrah and Kufah gates, where he added an additional tower. He fixed the length between the Khurasan Gate and the Kufah Gate at 800 cubits [a cubit was approximately 1.5 feet], and from the Damascus Gate to the Basrah Gate at 600 cubits. There were five iron gates between the main entrance to the city and the gate which led to the courtyard.

Waki' related in the account which I have on his authority that Abu Ja'far built the city in a circular form because a circular city has advantages over the square city, in that if the monarch were to be in the center of the square city, some parts would be closer to him than others, while, regardless of the divisions, the sections of the Round City are equidistant from him when he is in the center. Al-Mansur then built four main gates, dug moats, and erected two walls and two fasils [defensive fields]. Between each main gate were two fasils, and the inner wall was higher than the outer wall. He commanded that no one be allowed to dwell at the foot of the higher inner walls or build any dwelling there; but ordered construction along the wall in the second fasil because it was better for the fortification of the wall. Then he built the palace and the mosque. In back of al-Mansur's palace was a reception hall [diwan] thirty by twenty cubits, whose ceiling ended in a dome. Above this audience room was a similar chamber, above which rested the green dome. The chamber stood twenty cubits high until the point where the vaulting of the dome begins. The distance between the ground line and the top of the green dome was eighty cubits, and surmounting the green dome, which could be seen from the outskirts of Baghdad, was the figure of a mounted horseman.