

Baghdad:

What were its connections across the medieval world?

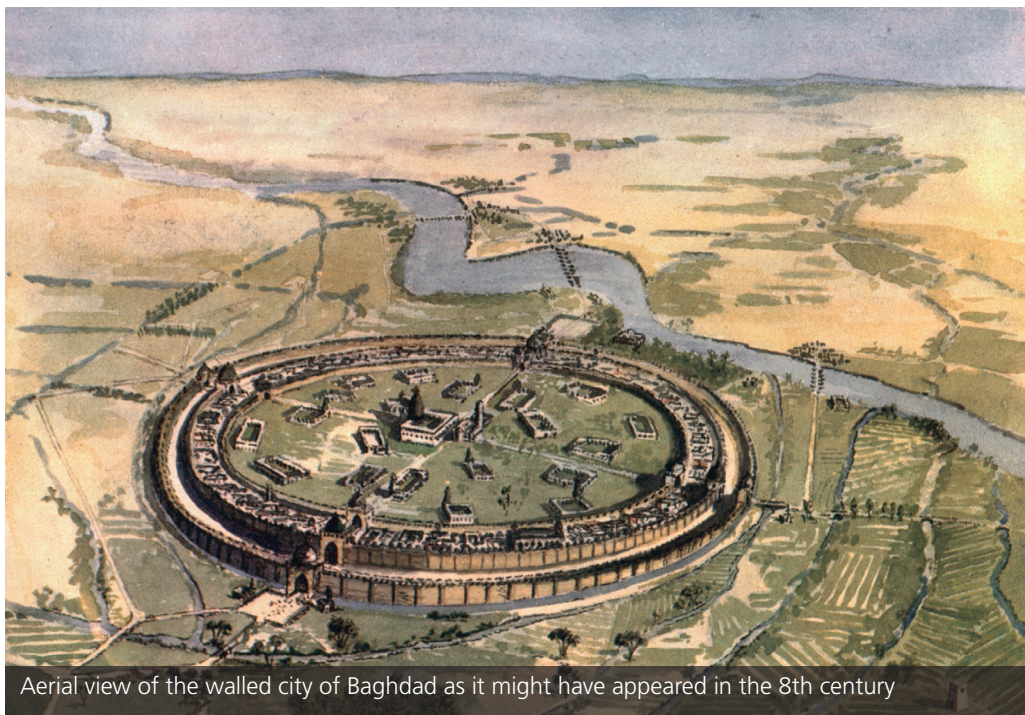
Karin Doull

I have seen the great cities, including those noted for their durable construction. I have seen such cities in the districts of Syria, in Byzantine territory, and in other provinces, but I have never seen a city of greater height, more perfect circularity, more endowed with superior merits or possessing more spacious gates or more perfect defences than ... the city of Abu Jafar al-Mansur.

9th-century author Al-Jahiz

Baghdad of the Abbasid Caliphate was an architectural marvel, a round city protected by huge walls and surrounded by an intricate canal system. At the centre lay the caliph's palace with a cupola of green, and the Great Mosque. The city was a series of concentric circles. The surrounding walls were over 240 metres high crowned with battlements and encircled by a deep moat. The city walls were made of bricks interlaced with reed bundles as were the buildings inside the city. Four equidistant gates opened onto four avenues that led straight to the heart of the city. Huge gatehouses guarded the city. They looked out over palm groves, fields, canals and bridges made of boats tied together and the growing suburbs in the west. Al Mansur was the caliph who designed and created the city. It is said that he liked to look out of the Khorasan gatehouse towards the river Tigris, in the afternoon when the sun was hot.

Four key roads bisected the city, feeding in trade from across the world. The roads into the city were originally lined with vaulted arcades for merchants' shops and bazaars but these quickly spread to outside the city. The centre of the city was open and sacrosanct to the caliph, who was the only one who could ride across it. The inner ring housed palaces of the caliph's



Aerial view of the walled city of Baghdad as it might have appeared in the 8th century

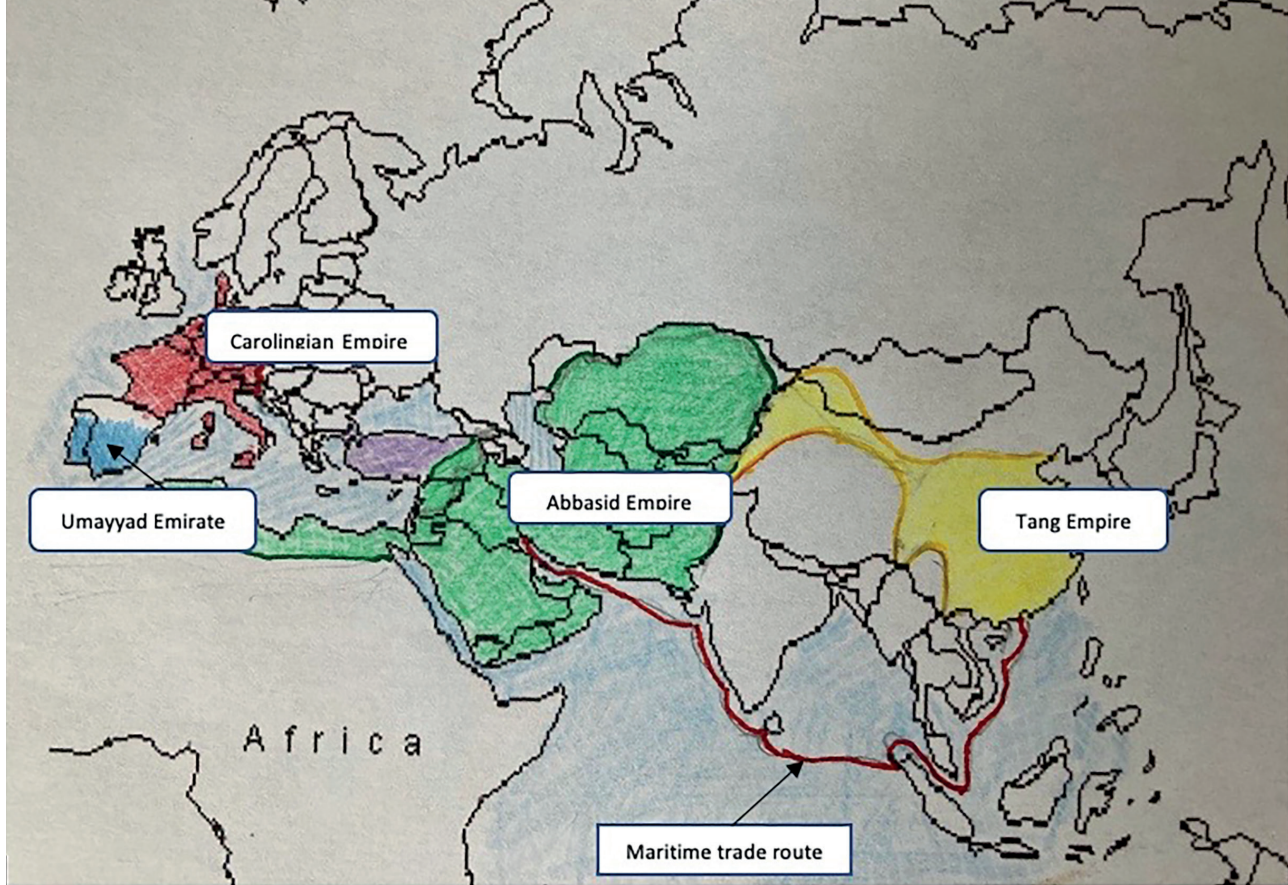
children and royal staff. The outer ring was for military and state offices. The city was essentially a royal preserve. These features reflect the significance of Baghdad – what follows will provide an insight into how it compared with other civilisations, and links and connections with other important powers.

Activity

Could the class design a model of the city as a perfect series of concentric circles bisected by gates? Children could each create a building to fit into the elements of the city including the great mosque and palace. They could also look at architectural designs and patterns of decoration. These short videos could provide background information.

www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/topics/z3tg4wx/articles/zpq2m39#z268dp30

www.youtube.com/watch?v=yfVj50dWCC4



Nearly a million people lived in and around this capital of an extensive and vibrant empire. Scholars came from across the known world to study in the House of Wisdom. There were two hospitals and an observatory. It was the hub of a vast trade network. The culture of the city shaped and was shaped by ideas from China to western Europe. This article will look at two of those interactions.

The **substantive concepts** considered within this article are trade, culture and diplomacy.

The key **disciplinary concepts** are significance and comparison identifying links and connections.

Who were the other superpowers at this time?

In the map above you can see some of the main influential regions.

- Tang Dynasty of China (yellow)
- The Abbasid Caliphate (green)
- The Carolingian Empire (red)
- The Byzantine Empire (purple, but not labelled)
- The Umayyad Emirate (blue)

Meanwhile, in England, the Anglo-Saxons were beginning to consolidate into a single kingdom.

This article will look at trading links between Baghdad and these empires, particularly focusing on the significance of links with the Tang and Carolingian empires.

Activity

One of the first activities that you could think about here to draw out the comparisons between different empires is to use the map: look at the size of these different empires and the scope of land that they controlled. Could this be compared with other civilisations that pupils may have looked at such as the Roman Empire or the territories of the Shang Dynasty? On a plain world map you could also colour in the areas controlled by Benin or the Maya.

You can then look at substantive concepts by considering – what do we mean by empire, caliphate, dynasty, emirate, kingdom and what would the rules of these places be called? How are the meanings of these terms the same or different?

What was the significance of Baghdad as a centre of imports and exports?

Baghdad stood at the centre of trade routes along the river Tigris almost equidistant between Mosul in the north and Basra in the south. Basra was a major port situated on the Persian Gulf and providing a sea route to India, Indonesia, Japan and China. Mosul linked into the land routes eastwards to Nishapur and Samarkand and then west to Cairo and Antioch and north to Russia.

Trade, people and letters all travelled backwards and forwards along the vast land and sea trade routes, with Baghdad forming an important central hub. Produce along the long route travelled by horse and camel. Different trade items such as heavier goods or fragile objects could be carried by sea.

Chart 1

Goods being traded	Origin of goods
Paper, silk, peacocks, medicine, ceramics (china), ink	China
Tigers, elephants, cotton, ivory, minerals, medicines, chess, spices, sandalwood and cedar	India
Diamonds, garnets, spices	Sri Lanka
Fur, honey, wax, amber, swords	Russia
Linen, horses, saffron, carpets	Azerbaijan
Textiles, wool, rugs	Armenia
Copper, gold, precious stones, textiles, crops	Egypt
Incense, precious stones	Yemen
Pearls, linen, textiles, cedar, olives, perfume, gum, swords	Byzantium

Activity

Make cards of the different goods. Have a large map on the table with different locations marked. Can the children as a group match goods to locations? What does this show about what people **in Baghdad** wanted to buy or sell? For a plenary you could get the children to play a question-and-answer game, using the question – Where would you go to get ... ?

What links did Baghdad have with China?

It was during the time of the Abbasids that trade really developed with the Tang Empire in China. There was much for Baghdad to gain from links and connections with this empire which was strong and open to developing trade and exchanging ideas. The Chinese also had knowledge of papermaking which spread and so helped to create works for the House of Wisdom. The trade with them in plants and spices also encouraged the spread of medical knowledge.

Travel accounts were written of these journeys, giving advice about where to stay, what is traded, types of money, where to stop for water and provisions. They also set up commercial centres at stopping points

along the route between Baghdad and China. They would have reached Guangzhou, the main trade port in China. Sulaiman al Tajir (in 851 CE), a Muslim merchant and traveller wrote, 'spices, pearls and jade piled up mountain high'. Arab traders set up commercial centres along the route but Guangzhou was to become the most important. Arab travellers built mosques and schools there and lived affluent lives arranging business ventures.

Trips between Bagdad and Guangzhou were arduous, taking just under a year. Most voyages were set up by professional merchants along with commercial agents. They would arrive between May and June in order to be presented at court and gain permission to trade. Time was spent waiting to arrange for the goods to be collected and prepared. Then they would be delayed until the monsoon winds allowed a return around November or December. The ships would bring products to China such as incense, and return with ceramics and silk.

Activity 1 How do goods travel from China now?

Today the same sea voyage would take 26 days at 10 knots or 9 days at 30 knots. This website allows you to calculate how long a journey takes. Children could look at how long a voyage would take between other stopping points along the route such as Somnath and Calcut (india). Chittagong, Srivijaya
<http://ports.com/sea-route/>

What are the main similarities and differences between making a seas journey between Basra and China today with merchants and travellers in the ninth century?



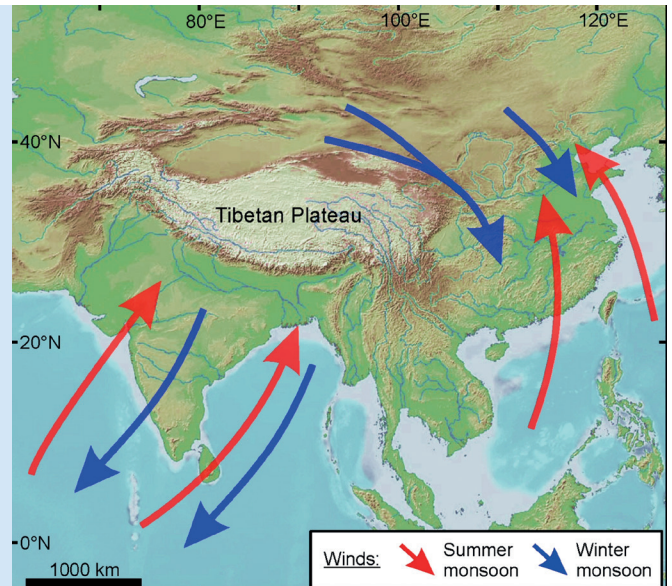
Foreign traders waiting to be presented at court in Guangzhou

Activity 2

Background information: The journey from Basra (the port that would have been used by merchants from Baghdad and its surrounding area) to Guangzhou took just under a year and was dependent on the winds blowing in the right direction. The distance is 6,305 nautical miles.

Find out about monsoon winds and how they work. What are their implications for peoples' lives today? How would they have affected travellers going from Basra to Guangzhou?

Plot the journey on a map and have two cut out ships, an Arabian one and a Chinese one. Let the children move them along the route and explain what they might bring back (use chart above).



What was in the ship and what does it tell us about links between Baghdad and the Middle East and China?

In 1998 fishermen diving for sea cucumbers found a wreck near the Belitung Islands in Indonesia. Inside were over 60,000 objects made in China during the Tang Dynasty. Among the finds it is possible to see the importance of trade between the Middle East, Baghdad and China.

- Artefacts showed that it was a polyglot crew which included people from the middle east as well as southeast and at least one Chinese merchant. The ship was made of planks sewn together with ropes without nails, a technique from the Persian Gulf – the area dominated by Baghdad.
- Changa bowls from China were the most common objects found.
- Green ware bowls from southern China and white ware from northern China, often used for drinking which used shapes and designs popular in Baghdad.
- Some gold articles which may possibly have been intended as diplomatic gifts.
- Ceramic objects with sculpted animals and moulded designs which included Chinese designs with dragons and fish. Objects were also patterned with splashes of green and destined for Middle East markets.
- Most surprisingly there were some bowls in blue and white using a colour imported from the Middle East. This was long before blue and white became a popular colour combination for China.
- There were turquoise-coloured ceramics from the Abbasid Empire.

Activity

Match the objects to their descriptions. Which one is the most important as an historical artefact to tell you about trade between China and Abbasid Caliphate? Why do you think this?



What was the significance of links between Baghdad and Charlemagne?

Harun Al-Rashid, Caliph of the Abbasid Empire, wanted to develop good relations with the Carolingian empire of Charlemagne because:

- There were tensions with the Byzantium Empire for Al-Rashid and Charlemagne as all three tried to extend their territories and influence.
- In Spain the Umayyad Emirate was directly opposed to the Abbasid Empire. Although both were Muslim states the Umayyad dynasty had been deposed by the Abbasids and so was determined to try to return to power. They were also seeking to expand northwards into Charlemagne's lands.

Charlemagne wanted a strong partner in the East and in 798 CE sent gifts of friendship to Al-Rashid. In 801 CE Al-Rashid returned the favour sending his own offerings. He dispatched three men, Lantfrid, Sigimund and Isaac, the Jew with the offerings. The most important of these offerings was a large Asian elephant called Abul-Abbas. They travelled through the middle east and along the coast of north Africa. The journey was long and arduous and soon only Isaac and Abul-Abbas were left. Charlemagne received messages from them and sent a fleet of ships to carry the elephant across the Mediterranean sea. He arrived near Genoa (Italy) in 801 CE. They waited in northern Italy over winter setting out to cross the alps in the spring. It took almost another year before he and Isaac reached Aachen (Germany) where the emperor waited. They arrived on 20 July 802 CE. The elephant's arrival was recorded in the Royal Frankish Annals:

On 20th July (802) Isaac arrived with the elephant and the other gifts and he delivered them to the emperor at Aachen. The name of the elephant was Abul-Abass

Along with the elephant Al-Rashid sent a number of other gifts such as textiles, silks, perfume, tents with multi-coloured curtains, brass candelabra, ivory chessmen and an autonomic water clock.

But what particularly attracted the attention of the curious, was a clock worked by water. The dial was composed of twelve small doors, which represented the division of the hours; each door opened at the hour it was intended to represent, and out of it came the same number of little balls, which fell one by one, at equal distances of time, on a brass drum. It might be told by the eye what hour it was by the number of doors that were open; and by the ear, by the number of balls that fell. When it was twelve o'clock twelve horsemen in miniature issued at the same time and, marching round the dial, shut all of the doors.
<https://muslimheritage.com/baghdad-clock/#harun>

The elephant lived with Charlemagne for eight years. He was with the emperor by the Rhine on a military expedition when he died in 810 CE.



Activity 1

Map the journey that Abul-Abbas made (Baghdad, Damascus, Jerusalem, Alexandria, Tunisia, Carthage, Genoa, Alps, Gent, Rheims, Aachen). What difficulties do you think he might have encountered? For example, think of what the physical terrain might have been like.

Activity 2

Research Islamic water clocks and automaton and investigate how a water clock might work.

Conclusion

While trade fed the needs of the empire, bringing necessities and luxury items, it also linked the empire to other parts of the world. Ideas, culture and technology were also exchanged, particularly between societies that were open to the new or the different. When we look at particular civilisations, we should be considering these links and connections. They enable us to be more effective in identifying what was significant for those people and societies.

Karin Doull is an honorary research fellow with the University of Roehampton and a freelance consultant and writer. She is a member of the Primary History Committee.



Resources

HA Resources

Doull K. (2019) Trade and pilgrimage in the Abbasid Caliphate. *Primary History* Issue 81 pp33-39

Ismail, A. (2015) Early Islamic civilisation. *Primary History* Issue 69, pp34-42

Websites

Video animation of the ancient city of Baghdad
www.youtube.com/watch?v=jPez2MFFKAQ

The Baghdad water clock
<https://muslimheritage.com/baghdad-clock/#harun>
Belitung shipwreck

www.google.com/search?q=belitung+shipwreck&aq=chrome.0.0i512l2j0i22i30.2739j0j15&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Belitung_shipwreck