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CRESWELL, HERZFELD, AND SAMARRA

It has long been recognized that Samarra, the capital of the Abbasid Caliphate between 836 and 892, plays a pivotal role in early Islamic archaeology, architecture, and art history, in respect of both its architecture and the finds recovered from the excavations of the site. Samarra also took a fairly prominent place in Creswell’s work, and the discussion of its architecture is to be found in no less than four of the chapters of the second volume of Early Muslim Architecture, published in 1940, a volume which regrettably never reached a second edition. The origins of Creswell’s work lay in the excavations of the Samarra expedition, led by Sarre and Herzfeld, which took place in 1911–13. As the successes and failures of Creswell’s treatment of Samarra are inevitably closely related to the results of that expedition, it seemed worthwhile to make an assessment of the Samarra expedition, and Creswell’s work on the site, still the main source in English on its architecture, in the light of more recent work by both the Iraq Department of Antiquities and Heritage and the present author.

Since 1981 the Iraq Department of Antiquities and Heritage has been conducting an extensive project of excavation and restoration at Samarra. Since 1983 the author has led a British team surveying the overall ruinfield, and since 1989, excavating at Qadisiyya, in the south of the ruin-field.

THE SITE AND HISTORY OF SAMARRA

The ruins of Samarra (fig. 1), the collapsed mounds of pisé and mud-brick walls, and the robbed-out debris from fired-brick construction, cover a length of nearly 50 km. along the Tigris, with a maximum width of 8 km. The built-up area extended to about 57 km. of ruins, but this was spread over a region of about 150 km.² The mounds stand to a maximum height of about 2 m. in a pattern difficult to comprehend from the ground, but which resolves into a clear structure of streets and buildings in vertical air photography. There are in fact only nine buildings out of a registered total, at the time of writing, of 6,314,³ which have any meaningful vertical dimension to record.⁴

The dominating feature of the landscape in the region of Samarra at the time of the Islamic conquests was the inlets to the great Nahrawan canal, dug by the Sasanian Shah Khusraw Anushirvan in the early sixth century and running down to the east of Baghdad and Ctesiphon. From this canal, most of the left bank of the Tigris was irrigated in early Islamic times.⁵ The great dry trench is still a most impressive piece of civil engineering work (fig. 2).

Samarra was a pleasant site, bare steppe on either side of an incised flood plain, with hunting available on the steppe — there is plenty of small game even today. There was water, to look at in the canals.⁶ However, when the city came to develop, there were difficulties over the water supply. The inhabitants are said to have had to “drink from the river.”⁷ What this meant was that there were inadequate facilities for diverting unpolluted water from the river above the town, and the wells were poor.⁸ There is evidence of underground water channels, using the same technology as the Iranian qanāt (Iraq Ar. kehrīz), which offtake from the Tigris above al-Daur, but these seem largely to lead to the palace areas (fig. 1).

Tabari reports that Harun al-Rashid visited the nearby location of al-Qatul when he tired of Baghdad.⁹ The Octagon of Husn al-Qadisiyya, an unfinished octagonal city 1500 m. across, with many parallels with Raqqa and the Round City of Baghdad, can now be shown to date to Rashid’s reign (before 796) (fig. 3).¹⁰ Matira, south of Samarra, was also known as a resort from Baghdad and Samarra.¹¹

In 836, according to Ya’qubi’s version, Mu’tasim left Baghdad, tried to settle first at Shammasiya on the northern outskirts, then at Baradan, at Bahamsha, at Matira south of Samarra, on the Qatul, and then finally at Samarra. Tabari’s and other versions omit some of these stops.¹²

When Mu’tasim settled in Samarra, the name was changed to Surra man ra’a, “he who sees it is delighted.” The main city was laid out from the main palace complex in the north to the area of the modern town, while around it the military cantonments, called qaṭ‘a, pl. qaṭ
Fig. 1. The main city area of Samarra.