

Studying Samarra Today

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There is probably no site in the entire Islamic World that can compare in extravagance as the city of Samarra. Located around 125 km north of Bagdad on the Tigris (today: Iraq), Samarra served as temporary capital of the Abbasid dynasty. Founded by the caliph al-Mu'tasim in 836, it developed into one of the largest and certainly one of the most stunning cities of the Ancient World. With its luxurious palaces, sumptuous pleasure gardens, gigantic mosques with their remarkable spiral minarets, and its separate residential quarters for the military, it became one of the most extraordinary cities of the Ancient World. It remained so for almost six decades until financial crises forced the caliphs to return to Bagdad in 892, leaving Samarra to decay after many precious materials had been stripped out for future re-use. During the 57 years of its existence, Samarra embodied a unique complex of royal residences – cum – military encampment cities of the Abbasid Empire. Its fate from glorious capital to deserted ruin became the subject of many Arabic poems.

It was through the excavations by the former director of the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin, Friedrich Sarre (1865–1945), and the archaeologist-doyen Ernst Herzfeld (1879–1948) in the years 1911–13 that Samarra reached world fame in the academic field. The Samarra explorations were the first comprehensive archaeological studies of an Islamic site ever carried out and its discoveries greatly enlarged our knowledge of early Islamic city planning, architecture, and artefacts. These findings in turn stimulated some of the most fundamental theoretical discussions within the field. The remarkable stucco decoration started a vibrant debate about the formation and thus the nature of Islamic art. The correlation between Abbasid and Sasanian art had become yet another issue, as well as other more “profane” concerns such as technical innovations in the pottery and glass industries or international trading relations between the Middle East and China. Many of these questions continue to engage scholars today and the publications by Ernst Herzfeld, Friedrich Sarre and Carl Johan Lamm certainly remain obligatory corpus-reference works for anyone working on Abbasid art to the present.

Samarra: A Reassessment

In 2011, the German excavations celebrated their hundred year anniversary. Together with the Ernst Herzfeld Gesellschaft, the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin decided to dedicate the 7th Colloquy of the EHG to this early German mission at the former Abbasid capital. The Museum of Islamic Art, of course, holds a substantial part of the original findings, and considering the planned new Museum installations in 2019, it seemed appropriate to reconsider the entire “Samarra” complex. Since the 1911–13 excavations, vast amounts of archaeological and survey research has been carried out, not only in Samarra itself – and we only have to recall the essential work by the Iraqi Antiquities Department and that of Alastair Northedge – but also at other important Abbasid sites, particularly in ar-Raqqa (Syria), but likewise in Kharab Sayyar (Syria), Humaima (Jordan), in the Gulf, on the Arabian peninsula, in Iran and Central Asia. In addition, specific Abbasid find groups, above all pottery, but also glass, wall paintings, stucco and other materials have been restudied on a large scale and put into a wider

context. Art historical perspectives and discussions have equally shifted and important new debates have emerged, such as the connection between Early Archaeology and Imperialism, which, of course, is highly relevant to the German mission to Samarra as well.

The conference brought together a selection of some of the most relevant studies from past years. These include the latest archaeological and historical studies which touch upon the city of Samarra itself (Alastair Northedge) and the related city of al-Qata'i/Cairo (Matthew Gordon). Others examine the various Samarra finds groups and include a reconsideration of the mysterious painted Samarra jars (Fatma Dahmani), Samarra glass (Andrea Becker), Samarra textiles (Gisela Helmecke) as well as Abbasid pottery (Oliver Watson) and its Far Eastern connection (Hsueh-man Shen). A further important issue, the conference discussed the relationship between Samarra and the provinces with significant new excavation findings from Egypt (Felix Arnold), Syria (Angela Koppel) and the Arabian Peninsula (Bernard O'Kane). A rather daring contribution is the re-dating of the Jordanian desert-castle Qasr al-Mshatta from the Umayyad into the Abbasid period (Johannes Cramer, Barbara Perlich).

As students of Samarra are very much aware, one major problem for the site has always been the dispersal of the excavated material, including both the actual finds and its documentation. Due to the political upheaval in the Middle East during World War I, the Samarra finds never reached their original destinations of Berlin and Istanbul and languished in storage at the site until 1917, and eventually shipped to London via Bagdad and Basra in 1921, where the material was split up and distributed to museum collections world wide (for the detailed story of their dispersal, see Jens Kröger and Yuka Kadoi in this volume). Ernst Herzfeld's excavation documents did not remain in Berlin; being Jewish he was forced to leave for the United States just before World War 2. The main bulk of his former archive is therefore now kept at the Freer|Sackler Gallery in Washington, while parts of his archaeological library and other archival documents are at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

For the study of Samarra, it was a particular stroke of good luck that the archives in the Freer|Sackler Gallery decided to digitize their Ernst Herzfeld Papers facilitating access to a large part of his photographs, drawings, sketchbooks and field notes. Alexander Nagel and Rachael Woody describe this enormous project which now represents one of the most important tools for anyone wishing to study the site and it might be interesting to note that the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York is now launching a similar project with Matt Saba. The conference volume also includes two further important archival studies, one by Arzu Terzi who for the first time ever, sifted through the Ottoman archives in Istanbul. Jens Kröger has just finished his extensive survey of the Berlin archives and produced the first comprehensive chronicle of the German excavations ever written, covering all aspects of this remarkable archaeological undertaking from its planning stage up to the publication of its material.

Not only the dispersal of the documents, but also the dispersal of the finds still represent a serious challenge for scholars of Abbasid art, and it was Christoph Konrad and Mariam Rosser-Owen who made a first attempt to reunite the scattered material as early as 2005 with their www.samarrafinds.info project which, however, had to be discontinued due to lack of funding. In this volume, Yuka Kadoi follows in their footsteps and pursues dispersed Samarra finds in various American collections.

It should be noted that in the light of its upcoming new installations in 2019, the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin has meanwhile started to complete the catalogue of its Samarra collection and intensified technical analysis of the various materials. Simone Struth is now taking particular care of the stucco decorations. At the same time, Samarra findings will be

3D-digitized through the Hochschule für Technik und Wirtschaft (HTW-Berlin) in order to develop a highly precise documentation system and further a museum application which will eventually enable future visitors to experience Samarra more easily. The Victoria & Albert Museum in London is carrying out a similar project under the supervision of Mariam Rosser-Owen and Rosalind Wade Haddon, funded by the British Institute for Studies in Iraq (see also their recent blogspot: <http://samarrafindsproject.blogspot.de/>). Phase 2 will include the considerably larger collection in the British Museum. Of course, it is hoped that all these various efforts will eventually result in an international cooperation and help to make even more material available globally.

Acknowledgements

The conference “A Hundred Years of Excavations in Samarra” took place in the Pergamon Museum, Berlin from 30 June – 02 July 2011, as the 7th Colloquy of the Ernst Herzfeld Gesellschaft. The Ernst Herzfeld Gesellschaft and the Museum of Islamic Art would like to warmly thank the Gerda Henkel Foundation (Düsseldorf) for so generously funding this event and also its publication. We would also like to extend our greatest appreciation to the contributors for their valuable papers. They have brought the study of Samarra a great leap forward which certainly gives a wider understanding of this vital period in the field of Islamic art. We are equally grateful to those speakers who – for various reasons – have not published their papers in this volume as well as to the chairs, eminent scholars in the field themselves, for enhancing the lively discussion during the conference itself.

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