

# SĀMARRĀ

## AN ARCHEOLOGICAL CITY FROM THE WORLD HERITAGE

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### ABSTRACT

*In a world full of violence, fear and awful situations, we are also able to enjoy beautiful things such as music, art, or culture. These can change the perception of people by making them feel emotional, give thought to a certain thing or even smile. These are some reasons why we need to preserve these works of art and to transmit them from generation to generation.*

*Entitled "Sāmarrā", the paper is a brief presentation, starting from information about the country Iraq, to general aspects related to the city of Sāmarrā'. The chosen topic is treated from a historical point of view and this article aims to give the readers a better perspective on the city of Sāmarrā', but also on the archaeological site located in this city. The archaeological city of Sāmarrā' is the site of a powerful Islamic capital that ruled over the provinces of the Abbasid Empire for a century.*

**Keywords:** *Iraq, heritage, Sāmarrā, history, archaeological site.*

## Overview of the Iraqi State

Since Iraq's inception in the 1920s, it has been obvious that there are very different ideas about the future of the state. Throughout the country, the boundaries between these ideas have changed as different, empowered groups tried to assert control, bring others into line with their own vision of Iraq. Throughout Iraq's history, these views have been contradictory. The British authorities in the 1920s, tribal sheiks under the control of the monarchy and the republic, Arab nationalists in the 1930s, Shiite scholars in this period, the Iraqi Communist Party in the heyday of the 1950s and early 1960s, Kurdish parties in their struggles with each other and with the central authorities, Saddam Hussein and the Ba'ath party in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and, most recently, the United States and the forces that its brief occupation brought to the fore, all left their mark on the formation of the state of Iraq (Tripp, 2007).

Situated in the Middle East, in the South-West Asia, the Republic of Iraq borders the Islamic Republic of Iran to the east, the Republic of Turkey to the north, the Syrian Arab Republic and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan to the west, and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait to the south, respectively. The country's territory consists mainly of dry desert land west of the Euphrates River, a large central valley between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, and the mountains in the northeast (Infoplease, n.d.).

In the distant past, the area now known as Iraq carried the historical name of Mesopotamia, often referred to as the "Land between rivers." This region gave rise to some of the world's earliest civilizations, such as Sumer, Akkad, Babylon, and Assyria. The rich region, comprising much of what is called the Fertile Crescent<sup>1</sup>, became a valuable part of the imperial policies, namely the various Persian Greek and Roman dynasties, and after the 7<sup>th</sup> century the region became a central point of the Islamic world. Iraq's capital Baghdad, became the capital of the Abbasid Caliphate in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Iraq derives its name from the Arabic term used in the premodern times to describe a region roughly corresponding to Mesopotamia ('Irāq' Arabī, "Arabian Iraq") and the modern northwest of Iran ('Irāq' Ajamī, "Foreign Iraq" - meaning Persian) (Woods, n.d.).

The period of the Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258) has long been recognized as the stage of the formation of Islamic civilization, with various achievements in

the field of science, literature and culture. The Abbasid Caliphate, from its foundation in 750 and the golden age under Hārūn al-Rashīd to the conquest of Baghdad by the Mongols in 1258 was a grandiose empire and had a strong influence on Islamic culture and society (El-Hibri, 2021).

The kingdom of Iraq gained its independence in 1932, but remained under British imperial influence for the next quarter-century of monarchial rule. The political instability following the overthrow of the monarchy in 1958, but the establishment of an Arab nationalist and socialist regime – the Baath Party – in a bloodless *coup d'état* 10 years later brought new stability. With oil reserves, the regime was able to finance development projects and plans throughout the 1970s, thus building one of the largest and best equipped armed forces in the Arab world. Oil revenues almost doubled between 1973 and 1975 and, until the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war, this allowed the Baath regime to set ambitious development goals, namely in the construction industry, reducing the amount of imported manufactured products, improving the agricultural sector and significantly increasing non-oil exports. Investments in infrastructure have been high, particularly for projects involving irrigation and water supply, roads, and railways, and rural electrification, and health services have also been greatly improved (Woods, n.d.).

Saddam Hussein, who led the country in the disastrous military confrontations, namely the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) and the Persian Gulf War (1990–1991), quickly took over the leadership of the party. These conflicts have isolated the country from the international community, especially in financial and social terms. However, the Iraqi leader was able to maintain a firm grip on power in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. He and his regime were overthrown in 2003, during the war in Iraq (Woods, n.d.).

Between 2014 and 2017, Iraq was engaged in a military campaign against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)<sup>2</sup>, aimed at regaining lost territory in the western and northern parts of the country. Iraqi and allied forces retake Mosul, the country's second largest city, in 2017 and expelled ISIS from its other urban strongholds. In December 2017, prime minister Haider Al-Abadi<sup>3</sup> publicly declared victory against ISIS while continuing operations against the remaining group in rural areas. Also, at the end of 2017, Al-Abadi responded to an independence referendum organized by the Kurdistan

regional government, ordering Iraqi forces to take control of territories in central and northern Iraq that had previously been occupied and governed by Kurdish forces (The World Factbook<sup>4</sup>, 2022).

The ongoing struggle to dislodge the Islamic State has deepened amid underlying sectarian tensions in Iraq, between Sunni and Shia groups, as well as tensions between northern Kurdish groups and the government in Baghdad, which have intensified since the 2003 U.S. invasion and the fall of Saddam Hussein. These tensions now threaten the stability of the new Iraqi government that is trying to rebuild the country and prevent the Islamic State from reborn (Center for Preventive Action<sup>5</sup>, 2023).

Iraq faces significant challenges in its recovery from the war against Islamic State. More than two million people remain internally displaced and nearly nine million need humanitarian assistance in the wake of the nearly four-year war, with the reconstruction estimated at, at least, 88 billion dollars. In addition to reintegrating Sunni communities into the political systems, the new government must also address the demobilization and integration of powerful Shia militias that transformed during the fight against Islamic State into Iraqi security forces, as well as tensions with Kurdish groups, pressing for greater autonomy in the country's north, following a failed independence referendum in October 2017 (Center for Preventive Action, 2023).

On 1<sup>st</sup> October 2019, thousands of Iraqis took to the streets leading anti-government protests to mark, at national level, the anniversary of demonstrations that burst out three years ago and have since sporadically continued. The 2019 protests were largely organized by a young and passionate generation of Iraqis, who are demanding political and economic reforms, but also an end to foreign interference in Iraqi politics. The emergence of the protest movement in 2019, called Tishrīn (ar. تشرين - October), seemed to herald a different Iraq, where some of the demonstrators' goals seemed to be achieved – especially less than a month after the beginning of the unrest, the prime minister at that time, 'Ādil 'Abd Al-Mahdi, was forced to resign due to the pressures of the protesters. Young people have been coming to Tahrir Square for months demanding an end to widespread government corruption, precarious public services and unemployment. They also called for the dismantling of the political system, which relies on a sectarian arrangement of power-sharing among an older generation of political elites. Some of these demonstrators

organized themselves, coming with polls and forming political parties, and some of them passed the electoral threshold in the October 2021 national elections, securing seats in the parliament (Abdo, 2022).

Today, Iraq enjoys the most stable period since 2003. Armed violence persists in various forms, but it is sporadic, fragmented and only in certain areas, especially rural ones. However, the country remains fragile and divided, and its people face a series of deepening challenges the state is striving to address (Fazil & Tartir, 2023).

## Sāmarrā'

During the reign of the Abbasid Caliphate from 750 to 1258, there was a significant shift in the epicenter of Islamic cultural and political life. This shift led to the relocation of the capital from Syria to Iraq, with Baghdad assuming the role of the new capital in 762. Subsequently, the Abbasids founded another city, Sāmarrā', located to the north of Baghdad, which briefly served as the capital from 836 to 892. The initial three centuries of the Abbasid rule are often described as a golden age. During this time, both Baghdad and Sāmarrā' played pivotal roles as cultural and economic hubs within the Islamic world. This era saw the emergence of a distinct artistic style and the development of innovative techniques that had a far-reaching impact on Islamic art and architecture, influencing the broader Muslim domain (Yalman & Komaroff, 2001).

The city of Sāmarrā' is located in the governorate (muḥāfazah) Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, in central Iraq. Located on the banks of the Tigris River, Sāmarrā' is the site of a prehistoric settlement from the 5<sup>th</sup> millennium BC. The city was founded between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 7<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. In 836, when the Abbasid Caliph Al-Mu'taṣim was forced to leave Baghdad, he transformed Sāmarrā' into its new capital, building palaces and gardens, and under the domination of its successors, the city expanded along the Tigris for a distance of 32 km. In 892, the capital was moved back to Baghdad by Caliph al-Mu'tamid, and by 1,300, almost all of the city was in ruins, but it has since been resurrected (Gaur, n.d.).

The city's original plan consisted of a congregational mosque, squares, military cantonments, and the great principal complex of the Caliphal Palace or the original Dār al-Khilafa. A broad arterial alley connected the squares and the mosque at the southern

<sup>1</sup> The Fertile Crescent – The eastern arch between the Nile, the Tigris, and the Euphrates is called the "Fertile Crescent" and this is where the first social organizations of the Mediterranean basin emerged in the fourth millennium BC (Oprea, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is a political-military terrorist organization.

<sup>3</sup> Haider Al-Abadi (b. 1952) is an Iraqi politician who served as prime minister of Iraq from 2014 to 2018 (Haider Al-Abadi, n.d.).

<sup>4</sup> The World Factbook is an official annual publication of the online Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) that covers information about the world's countries.

<sup>5</sup> Center for Preventive Action is a program that focuses on preventing, reducing or solving armed conflicts around the world. The CPA is an interactive online guide to ongoing conflicts all over the world, especially in areas where U.S. interests are most at risk (Center for Preventive Action, 2023).

end of the site with the palace complex to the north. The cantonments stretched between the mosque and the palace. After the death of al-Mu'tasim<sup>6</sup> in 842, his successors al-Wāthiq chose to remain in Sāmarrā' (Archnet, n.d.).

The population of Sāmarrā', along with the population of the surroundings areas, is about 300,000 people according to statistics of the Ministry of Commerce in 2003. Most of them are Sunni Arabs and belong to different tribes and clans, the most important being Al-Dulaim, Al-Sawamarah, Al-Bubdran, Al-Jubūr and Al-Anzza. The city is also inhabited by Sunni and Shia Kurds (Al-Jazeera, 2015).

The economy of the city depends on the agricultural and industrial sectors. Here the company Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn existed for electronic industries and communications, but it was affiliated with the Ministry of Military Industry, ending its activity in April 2003. There is also the General Company for Pharmaceutical Industry, which has a great reputation, as it worked to meet local needs during the period of sanctions imposed on the country. Drug production was not interrupted, as the company employed about 3,000 people. The city's economy is also based on the service sector and domestic and foreign tourism, including ancient historical monuments and Shia religious shrines (Al-Jazeera, 2015).

In the city there are Christian and Jewish monuments, such as the temple of the Thora or what is known as the Jewish Quarter, which lasts until the fifties of the twentieth century. The Jewish market in the center of Sāmarrā' is now surrounded by a series of dilapidated houses, after the Jews left for Israel with the formation of the state of Israel. The inhabitants of Sāmarrā' were left only with the memories that the Jews left behind when they lived side by side with the Muslims. Samad Abbas, 70 years old, a resident of the Jewish Quarter, recalls his Jewish neighbors before they left and how they performed their rituals, their numerous holidays and year-round events, noting that they owned shops and properties and were good people (Othman, 2014).

The archeological city of Sāmarrā' is the site of a powerful Islamic capital that ruled, for a century, over the provinces of the Abbasid Caliphate, extending from

present-day Tunisia to Central Asia. The city is located on both sides of the Tigris River, 130 km north of Baghdad, with the length of the site from north to south being 41,5 km. Also, the Ninth Century Grand Mosque and its spiral minaret are among the many outstanding architectural monuments on the site (World Heritage Center, n.d.).

## The Great Mosque and the Spiral Minaret of Sāmarrā'

The mosque has a rectangular appearance, consisting of an outer brick wall 10m high and 2,65m thick, and supported by a total of 44 semicircular towers, including four corners.

Access to the mosque was possible through one of the 16 gates, and above each entrance there were a few small arched windows. The mosque had 17 corridors, and its walls were covered with dark blue glass mosaics. The courtyard was surrounded on all sides by an arcade.

Approximately 27m from the center of the north-facing part of the mosque is the Malwiya Tower, with its vast 52m high and 33m wide spiral cone at the base. During his time at the helm, Al-Mutawakkil<sup>7</sup> often rode his donkey to the top of the tower to enjoy the view (Amusing Planet, 2014).

The spiral minaret of the city of Sāmarrā', more than 1,000 years old, is one of Iraq's main tourist attractions. Iraqi police said in 2005 that an explosion damaged one of the most important monuments of Islamic architecture. The same source reported that the insurgents blew up the upper Malwiya tower, which had been used by American soldiers as an observation post (BBC News, 2005). Thus, the explosion left scattered debris on the minaret's outer steps. Officials in Iraq have voiced concerns over the damage U.S. troops have caused to other historical sites in Sāmarrā' and have demanded compensation after the walls of the ancient palace in Sāmarrā' were cracked. According to Caroline Hawley, the BBC correspondent in Baghdad, the looting of archeological sites, especially in southern Iraq, is a disturbing phenomenon, focusing on the effects of the war on the country's heritage (BBC News, 2005).

## Archaeological Sites Destroyed by Attacks

Ten of thousands of people rallied in the Shiite towns of Iraq in 2006, expressing their anger after the attack on the mausoleum of the Imam 'Alī ibn Muḥammad al-Hādi (827-868) and the mausoleum of the Imam Ḥasan al-'Askarī (845-872), one of the most sacred places in Sāmarrā'. In Baghdad, the population of the Shia neighborhoods Ṣadr and Al-Kāzimiyyah rebelled; hence, the mosque's muezzins issued a call for a protest to condemn it. A crowd gathered around mosques and political party premises, awaiting instructions. One Islamic Party headquarters and three Sunni mosques were attacked in the capital after an attack on the Shiite mausoleum. The highest Shia authority, religious leader Ali Sistani, immediately appealed for calm and asked the people not to attack Sunni mosques. The head of state at that time, Jalal Talabani, called for unity to thwart the plans of Sunni extremists (L'Obs, 2006).

The right side of the mausoleum, 1,200 years old, was also destroyed by a double explosion. The golden dome and the turquoise mosaic cladding were totally destroyed (L'Obs, 2006).

## Conclusions

Remembering the ancient world, our minds are attracted to the powerful old cities in the heart of the great empires and civilizations, such as Babylon, Athens and Rome, as they all shaped the course of history in their own way. Some of them were the seat of powerful empires that ruled the world. Some have suffered tragic falls, while others remain standing, in various states of preservation. It is hardly surprising that Iraq today, despite all the destruction, and conflicts that have been caused over the centuries, is still full of archeological treasures and fascinating world heritage.

Historical and cultural monuments are found in the town of Sāmarrā' which have made it an important tourist destination internally and externally, and UNESCO has included it on the World Heritage List in 2007 (Al-Jazeera, 2015).

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, Sāmarrā' inspired some of the most important works of modern architecture and urban planning in the Middle East.

The grandeur of its architecture was noted by many writers, Thomas Leisten recounting in the first volume of his work "Excavation of Samarra", entitled "Final Report on the First Campaign 1910-1912", the impressions of

the Syrian historian and literary critic Muhammad Kurd 'Ali, that Sāmarrā' was a model of "an Arab city" and used it as an example to counter the tendency of modern western scholars to ignore Arab contributions to the history of urban civilization (Leisten, 2003). Both the ruins and poetic descriptions of Sāmarrā' inspired two of the modern architects who helped transform buildings in Iraq in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, namely Rifat Chadirji (d. 2020) and Mohamed Makiya (d. 2015). They designed the State Mosque in Baghdad, which unfortunately was never built. For these writers and architects of the post-colonial Middle East, Sāmarrā' was not only a source of national pride, but also an archive of indigenous architectural knowledge (Saba, 2022).

Iraq has the privilege of holding over 15,000 archeological sites and many other heritage and religious buildings, monuments and historical centers, as well as archives, manuscripts, cultural artifacts, and nationally significant paintings. However, the country is witnessing cultural losses on an unprecedented scale (Kathem et al., 2022).

The large differences in living standards, the failure of development, high unemployment rates and low living standard are among the reasons that have helped to encourage terrorism in Iraq (Sabah, 2020).

The country has suffered a series of economic, psychological, sociological and political shocks, stemming from civil conflicts and terrorism. Indeed, in recent years, the Republic of Iraq has faced a complex problem, namely terrorism, as ISIS has expanded ever further (Yaseen, 2019). In addition, despite Iraq having large natural gas reserves, the country is currently relying on imports of gas from Iran. The U.S. and Iraq's European partners are keen to end this dependence and to help Iraq become energy independent. However, political and economic turmoil in Iraq in recent years has blocked investments in the separation and processing capacity of Iraqi oil fields (Fazil & Tartir, 2023). The last two decades in Iraq's history are marked by conflicts with ethnic Kurds, conflict with neighboring Iran, invasion of Kuwait, the Gulf War, and international sanctions, all of which have a huge impact on citizens (Catholic Relief Services, 2002).

Unlike other war-torn countries in the Middle East, and despite being in some form of conflict or other, for four consecutive decades, Iraq proved to be remarkably resilient. It is also a country with significant financial and human resources, and with a strong potential for recovery and development. However, in order to bring about a successful transition and post-conflict country's reconstruction, the Iraqi leadership will need a strong will for cohesion and to meet growing challenges (Kadhim, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Al-Mu'tasim, also known as Mu'tasim bi'llāh, is the eighth Abbasid caliph. He ruled from 833 to 842 AD., as the youngest son of Hārūn ar-Rashīd (the fifth caliph of the Abbasid Dynasty). He was a skillful commander in Anatolia (a region southwest Asia that today corresponds to the Asian part of Turkey) (Al-Mu'tasim, 1993).

<sup>7</sup> Al-Mutawakkil 'alā Allāh (b. 822 – d. 861) was the tenth Abbasid caliph and son of al-Mu'tasim; he became a caliph after the death of his brother, al-Wāthiq, who was known for his extension of the empire, his religiousness, and the harsh rule he implemented (El-Hibri, 1999).

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