

Al-Halfaya

from Iraq to Andalusia

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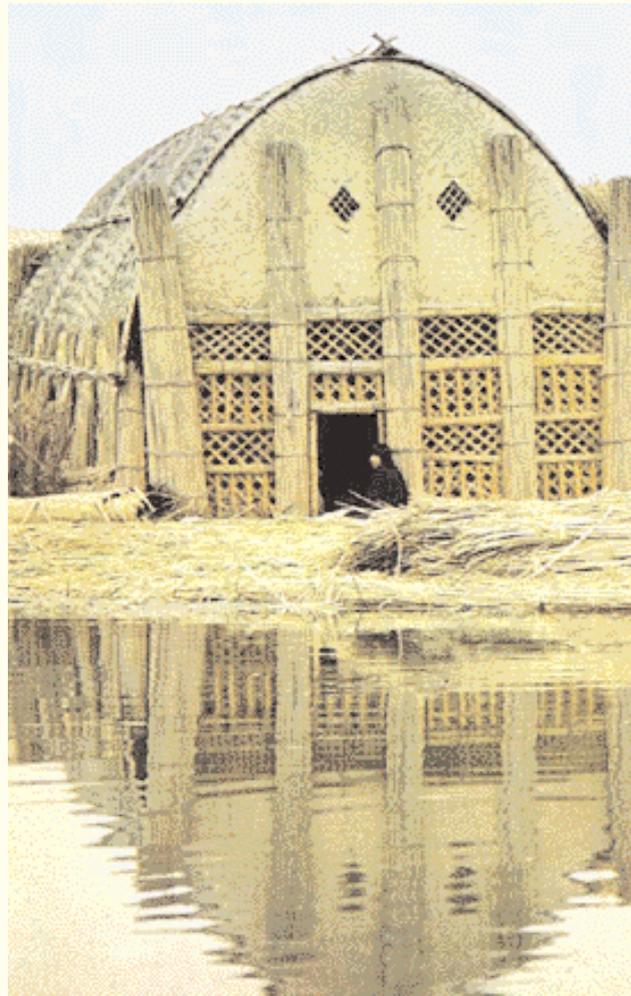
There is no corner of Andalusia without a history. This has enriched the region culturally, scientifically and artistically. While traveling through this region, one often comes across Arabic names of cities, rivers, fortresses, streets, bridges and even families.

One of the cities that attracted my attention is Al-Halfaya, situated some 20 km northwest of Madrid. Its name took me back to southern Iraq, where one finds a city in Al-Amara with the same name. There is also a novel by Malik Al-Mutalibi entitled Al-Halfaya. All this forced me to remember history and to think of the Arabs who transported their heritage from the Orient to the West. With a civilized vision, they knew how to master the riches of this region that became a leading civilization for Europe during its dark ages.

How did these names pass to the West and what are the common denominators?

It is not strange to note that names of cities are transposed from one country to another as seen by many historical examples: the Phoenicians built a city on the East coast of Spain that they named Carthage in reference to the former Carthage of Tunisia; the Spanish founded some cities in Central America and the South to which they gave the names of Andalusian cities, such as Cordoba in Argentina or Guadalajara in Mexico.

The city of Al-Halfaya started life as a military fortress, founded by the Arabs and situated on the defense line of the central zone of Andalusia. Ibn Hazme indicates that Abdul-Rahman III raided the Christians in 939 and fortified Al-Halfaya while endowing it with



The marshes of Amarah.

أهوار العمارة.

defense and surveillance facilities. In 1270, this city was abandoned by its inhabitants, who immigrated to other regions due to the heavy tributes imposed by the church on the peasants and craftsmen.

The remains of this old city still exist on high

ground overlooking two deep valleys, one delimiting it to the north and the other to the south. To the east, it is bordered by the Guadarrama stream (Wadi Al-Raml). Water basins and some stones from its old defensive wall are still visible. Crossing this area nowadays, no one can believe that it was once a Moslem fiefdom, with a defensive wall, towers and dwellings. Currently, one finds a peasant's house that has been transformed into a farm. The area is also a hunting ground with plenty of green land.

The fortress of Al-Halfa is close to Guadarrama, situated to the west of Madrid, where one also finds Olmos and Canales. These three citadels were considered Toledo's first line of defense.

Al-Halfaya is currently called Villaviciosa de Odon. It is a shame its name only appears on old maps. I asked the municipality officers and local residents about it but they had very little information. After a long search I discovered a cultivated flat area which I was told is the place of the former city.

It is incumbent on the authorities responsible for national heritage to pay greater attention to the area, encourage archaeological digs and provide a tourist guide and facilities for visitors.

The journey to this beautiful and bewitching region, as well as the reports written about ➤



Remains of Al-Halfaya which needs excavation.

بقايا الحفاية التي تحتاج إلى تنقيبات.



Here once stood Al- Halfaya.

هنا كانت الحفاية.

it, counter the arguments of those who want to twist the facts to include new events that have no historical basis. Many Western works have a tendency to violate other civilizations, especially that of Andalusia, which played an important role in numerous scientific, literary and artistic achievements, as well as in the discovery of the new world. Some historical sources indicate that the Andalusians arrived in America a few centuries before Christopher Columbus. The Al-Halfaya of Iraq, is a small city situated

in Missane County (Al-Amarah). Its inhabitants are farmers and hunters. Like the other cities of southern Iraq, Al-Halfaya preserves its traditions and Arabic-Islamic and Sumerian customs.

There was an international outcry when Saddam's regime drained the marshlands where civilization first began. The director of the Spanish Museum gave a radio interview about the inhabitants of the region, the descendants of the Sumerians and Babylonians and pointed out that their

traditional way of life has been preserved in southern Iraq to this day.

Al-Balam, the boat used by the inhabitants of the marshlands, is the same as that of the Sumerians, as are the dwellings constructed with papyrus and reeds. The cloth head covering (amama) is also the same as that of the Sumerians.

The third Al-Halfaya, it is a novel by Malik Al-Mutalibi. He was the editor-in-chief of "Majallati" and "Al Mizmar", where I worked as a cartoonist. I didn't read this novel, because I lived abroad and there was a rupture between the intellectuals inside Iraq and those outside that prevailed during the former regime. This is definitely Al-Mutalibi's best novel which tries to explore the farmers' life through simple traditions and ancestral customs. It also reflects human relations that search for unity, solidarity and harmony between the individual and his tribe. The peasant has an intimate knowledge of his land, water and sky and is capable of solving the problems of his community. These are unique qualities as commendable as those of intellectuals with high academic qualification.

During my visit to Baghdad, I met a group of intellectuals, in the Shabandar coffee house in Al-Moutanabbi Street - the meeting place of artists and Iraqi intellectuals. It reminded me of the Gijon coffee house in Madrid where one could meet the most famous Spanish writers, such as the poet Rafael Alberti and the writer Antonio Gala.

Iraqi intellectuals have adopted the motto of Western writers: "Writing is my struggle for survival". Al-Moutanabbi Street is one of Baghdad's unique cultural phenomena with a long history. There is also a weekly Friday book auction. Book sellers spread their wares in this street and in adjoining streets. Everything is on sale: works of leftists and conservatives, Westerners and Arabs. This cultural exchange bodes well for a harmonious and prosperous future.

Al-Halafya is undoubtedly part of world heritage. The transposition of this name to an Andalusian city, deliberately or casually, is a natural cultural continuity, the fruit of former nations that has been transmitted by the civilizations that followed each other and spread throughout the world. ■