

Nuffar,

the city that was created in the sky

>Text and photos:
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Legends, myths and stories are told about the city of Nuffar. They say it was created in the sky and fell to the earth. The inhabitants of the surrounding villages repeat fantastic stories, such as those about a creature that swallows everyone who comes to city and the curse sooner or later affects anyone who enters Nuffar.



The writer inside the Ziggurat



The Altar

الكاتب في الزقورة

المذبح

When the driver of the taxi that took us from the Archaeological Bureau in Diwania, heard we were going to Nuffar, he asked us to allow him to turn back, and was willing not to charge us anything for the trip to the bus station, so that we could return to Baghdad. In the end we were accompanied by the director of the Archaeological Bureau and a police officer, determined to continue until we reached the religious capital of the Sumerians.

Location

The ruins of the city of Nuffar are 40 kilometres east of Diwania, 181 km south of Baghdad. They say that the name comes from the Sumerian "Nipur." The site is a wide desert. It has many scattered hills between the sand dunes, remnants of buildings, castles and fortifications. We

found numerous containers broken and abandoned, holes covered with rocks or tree trunks, leading us to suppose that it is the work of thieves or vandals. The Euphrates used to divide the city in two before it changed course. The old course of the river is known as the "Nile."

The importance of the city

The city is mentioned in Sumerian and Babylonian legends and religious stories as a religious centre of the Sumerians 5000 years ago. It was the seat of Enlil, the most powerful deity of the Sumerians, head of all other deities, the creative, all powerful force of the universe. It was this god who caused the flood, as related in the legend of Gilgamesh. He was also the owner of the territories and punished kings for their sins and mistakes.

He was mentioned in the Hammurabi Laws as one of the sacred deities that will punish those who dare to change his laws. This area was also the seat of the wife of Enlil, Yinlil, - the goddess of air and wind. That is why Nuffar was famous in the third millennium before Christ. To become a king, prince or governor, it was imperative to obtain the acquiescence of the deity of Nuffar, from the religious capital of Sumer. The city had 50 of the most important deities. Each one was responsible for a certain sphere of life in the kingdom. The first parliament known to mankind was founded here, as the deities met to decide the future of the world, distributing powers and announcing war. The meetings were regular or annual. It was also a pilgrimage city where people came to worship deities and bring sacrifices. Being considered the most holy city on earth ▶

during the rule of the Sumerians, Babylonians and Acadians, the pilgrimage to Nuffar was a religious obligation. And to keep it out of wars, despite its importance, it was not included in the political life of the times, but kept as a religious symbol. Religious holidays, the New Year festivals and the crowning of kings ceremonies (which lasted an entire week) were celebrated here. That is why it was called the "Lady of the Mashanar Valley."

The city was ruled by the Sumerians at the beginning of the third millennium BC. Then it fell successively under the power of Acadians, Babylonians, Kishians and Assyrians. The names of the kings of these states were discovered during excavations. The population continued to grow even under the Assyrians. The remnants of the buildings show that they continued to be occupied until the time of Jesus Christ, but when the Euphrates changed course, the people emigrated.

The excavations carried out in Nuffar were very successful. Artefacts discovered included statues, ceramic containers, rings and clay tablets that show the plans of the city with its houses and way of life. Some tablets show the entire map of the city, with its monuments, buildings and temples.

The ruins of Nuffar

We arrived in the town after a rest in Affak, where we were joined by another policeman, who was also our guide. As we passed through farmland, we saw the ruins from afar, especially the high "ziggurat" (a temple tower). The area is isolated from its

surroundings. A stroll through the nine square kilometres of the city only shows interspersed ruins here and there, between a temple or a wall or a pillar, or sand mounds that hide temples and castles.

A wonderful sense of tranquillity comes over you as you walk through these ruins. You have the impression that you are totally isolated from the world, but at the same time that someone is watching and controlling you. However, only six kms from here is Affak, a flourishing city.

The best monument which remains is the temple of Enlil. Some of its floors still stand, along with the "ziggurat" (a pyramid with steps). The ziggurat, in the east of the city, has a very high round tower. It is a solid block covered by brick on a square base, the remains of which reach 15 meters. The building had one or more floors, above which stands a small temple which can be reached by three stairs. In the midst of the temple was a statue of the god Enlil, which is believed to have been made of gold.

The principal place of prayer was on the northeast side of the tower, separated from it by a street paved with brick and tar. It consists of a rectangular room in the centre, and around it other smaller rooms for the servants in between, the sacred room. Their dimensions were 22x45 square meters. This building was dedicated to the worship of Enlil.

There are also remnants of another temple about 300 metres southwest of the ziggurat dedicated to the worship of the Sumerian gods of love and war, known during Babylonian times as Ishtar. The temple is

rectangular, 275 metres long and 80 meters wide, with a central courtyard 25 x 45 square meters and a three metre thick wall with a door on the north side. This used to have a small room that leads to the yard. There are also some low-elevation stairs leading to a rectangular room, which opens onto a second courtyard.

The three stairs of the ziggurat mentioned earlier lead to the courtyard of the large temple. The remains of the altar, where



Writings inside the Ziggurat كتابات داخل الزقورة



Ziggurat: view from inside الزقورة من الداخل



الكاتب مع الفريق الذي رافقه
The writer (2nd right) with the team that accompanied him



الكاتب (من اليسار) بصحبة الدليل الأثاري وأفراد من الحماية
The writer (left) with the guide and security

sacrifices were made to 50 gods, are still standing in the form of two outgoing stones about 3 meters high, similar to human molars.

This place, the most sacred in the city, is separated from the rest by a wall. It has towers with inscriptions indicating the most important buildings in the city, such as Nipur Library, with more than 30 thousand clay tablets. These tablets contain treaties on different sciences (economics, literature, medicine, astronomy, history and language). There are also lists with the names of the Sumerian kings since the time of the flood, with the duration of their rules, the events of every year, and texts related to religious sermons, reports and advice on farming techniques for each season to get the best crop. The tablets also contained literary dialogues between a student and his teacher, who advises him on how to live the good life and the best ways to succeed, insisting on the moral and virtuous values. This heritage prompted the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago to send a team of archaeologists to this region and to publish an encyclopaedia of 30 volumes with all the knowledge contained in Nipur Library.

Legends

There are many legends about Nuffar. The best known is that it was founded in heaven and that the God Enlil who separated heaven and the earth came down to heal the wounds of the earth due to the separation.

This was done on the site where the city was established and the temple was called Do-Iki, - the knot (or bandage) of heaven.

Perhaps the most amazing thing is that it was related to us by an archaeologist who joined us. He told us that this legend might have some truth, and that the proof of this is the Koranic verse which says: "Do not the Unbelievers see that the heavens and the earth were joined together (as one unit of creation), before we clove them asunder? We made from water every living thing. Will they not then believe?" (The Prophets, verse 30).

There are endless legends about Nuffar related by the villagers. It is said that whoever enters Nuffar will be swallowed up and whole groups were annihilated. A snake called "arbid" would kill anyone who enters the city. This animal is part of the Iraqi people's heritage, particularly in the centre and south of the country, because it protects agricultural plantations and mausoleums from thieves and the unscrupulous.

The villagers tell hundreds of stories about the curse that befalls those entering Nuffar and that is why they avoid approaching its limits. There are also numerous stories about the treasures of Nuffar. During the first Gulf War, one of the villagers had to accompany his son, who had fled military service, to Nuffar, trying to find a safe place for him to hide. And while heading back through the desert, he found a bottle with 26 pieces of gold. They were antique coins which made him rich.

During our walk through Nuffar, which lasted more than five hours, we did not see any strange being, or come across "arbid" (the large snake). So far we have not been cursed and no misfortune has befallen us. Perhaps this is due to the presence of an armed policeman who accompanied us all the time.

A blessing rather than a curse may be bestowed on visitors to Nuffar, as was the case with the man trying to hide his son. But we heard so many stories of misfortune that we were still having nightmares three weeks after our visit fearing that what we were told may be true. We are still waiting to find out the mystery. Perhaps it is a self-fulfilling prophecy: those who expect evil are cursed, those who seek to understand Nuffar are blessed. ■



أحد سلالم الزقورة الثلاثة

One of three stairs of the Ziggurat



Ziggurat

الزقورة



The Nuffar police station

أفراد مركز شرطة آثار نضر