

Uruk

The birth place of the alphabet and home to the first tourist

> Report: Walid Abdul-Amir Alwan
Photos: Wassim Abdul-Razzak Abbas

We had no intention of visiting the city of Uruk, even though we were on a working trip to the city of Samawah. But our host proposed a visit to this historic city and we accepted without hesitation. It was a unique opportunity given the importance of the heritage of Uruk, the first cradle of civilization, where we could follow in the footsteps of history's first tourists. We went to the Office of Heritage of Al-Muthanna for the formalities of travel. Then we left for the city of the mythological hero Gilgamesh, accompanied by our guide Sayed Jacob, who inherited this job from his father. Born in the city of Uruk he seemed to be a descendant of the mythical king.

The site and its name

The city of Uruk is located 56 km from the province of Al-Muthanna (Samawah), which lies 281 km south of the capital Baghdad. It can be reached by travelling 10 km north of Samawah, then turning right into a 6km side street in the direction of Uruk, and going south for 40 km to reach the ruins of the city.

Welcoming visitors from afar are dunes and elevated surfaces - the ruins of the ancient city with an area of nine square kilometres. It is surrounded by a barbed

wire fence for protection. A large metal door allows cars and visitors to enter.

The origin of its name is from the Sumerian word Uru meaning "city", and Ku, "holy"; hence "Holy City".

History of the city

Uruk is one of the ancient cities of Iraq. Its founding dates back to the dawn of human settlement in the south of the country: 5000 years BC. It continued to be settled until the start of the Muslim era and subsequently declined, abandoned by its inhabitants

following a the change in the bed of the Euphrates, currently 12 km from the city.

It was one of the most beautiful and majestic Sumerian city which started life as a small town located along the marsh, with clay and reeds houses. It evolved, following the succession of various civilizations: the Sumerians, Akkadians, Babylonians, and Kassites, who founded temples and palaces. Then came the conquerors: the Assyrians, Chaldeans, Persian Achaemenids, Seleucids and



Ruins of the city

أطلال المدينة



بقايا معبد (آي _ ننا)

The remains of the grand temple of AyNana



Inside AyNana temple

داخل المعبد



The team approaching the ruins by car

السيارة التي أفلتتنا نحو آثار المدينة



نظام تصريف المياه من الزقورة إلى الساقية التي تنتهي قرب البئر

Drainage system from the zagora to the well

Greeks who built gigantic buildings, whose remains are still visible today.

This city was ruled by the twelve kings of the first dynasty: gods or quasi gods, as reported in Sumerian mythology. The most famous is undoubtedly Gilgamesh, who built the city wall and participated in building the temple of AyAna. Then came the Kish dynasty, followed by Laish. When the Akkadians under Sargon united Mesopotamia in 2350 BC, Uruk was incorporated into its territory. That was during the era of the third Ur dynasty and the ancient Babylonian reign. But Uruk was always in the forefront of major cities in terms of architecture and culture, in addition to being an important religious centre for the worship of the god Ishtar. The Kassite king Krindash founded an impressive temple, whose facade is decorated with a brick wall and reliefs representing the gods. The Assyrians have

played a role in the construction of the buildings and temples, especially King Sargon II. The tower of the city and its great temple were subsequently renovated.

During the Seleucid era Uruk was one of the largest cities in southern Iraq. The ruins of ancient buildings still attract the attention of visitors, recalling this glorious era. Countless archaeological artefacts have been discovered, of which the most famous are the "obelisk of the hunting lion", "the offering bowl," and "the face of a girl," carved on marble known as the "Mona Lisa of Uruk," in reference to the painting of Leonardo da Vinci. A richly decorated coffee set has also been discovered.

What remains of the city?

The ruins of the city of Uruk consist of dunes and elevations, the remains of temples and buildings destroyed by erosion, which raised the debris on the surface of the earth. Some

monuments are still intact including the well that provided the inhabitants of the city with water. But today it is filled with earth rather than water. The visitor feels that the city is still full of life, its buildings have preserved the color of mud, and the archways of its temples are scattered everywhere. The most famous site is the beautiful tower, the zagora.

The Zagora

The idea behind the zagora is that it is a link between heaven and earth. The first model of what became an inherent characteristic of several Mesopotamian civilisations was discovered in Uruk, dating from the Stone Age. During the time of the early dynasties it was a place at the top of which religious rituals were performed.

The Uruk zagora is a high stairway with mortar and mats to strengthen it. The locals called the region "Abouriya", a reference to the mat "bariya". It was said that it included ▶

12 steps, the number of kings who reigned in Uruk: each king added his step. But, because of erosion, all that remains of the zagora founded by Orenmo, is one step. The zagora is 16 m,x60 m. It has a staircase at its centre, part of which is still intact. The mud walls, of uneven dimensions are also fairly well preserved. The first is located on the north side, the second on the east side. This zagora has a remarkable system of drainage of rain water: a high wall connected to a channel leads to a deep underground well, 1.80 m in diameter. The guardian of the area told us that during the 1970s the well was 20m deep but sand and storms have reduced it to 5m. The well is located 35m from the zagora and is built of brick, still used to cover the facades of modern buildings and luxurious palaces. The brick is called Farshi, (wide), and is of various sizes.

Temples

The city's temples are perhaps the monuments that attract the most attention from visitors since they are visible from afar. Being scattered throughout the city, we couldn't see all of them as we did not want to bore our companions. We also had to contend with a severe sandstorm in the desert region. The most important temples are those of Anu, the god of heaven, located west of the city and the grand temple of AyNana, built for the god of heaven, in the prehistoric era. It is also known as the White Temple,dedicated to the goddess Ishtar, who was highly venerated by the people of Mesopotamia. She is regarded as

the source of love and mercy and is credited with transferring the civilization of Eridu city to her city of Uruk.

This temple has several rooms separated by walls constructed with great attention. The facades of the outer walls were decorated with colourful, mainly blue mosaics. The main material used is brick, fixed with a kind of light grey gypsum. Within this temple, there are many beautiful arcades of different sizes. A large door provides access to another smaller, less attractive temple.

The palace of Gilgamesh

Visiting the ruins of the palace where the mythological hero Gilgamesh lived, and where he went in search of the tree of immortality, is the highlight of a visit to Uruk.

Only the foundations and some parts of the walls of the palace remain. It has a wide rectangular room, surrounded by two 15m walls: the first, small, with a width of one meter and the second three meters wide. The palace also includes a series of annexes, apparently reserved for services. To the left of the door, there is a large fresco, perhaps used for writings. The palace was built with great care, using stones and mud. This is strange, because we do not find such stones in this region. They could have been transported from the remote region of the Samawah desert.

The palace has a main gate, apparently also used for observation through small openings in its sides. It is located only 100 meters from the main temple. The city was surrounded by a great wall that Gilgamesh

built by using the labour of thousands of the city's inhabitants to protect it from danger. Only a few foundations remain.

Gilgamesh was the fifth and most famous king of Uruk. He is the hero of the famous epic that carries his name, which always attracts the attention of researchers and historians. who wondered if he was a real



أحد جدران المعبد ويلاحظ لون الطابوق المزجج
A wall in the temple built with glazed bricks



Inside AyNana temple

داخل المعبد



Zagora

الزقورة

person or a mythological character. Recently archaeologists and historians agreed that he was a real person who lived in the 26th century BC.

The epic is famous because it is the most beautiful literary work of the Mesopotamian civilization. It also contains facts consistent with major historical events, such as the flood (at the time of Prophet Noah). It is therefore not surprising to call it "the odyssey of ancient Iraq."

In summary, this epic tells us that the people of Uruk, who could no longer endure the oppression and arbitrariness of Gilgamesh, prayed to their gods to deliver them from this ordeal. The gods responded positively to their request. One of their goddess, Ururu, created Enkidu a wild man living like animals. Because he saved animals from the nets of hunters, they complained to king Gilgamesh who went looking for him. A battle took place between the two men, and Gilgamesh emerged victorious. But they developed an intimate friendship.

Gilgamesh, who wanted to carry out major operations, including cutting down the cedar trees in the area where the gods lived, had to fight Enkidu, on one front, and his guardian, Humpapa, on another. The latter was killed in the battle. Because Gilgamesh was seen as a mythological hero, his reputation attracted the goddess Ishtar who tried to get closer to him and even marry him, but he firmly refused. To wash this humiliation, she asked her father Anu, God of heaven, for revenge. So Anu sent a sacred bull from heaven which was killed by Gilgamesh and Enkidu. The gods decided to kill Enkidu, who was human. He fell ill and died. But they were powerless in front of Gilgamesh, who was half-god and half-man.

Gilgamesh was deeply affected by the death of his friend Enkidu, so he refused to bury him for a week, until he saw insects coming out of the body. He then buried his friend but the experience changed the course of his life. He abandoned his former lifestyle of comfort and luxury, wore animal skins and decided to seek immortality. Knowing that only Ut-napishtim could realize his wish, he went to meet him. ▶



The grand temple of AyNana

بغايا معبد (أي _ ننا)



Rooms and corridors of the AyNana temple

غرف وجدران ودهاليز داخل المعبد



Inside AyNana temple

داخل المعبد



Inside AyNana temple

داخل المعبد



The writer in AyNana temple

الكاتب والفريق المرافق له داخل المعبد

Noting the determination of Gilgamesh, Ut-napishtim asked him to stay awake for six days and seven nights, if he sought immortality. But Gilgamesh failed. Noting his determination, Ut-napishtim's wife asked her husband to help him, offering him to seek a magical plant of the sea, which was able to restore his youth. After long adventures, Gilgamesh found this plant, but when he washed in the river, a snake swallowed it and found its rejuvenation. The snake shed its skin for another - a sign of regaining its youth.

Arriving empty-handed, he observed the giant wall of Uruk and realized that this alone would ensure the immortality of his name. He spent the rest of his life working for the good of the people of his kingdom who felt a deep sorrow when he passed away.

When the World Heritage Fund decided to place the whole of Iraq on its list of threatened sites it was not an arbitrary decision: the country has more than 10 thousand listed heritage sites and thousands of others which are not listed, covering a historical period of over seven thousand years. Its civilisations enriched humanity and their remains must be preserved for future generations. Saving the cradle of civilisation from an early grave must be a priority for the international community. ■



Gilgamesh's Palace from which he set on his journey بيت الملك كلكامش والذي انطلق منه في رحلته الأسطورية



The writer on the road from the zagora to AyNana temple

الكاتب في الطريق من الزقورة نحو معبد (أي _ ننا)