

Al-Moustansiriya

The oldest Arab-Islamic university

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Iraq is a country with a rich, unique Islamic heritage. During the time of the Abbasids, it ruled the Islamic world and was in the forefront of culture and learning. . Al-Moustansiriya School is part of this proud heritage.



The riverside.

المدرسة من جانب نهر دجلة.

The school clearly illustrates the interest of the Abbasid caliphs in science and scholarship. Situated to the east of the Tigris, in the heart of Baghdad, Al Moustansiriya, is an exemplary Arab-Islamic university. In the 7th century Hegira (13th

century A. D), and in the centuries which followed, the school was the center of scientific radiance that attracted students from the Islamic world, who subsequently shared their knowledge during travels throughout the Abbasid empire.

History

Historical sources indicate that the 36th Abbasid caliph, Al-Moustansir Billah, decided to construct this school in 625 A. H. (1228 A. D). It was built in 630 A. H (1232 A.D.), at a huge cost and inaugurated in ➤



The school court.

صحن المدرسة.



The rosaries and precious stones shop in the Watches market next to the school.

أحد المحلات الخاصة ببيع المسبحات والأحجار الكريمة في سوق الساعات المجاور للمدرسة.

esplanade in the centre. There are two levels: the ground floor has 40 study halls and residences and the upper floor 36 rooms and small balconies overlooking the esplanade. There is also a mosque, stores, a library, kitchen, garden and hospital. The south easterly side of the school consists of seven big rooms of various shapes and areas. There is a long hall in front of the big room, that joins it to the other rooms as well as to the esplanade.

The outside walls, made of various materials, have splendid Islamic engravings. One carries the name of the founder of the school: Al-Moustansir Billah. The portal is located in the center of the external northeast wall. With a height of 16 m, it appears more elevated than the other parts of the building. This portal has been decorated with beautiful Islamic motives and arcades. On entering, visitors are welcomed by the esplanade - a source of sunshine for the rest of the school's buildings. In the centre is an old, beautiful, Baghdad-style foundation. There are also two halls adjoining the esplanade, one at the northwest side, the other at the south easterly side.

The mosque is in a prime location. Situated in the southwest, it has an oblong shape (23x20.5m), with an oblong mihrab (of 90.1x25.5m).

The library is made up of two large oblong rooms. One reaches the second through a small door from the first. The library had 80,000 works from various disciplines reflecting the interests of Al-Moustansir Billah: religion and literary subjects. The books were beautifully hand-written, some by Billah himself.

In 656A.H/1258 A.D Tatar soldiers threw these treasures into the Tigris. The river's waters turned blue as the ink drained from the pages, and Baghdad was laid waste by the barbarians.

Chronology

The school has a long history: In 646 A. H, the Tigris flooded and the water sprung from its foundations. During the famous flood of the Tigris in 654 A. H, people arrived by boat to pray. The Mohamed Khan group occupied the premises and turned them into a fortress. In 1193 A. H, it was transformed into a ➤

631 A. H (1233). The aim of the school was to teach all religious sciences in accordance with the four Islamic doctrines as well as medicine, astronomy, mathematics and philosophy. A rigorous discipline was imposed and at first the school had a limited number of teachers and students. But, when it became famous, it attracted people of high intellectual and moral caliber. There were

once 120 teachers and 300 students. The most famous teachers were Shams-eddine Ben Sabbagh, Ben Al-Koutbi and the historian Ibn Najjar Al-Baghdadi.

The School And Its Buildings

The school has an almost oblong shape, and a total area of 4836 m² with a 1710 m²



Inside the school.

جاناب من المدرسة.



The main attractions are the marvelous hydraulic clock in a hall in front of Al-Moustansiriya and the traditional souk which specializes in the sale of old carpets, antiques and precious stones. Next to it is the watch souk, where old watches and rosaries, greatly valued by Iraqis, are sold. Some rare rosaries are on offer, such as "Al-kahrab" in all its varieties.

Khan (station of trailers) under the reign of the Ottoman Wali Abu Said Soliman Pasha. The French researcher Huveau, who visited in the middle of the 13th century A. H, indicated that it was used a costume office. It also served as a warehouse for military uniforms during the 14th century A. H. The building was abandoned until 1945, when the Archeology Department spent until 1960 restoring it and setting up a Museum of Islamic Heritage.

Al-Moustansiriya Today

Further restoration was carried out during the 1970s and 1980s, with international assistance to restore the original external

walls as well as the ornaments and engravings. The materials used were similar to those in the original construction: bricks, and gypsum, with sometimes a recourse to cement and anti-humidity products.

In the past many great historians and travelers who came to Baghdad visited this school, including: Ibn Batouta, the Mongol Sultan Ghazan (in 696 A. H), the Turkish traveler Olia Helbi (1058 A. H and 1066 A. H), Nibour, Buckingham, Robert Menan, Freiser, Houveau and Felix Johns. It has always been a popular tourist attraction and tourists will return as soon as the security situation permits.

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hydraulic clock in a hall in front of Al-Moustansiriya and the traditional souk which specializes in the sale of old carpets, antiques and precious stones. Next to it is the watch souk, where old watches and rosaries, greatly valued by Iraqis, are sold. Some rare rosaries are on offer, such as "Al-kahrab" in all its varieties.

The location of the school on the Tigris confers on it a particular beauty and grandeur. It stands proud and dignified in troubled times, looking forward to better days when it will once again be a must-see for tourists, historians and researchers. It may even re-open as an institution of enlightened Islamic learning. ■