

Kufa: The Islamic City And School

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The minbar and mihrab of Imam Ali after their reconstruction

محراب ومنبر الإمام علي بعد تجديدهما

Perhaps the historian was right in describing Iraq in the following terms: "Under each meter of Iraqi territory there is a city and a civilization, and on each inch one finds a city and a civility".

Kufa is one of most important Islamic cities that the Muslims established since the beginning of their conquests. This city, which was going to be the capital of the Islamic state, shelters the oldest mosque of

Iraq, after that of Basra, as well as the Minbar of Imam Ali Ben Abi Taleb, the room in which he resided, and the place of prayer where he was martyred.

In this city, there is also the school where

Jaber Iben Hayan studied. Westerners call him "the father of chemistry". Kufa was the city of the most beautiful Arab calligraphy, in which the Koran was written, as well as the broad outline of Arab grammar - thanks to ➤

Abu El-Assouad Addaouali, whose grammatical school competed with the Basra school.

Approximately 70 Companions of the Prophet who participated in the battle of Badr lived there, among them Ammar Ben Yasser and Abdullah Ben Massaoud. It was the birth place of the great Arab poet Al-Motannabi. Imam Ali described it as: the "head of the Arab, arrow of God's, treasure of faith and the house of exodus of the Muslims". Kufa is all this and much more.

The name and site

The town of Kufa is located 156 km south of the capital Baghdad and only 10 km from Najaf. It has a wonderful location at the edge of the Euphrates River and in the centre of forests and palm plantations. Some believe it was called Kufa because it had a circular form and was a gathering place. (The name is taken from the Arab verb "takawwafa" which means to gather). Others estimate that this name refers to the mixture of the ground and stones. Located 22m above sea level, it was saved from the risings of the Euphrates.

History of the city

Kufa is regarded as one of the most important Islamic cities, founded at the beginning of the Muslim state under the reign of the second Caliph Omar Ben Al-Khattab. It was built as a military garrison, to protect Madina. Its first houses were made of reeds on the orders of Saad Ben Abi Wakkass in 17 of Hegira (H). But, after they were devastated by fire, they were rebuilt out of bricks during the reign of Al-Moughira Ben Shuaba. This garrison was divided into seven zones, each reserved for a tribe. This arrangement lasted until the time of Imam Ali, in 36 H. Governor Ziad Ben Abih in 50 H subsequently divided the garrison into four zones.

The importance of this city increased when Imam Ali made it the capital of the Muslim State in 36 H with the support of several companions, after his victory in the Battle of the Camel. Thus, it had become a centre of knowledge, and was supported in particular by its commercial role and by its location on the pilgrimage route to Mecca.

But, with the advent of the Abbasids in 132



The mausoleum of Maytham Attammar

مرقد الصحابي ميثم التمار



The mausoleum of Muslim Ben Aqail

مرقد مسلم بن عقيل

H, the city declined, in particular with the Al-Hashimiya construction nearby and the transfer of the capital to Baghdad in 145 H. Many men of letters and science left to settle in the new capital. However, after the transfer of the capital to Samarra, during the reign of the Caliph Al-Moatassim, Kufa witnessed a rebirth and was extended to the area of the central Euphrates (Kerbela-

Hillah-Diwana).

After the rise of the town of Najaf, nearby in the middle of the 3rd century Hegira, Kufa's prosperity increased. But, at the beginning of the 5th century Hegira, it witnessed a decline. This situation remained until the end of the Ottoman state, at the beginning of the 20th century, when it started to rise from its ashes. ➔

Kufa today

The city owes its importance to the fact that it shelters the second oldest mosque in Iraq, after that of Basra; but it was of greater importance from the architectural point of view, and owing to the fact that it has the most famous Muslim Minbar from which Imam Ali made his speeches.

Its importance is also due to the Msalla (prayer room) of Imam Ali and the Mihrab in which he was martyred at dawn in 40 H. There is the site where Noah's Ark landed after the flood, certain places of saints who passed by the mosque, the house of Imam Ali when he was the Caliph and the well whose water was used to wash his body after this death. Close to this mosque, is the tomb of Muslim Ben Aqail. The city also shelters the remains of the Palace of Emirate (The State Palace), where the governor lived.

The house of Imam Ali

The house of Imam Ali is adjacent to the Palace of Emirate. It was built after his refusal to live in this palace at the time of his Caliphate. This recently-restored house has an area of 300 m2 and comprises a court ending in a long corridor which makes a curve towards the right in order to prevent visitors from seeing the women inside. At the end corridor, there is the room where Imam Ali slept and received visitors and where he was washed after his assassination.

Close to it is the well from which the family supplied itself with water and from where his two sons, Al-Hassan and Al-Hussein drew water to wash him after his death. The water of this well is particularly pure and soft. Visitors drink it to profit from its blessing. The well has a depth of about 10 meters and water is drawn by a bucket.

Close to the Imam's room, are the rooms of his two sons Al-Hassan and Al-Hussein, now called the "Library of Al-Hassan and Al-Hussein". Historical accounts indicate that it was reserved for the reading of the Koran. This room has a niche in the wall for books, especially the Koran.

The house has other rooms such as one for his wife, Fatima Bent Hazzam Al-Kalabia, called Oum Al-Banine (Mother of the Boys). She had four sons who were martyred on the day of Ashoura with their brother Hussein). There is another room for his daughters. One also finds the "dakka", (small elevated table) on which Imam Ali was dressed in his shroud.

The palace of Emirate

The governors of Kufa resided in the Palace of the Emirate, which was demolished in ➤



The area surrounding the mausoleum of Muslim Ben Aqail

المنطقة المحيطة بضرخ مسلم بن عقيل

72 H on the orders of Abdul-Malek Ben Marwan. Today only the foundations, thick 3.5 m walls remain from this magnificent edifice whose rooms lie in ruins. The palace was also used to dispense with opponents: it was from the top of its walls that the bodies of Muslim Ben Oqail, a cousin of Imam Hussein, and Hani Ben Aroua, chief of the Madhaj tribe, were thrown after their murder in 60 H. The palace had many doors leading to the mosque.

The mosque of Kufa

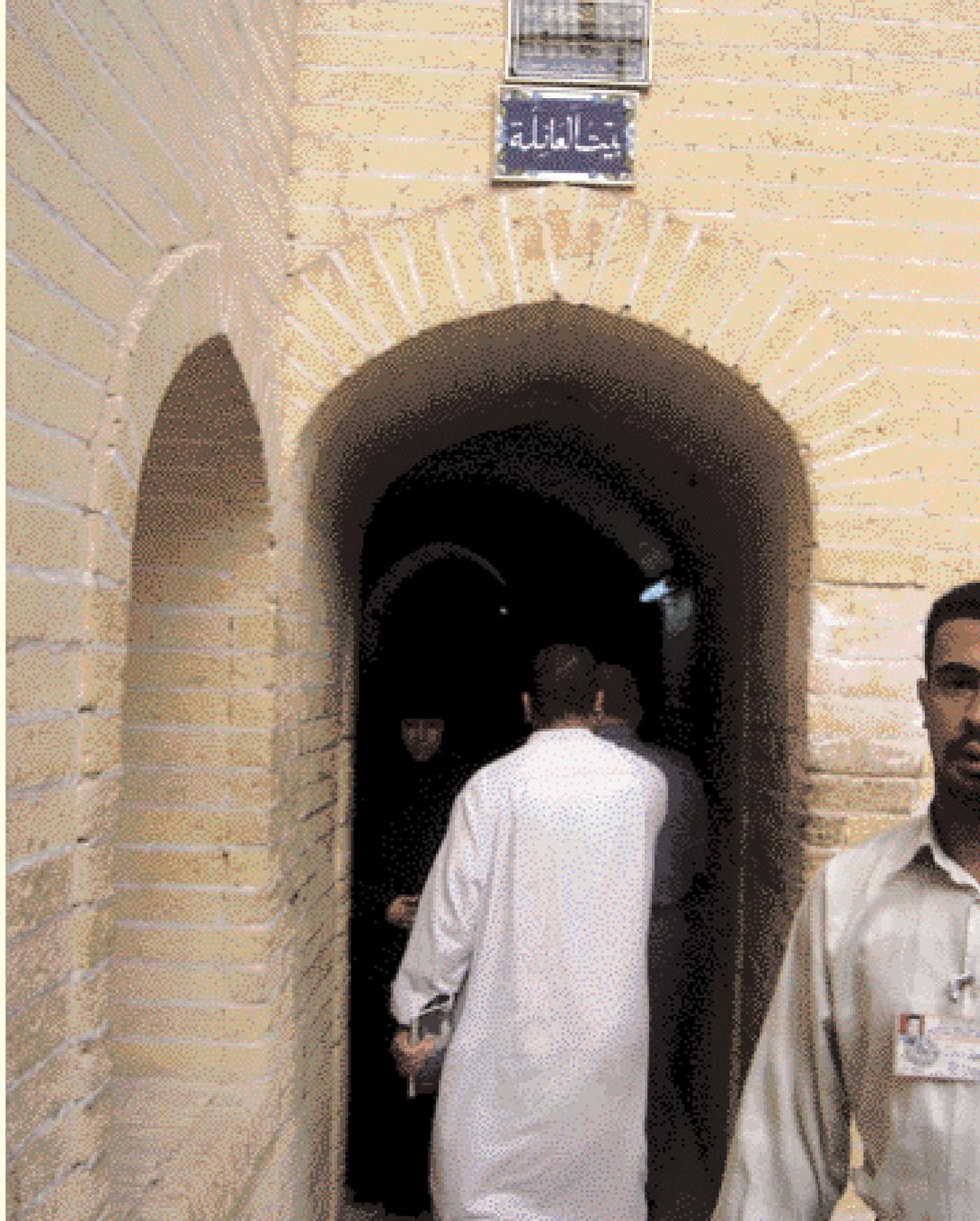
This mosque was built in 17 H by Saad Ben Abi Wakkas. Apart from Medina, it was the second mosque built by the Muslims after Basra mosque. It has an area of 12.660 m² and three doors, each with the name of a large tribe of the time: Bab Sudda, an ally of Imam Ali, Bab Kenda and Bab Al-Anmat. Today, they bear the following names: Bab Athoaban (The Snake Gate); Baba Arrahma (The Mercy Gate) and Bab Al-Feel (The Elephant Gate). This mosque has 60 halls built according to the Islamic architectural model, with arcades and arabesques, 14 of which are facing Mecca.

There are numerous places of interest for visitors to the Kufa mosque. People believe that the majority of the prophets visited the site of this mosque before its construction. Some of these sites are attributed to Prophet Ibrahim Al-Khalil, Khodr, Prophet Mohammad, Adam, Gabriel, and Prophet Noah (certain accounts indicate that he was born in Kufa).

The mosque was also visited by Zine El-Abidine, the son of Imam Hussein. There is the spot where Imam Jaafar Assadek gave his religious lessons (called the school Imam Assadek), the place where Imam Ali prayed (called Nafilate Al Imam), beside the Minbar and Mihrab in which he was assassinated. Visitors say their prayers at each of these holy places.

The most exciting site is undoubtedly the "Place of Noah's Ark". Certain historians indicate that the ark came to rest here after the great flood. It can be accessed via a staircase to a vast, octagonal-shaped court, with an esplanade and a hall.

There is also a corner of the mosque called "Dakkat Al Qada'", where Imam Ali sat as a



The family room

باب بيت العائلة

judge, as well as the place called "Bayte Attacht". It has been narrated that Imam Ali saved a young Yemeni virgin who was wrongly accused of adultery.

The second part of the site, separated from the mosque and frequently visited sites by a high wall, includes some mausoleums, of which the most famous is that of Muslim Ben Oqail. The mausoleum has a rectangular form, of 3m X 5m and a height of 2.5 m. Like all the mausoleums of Iraq, it is surrounded by a large silver grid comprising ten small square windows on its four sides. It is covered by a case 25cm wide.

The cemetery in which the mausoleum is located has marble ground and marble walls. The top is decorated in Koranic verses engraved in beautiful calligraphy on

Qashan tiles. The ceiling is decorated with glass. At the end, on the right of the entrance one finds the place where Al-Mokhtar Ben Abi Obaida Athaqafi was imprisoned - as a supporter of Hussein he was not allowed to join the revolution of Imam Hussein. This place is surrounded by silver netting with a panel specifying the ritual to be respected at the time of visits. At the top of the mausoleum, is a golden dome, visible from afar and a decorated minaret in Qashan and calligraphy.

Opposite the mausoleum of Muslim, beyond the vast court, one finds the mausoleum of Hani Ben Arwah, which can be reached by a narrow corridor. Of octagonal form, this mausoleum has beautiful silver netting. It has a decorated dome in Qashan blue and a ➤

high minaret. The front has eight decorated Islamic arcades in Qashan with Koranic verses.

Other mausoleums

On the left of the mausoleum of Muslim, one finds the mausoleum of Khadija, the daughter of Ali Ben Abi Taleb and Fatima Bent Hazzam Al Kalabiya. Located in the middle of a small room decorated with Qashan and Koranic verses, this mausoleum is covered with silver netting. It is visited primarily by women who hope to profit from the "gifts" of this lady for the realization of their wishes.

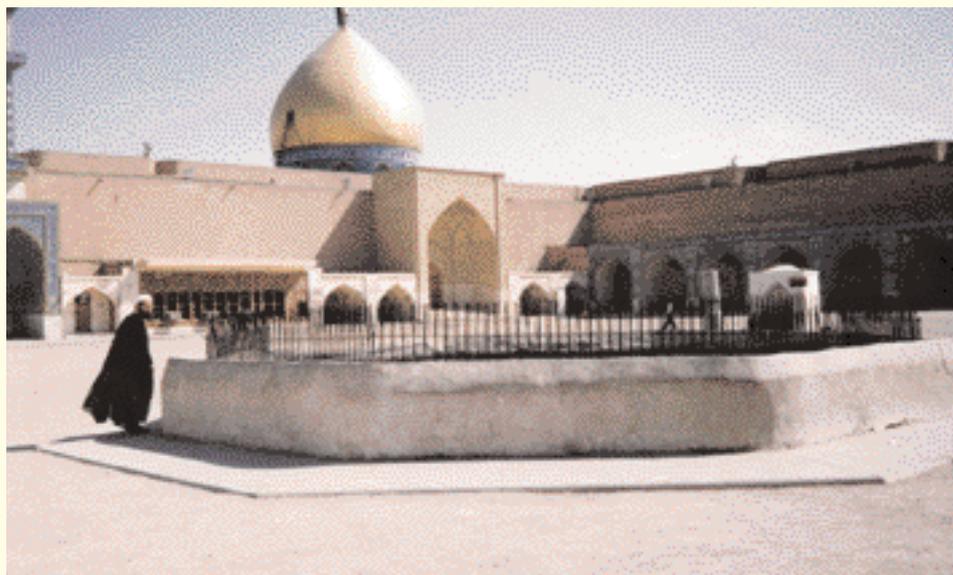
Maytham Attammar

A few hundred meters from the mosque of Kufa, is the mausoleum of Maytham Attammar, one of the Companions of Imam Ali who was killed on the orders of Obaid Allah Ben Ziad, governor of Kufa in 61 H. It is well attended by visitors who come to read Al Fatiha in the hope it will bestow blessings. The mausoleum has a vast esplanade of 26,000m², with more than 60 halls to accommodate visitors. The tomb, the height of which does not exceed 2 meters, is covered with silver netting in the middle of a room of 400m². The walls are decorated with Koranic verses, as well as a large dome decorated with blue Qashan.

The mosque of Assahla

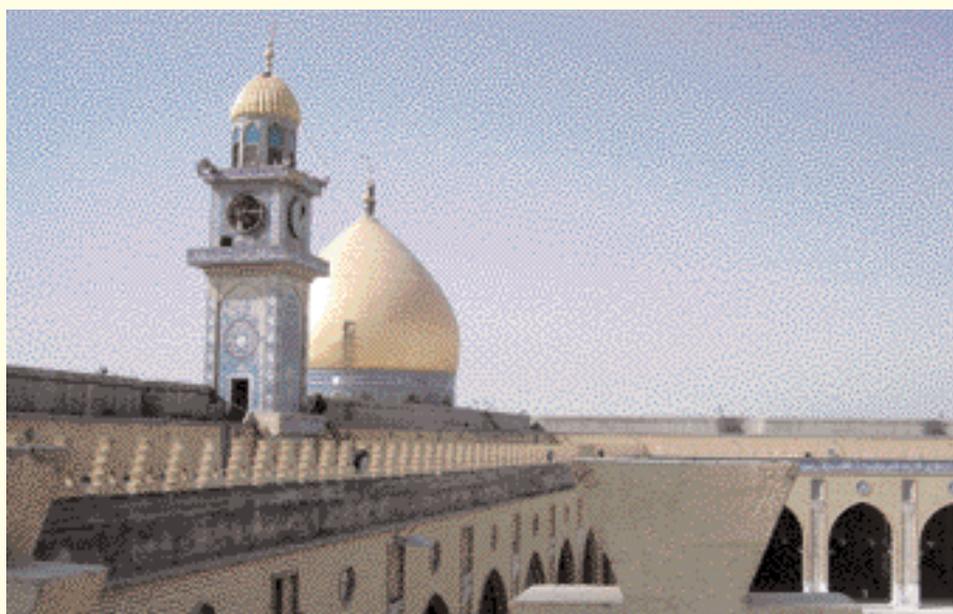
Approximately two kilometers north of Kufa mosque, is the mosque of Assahla, regarded as the 5th mosque of Islam, after those of Mecca and Jerusalem. It is believed that this mosque was visited by many prophets. It has seven holy places such as that of Prophet Ibrahim, who left from this area to fight the giants of Yemen.

Other holy places include those of Prophet Idriss, (tailor), Al-Khodr, Imams Mahdi, Assadek, Zinelabidine and other prophets and saints. They are marked by a plaque of blue Qashan. The most beautiful of these holy places is that of Al-Mahdi, called "Saheb Azzaman" (the Master of time). He is the last Imam of the Shiites, who, according to certain accounts, appears before the day of judgement in Kufa to restore peace and justice.



The spot where Noah's Ark allegedly came to rest after the flood

المكان الذي يقال إن سفينة نوح قد وضعت فيه في مسجد الكوفة بعد الطوفان



Kufa Mosque

مسجد الكوفة

This place has silver netting, with Koranic verses at the top printed on Qashan. On its walls are panels where ritual injunctions are registered. The room's floor and walls are covered with beautiful marble. The mosque is composed of two prayer halls one for men, and the other for women. It has a large dome decorated with Qashan and a high minaret, built in the 1960s. According to popular belief, it is preferable to visit this place on Tuesday after Isha evening prayer. It is a time when wishes can be granted.

This mosque is surrounded by a high wall and comprises of several halls built according to Abbasid style. They have an area of 5m², arches decorated with Qashan

and can accommodate ten visitors.

The mosque also shelters other beautiful constructions with varied architectural forms which are being restored as part of a major campaign of restoration and development of these holy places. The work is carried out with local materials and the craftsmen maintain the traditional architectural style.

Other mosques

Other mosques include the mosque of Zayd Ben Sohan, one of the Companions of Imam Ali, who died during the battle of the Camel and the mosque of his brother Saasaa Ben Sohan, who attended the funeral of Imam Ali, and was the first, apart from ➤



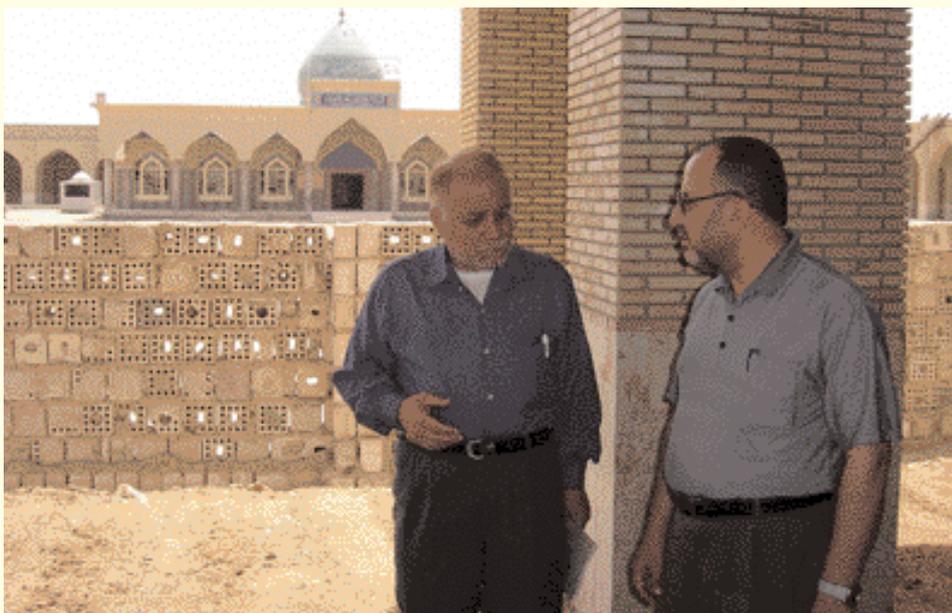
The well of Imam Ali

بئر الإمام علي



Al-Hassan and Al-Hussein Library

مكتبة الحسن والحسين



The writer talks to the engineer responsible for the reconstruction

مندوب المجلة يتحدث مع المهندس المشرف على عملية الاعمار

members of the family to visit his tomb. Visitors to Assahla also visit these two mosques.

Kufic writing

One of Imam Ali's famous saying tells us: "the beautiful writing makes the right more obvious". After his arrival in Kufa, he was interested in writing and contributed to the development of the style of writing which became known as "kufi". The Koran was written in this style and many were distributed to several countries. Two of these are in Najaf, the first in the Shrine of Imam Ali, and the other in the library of the "Commander of Believers". Another is in Cairo and the second in Istanbul where the beginning of the style of kufic writing developed. It surpassed other styles and became a favourite among Arab-Muslim calligraphers.

University of Kufa

In the past Kufa was distinguished by a prestigious school of Arab grammar along with Basra, thanks to Al-Kisai and Al-Farra. In the second century of Hegira, it had a famous school of Muslim theology, thanks to Imam Jaafar Assadek, who taught more than 3,000 scholars among them Noman Ben Thabet, (Abu Honaifa), the founder of the Hanafi school.

The city once again became a school of learning and science during the 1960s with the creation of the faculty of agriculture, as the cornerstone of its university. Other faculties: the humanities, education, medicine, economy and management, engineering, pharmacy, the law, as well as the Center of Kufic Studies followed gradually. These faculties are now distributed between Kufa and Najaf.

New tourist project

Because of its location on the beautiful riverside at the edge of the central Euphrates, Kufa attracts visitors, in particular families who have also visited Najaf. Many great Shi'ites religious scholars have lived in the city. When security returns to Iraq there is a plan to transform this area into a major tourist complex and connect it by rail to Najaf, to make transport easier for visitors. ■