

> Reportage and photos by
Walid Abdul-Amir Alwan

Al Ukhaider:

The amazing palace and fortress

Al Ukhaider is one of the most solid fortresses of the Islamic world, whose secrets are not yet completely revealed. It remains an enigma for archaeologists and researchers who are unaware of its founder, the reason or date of its construction, or even if it is Islamic or Sassanid. And who engraved its walls with words in one of the old languages, safayia?

The visitor will be perplexed as to whether Al Ukhaider is a palace or a fortress. Was it built all at once or in different stages? The channels which surround it also have their secrets.

Location

The palace/fortress of Al Ukhaider is located in the Western desert, 48 km to the south-west of the town of Karbala and 150 km south of Baghdad. It is one of the most beautiful fortresses of the Muslim world. The outer wall is the most complete and best preserved. One arrives there by the road connecting Karbala to Ain Tamr, in the Western desert, where one finds Attar vestiges, the church of Al Uqaysar and the Samson palace.

Al Ukhaider Fortress/palace

The fortress is 176 m x 164 m and covers an area of approximately 29.000 m². It has 165 rooms of various dimensions and a number of buildings: guest's rooms, living rooms, halls, houses, an esplanade, a bath and a mosque. It is composed of three juxtaposed palaces, which give the impression that there is only one palace. A house is reserved for the guards. The whole structure is surrounded by an imposing wall.

At the entrance is a gigantic overhung cloister of a high building. To the left of this cloister, is a mosque probably built well after the foundation of the fortress. The walls of the external fortifications are equipped with 48 towers on four sides. ▶



The top of the fort

الحصن من الأعلى



Old inscriptions

كتابات صفائية

They are very beautiful and attract the most attention.

But the two towers one in the middle of the Eastern frontage and the other on the Western frontage, present a richer architectural heritage. Perhaps the most astonishing feature of this fortress is its external wall, which remains almost intact. It is equipped with four doors, the most important being the door to the north made of stones and gypsum with circular towers used for defence.

Through the door of the north, one arrives at a passage which leads to the living room of the emir along with dormitories and an emergency ramp for a horse and rider. The ramp was also used to transport the guards' ammunition.

The principal part of this fortress consists of a vast house and four apartments, which were probably used as dwellings for the guards, since each had a living room, a bedroom, a bathroom, a kitchen and a passage to the external tunnel.

The emir's apartment is in the north-eastern zone of the fortress. It is characterized by a large cellar, probably used as a sleeping place during summer. The bedroom is vast, with a beautifully decorated ceiling. The bath consists of three rooms, the most important being the massage room of bricks and gypsum with a niche for heating. The second room is for washing and the third for rest. The three rooms open onto one another, with drainage and openings for the escape of vapour.

The mosque, constructed after the main complex, has a vast prayer room and a mihrab directed towards Kaaba.

Clever fortifications

The fortifications of this fortress are difficult to breach. In addition to its high walls, gigantic towers and secret underground entries, there are secret tunnels in the four apartments. The wall also has three battlements to pour hot oil over would-be invaders. Lastly, there is a battlement of 10cm in each turn making it possible for the guards to launch their arrows without being exposed to those of the enemy.

Secrets of the palace

One of the first secrets relates to writings on certain walls. Studies and investigations



Decorations on the ceiling

زخرفة مستخدمة في الحصن



The main corridor

الدليل الرئيسي

revealed that they are in the safayia language, originating in Yemen. The Yemenis settled near the fortress and subsequently left for unknown reasons.

The water supply is also a mystery. A channel connected to the palace has been discovered. Especially in summer when the need was most pressing, it supplied the palace with water from the Euphrates 50 kms away. But its opening towards the palace is currently closed. It is perhaps one of the wonders of the architecture of

Mesopotamia. The palace also has four wells which once over flowed due to the abundance of water.

The construction materials suggest this fortress was built during the second half of the second century of Hegira. It was probably a meeting place for the chiefs of "Ikhwan Assafa" (Assafa Brothers - Group Shiite Ishmaelite).

There are still many secrets for the palace to reveal. Why is it called Al Al Ukhaider, the small green palace? ■