

# Iraq's Forgotten Period

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When people discuss Iraqi history, how is it perceived? Most likely through the towering ziggurats of Sumer, or even perhaps the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. Through images of the powerful armies of Assyria, or the Round City of Baghdad. These are arguably the defining civilizations of the region, and their credit is not undeserved. Assyria was the world's first military superpower, Babylon was the largest city of its time, and Sumerian cities such as Ur and Uruk were among the first in the world [1]. The Abbasids not only made many innovations and turned Baghdad into the capital of the Islamic world, but also captured the imaginations of people around the world; One Thousand and One Nights continues to be one of the most iconic collections of Middle Eastern literature. It's hard to imagine an Iraq without these famous civilizations that shaped not just the region but the entire world. However, one period of Iraqi history tends to be ignored, or at the very least not seen nearly as important as the others, despite it being one of Iraq's most transformative and important eras. When it is studied, it tends to be in the broader context of the empires that occupied the region during that period, from the Persians to the Romans to the Hellenic Diadochi States. This period from roughly 300 BC to 633 AD would bring about the development of the Arabic script, the formation of the modern Assyrian people, begin the creation of the Kufic font of Arabic, and bring about the emergence of Arabs in Mesopotamia. It was also arguably one of the region's most diverse periods, featuring several religions and sects which would leave their mark on the region, some still existing to this day.

One of Iraq's most well-known titles is the "Cradle of Civilization", placing itself with other civilizations such as Ancient Egypt and the Indus river valley; but arguably Iraq is just as much a cradle of religions as it is a cradle of civilization. Mesopotamia is, after all, the place where Abraham once lived, as the ancient Sumerian city of Ur lies in modern-day southern Iraq. The Babylonian Talmud was written in Mesopotamia as well, and it is also where we see followers of smaller but nonetheless fascinating sects and religions such as Manichaeism, Mandaism and the Elcesaites.

The Manichaen movement began under the prophet Mani, who was born in 216 AD under Parthian rule. At the time, Baghdad as we know it did not exist; it was still a small Babylonian village on the Tigris River. The metropolis of the region was just to the South, in the Persian capital of Ctesiphon (Today known as al-Mada'in, meaning the cities in Arabic). While having been constructed by the Persians, Ctesiphon was a multi-ethnic and religiously diverse city, with Persians, Jews, Assyrians, Romans, and Arabs [2, p15][3, p33]. It was built just across the river from the former Greek Seleucid capital of Seleucia, which was eventually merged into the larger Ctesiphon metropolitan area. It was in this diverse capital that the prophet Mani was born, and this multicultural environment clearly influenced the movement. The Manichaen movement expanded beyond Mesopotamia across the Aramaic-speaking world (That being most of the Levant as well as Mesopotamia itself) and made it as far as China, where rumors persist that this religion is still practiced in Fujian province. It spread to Egypt, and as far west as the Roman province of Gaul in modern France. Manichaeism would even become the official religion of the Uyghur Khaganate in Central Asia. The Manichaen religion reveals to us how diverse the region was, and how Mesopotamia functioned as a crossroads for different beliefs.

The religion had aspects of Buddhism, Christianity, and Judaism incorporated into it. Both Jesus and the Buddha were considered prophets in Manichaeism as well, sent by God to different people across the globe, who's final message culminated in the Prophet Mani. Originating in Iraq, it also included aspects of indigenous Mesopotamian religions such as Mandaism [4]. Eventually, the Prophet Mani was killed in 274, and despite the continued existence of the Manichean religion following this setback, it eventually began to decline and was almost entirely gone by the Medieval period [2, p45].

There was however a similar religion that had survived these waves of persecutions. An already under-researched group, the Mandaeans in this pre-Islamic period are largely unknown due to widespread persecution. Under King Bahram I and his priest Kartir, the persecution of the Mandaeans caused a complete erasure of them from the records [5][6]. As a result the history of Mandaeans, particularly in this period, has been largely ignored in the grander field of religious history in Mesopotamia. They weren't the only ones to be victimized by these periods of zealotry either; the aforementioned prophet Mani was killed and his followers were persecuted, and even Christians, who made up the largest religious group in Iraq at the time, suffered periods of persecution. Despite the persecutions, this was what could almost be described as a golden age for Syriac Christianity in the Middle East. From the first century to the end of the sixteenth century, the Church of the East – which is today split between the Assyrian Church of the East and the Ancient Church of the East – reached its height. Based in Ctesiphon (Later it would be based in the Arab city of al-Hirah), the church held a strong presence in modern-day Iraq and was able to spread its influence across Asia. It began with the introduction of the religion by Addai of Edessa in the 2nd century, and quickly spread across Northern Mesopotamia [3, p26].

Under the small Aramaic-speaking kingdom of Osroene in modern-day eastern Syria and southern Anatolia, Syriac Christianity was able to spread further in the region, making its way and spreading down the Tigris and Euphrates, eventually having followers as far south as Khuzestan in southwestern Iran. Under Parthian rule, Christians were generally tolerated, as per the traditional Iranian imperial approach to religious minorities since the beginning of the Achaemenid empire, allowing them to establish themselves further in Mesopotamia. However, following the adoption of Christianity by the Roman Empire, the new Sassanid dynasty began to take a more hostile approach towards adherents in Mesopotamia. While persecution increased, the Sassanids did not attempt to fully eradicate Christianity from the empire; they were tolerated enough to the point where the Church of the East was able to continue performing missions across the continent. On top of being adopted by the native inhabitants of Mesopotamia, the church spread further east into Central Asia and East Asia, something which would happen well after the Islamic Conquests for centuries. They were the first to send missionaries to China, doing so in 635. Following the arrival of these Nestorian missionaries, Christianity would continue to have a sizable community in China until a series of persecutions two centuries later. It would spread to South Asia as well, where the Church of the East would continue to have followers up until the arrival of the Portuguese in the 16th century [3, p37-42].

For the indigenous modern Assyrians in Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran, this period represents a new transformation in their history. While the ancient Assyrians are famous for their great Iron Age empire and its ruthless conquering armies, the history of Assyrians in this period is largely ignored. During this time, the Assyrian identity underwent a vital transition, as the group shifted from being a polytheistic Akkadian-speaking civilization to a Christian

Aramaic-speaking one. While Aramaic was already spoken throughout the region prior to Christianity, it is during the spread of Christianity that we see the emergence of the Syriac dialect of Aramaic as a liturgical language for many Middle Eastern Christians, influencing not just modern Assyrian Aramaic but Arabic and its dialects in the region [3, p14-16]. It is proof of not just the continuation of the Assyrian people, but that even after the fall of their empire, Assyrians continued to flourish and contribute to the cultural and religious history of the region. It was also around this period that the Christian Assyrians had an influx of converts coming from the South, a people they called the Tayyaye.

The term “Tayyaye” (Singular: Tayyaya) comes from the tribe of Beni Tayy, one of the earliest Arab tribes to migrate to Mesopotamia, and was later applied to describe Arab tribesmen in general by Syriac authors [7, p235]. Arabs had settled in Mesopotamia prior but in small numbers, usually remaining nomadic and not interacting with the local population. By around the turn of the millennium onward, more Arabs began to migrate into the Levant and Mesopotamia, mostly on the peripheries [7, p58-59]. Eventually Arabs began to even rule to some extent, with the states of Hatra and Characene ruling parts of Iraq until the third century AD. Hatra was located in the North of Mesopotamia, modern day Nineveh Governorate. Despite being populated by Arabs it was still diverse and influenced by several civilizations. As a result, the Arabs of Hatra used Aramaic as its language, as it was the lingua franca of most of the region at the time [2, p31]. In Hatra there was a mix of Greek, Arab, and Assyrian polytheism which is still reflected in the city’s ruins to this day, featuring a blend of the various architectures of the cultures that influenced it [7, p69]. The city eventually gained enough prominence so that the

king of Hatra had the title of “King of the Arabs”, and it became a strategic point in the Roman-Iranian border [7, p77-78].

This would become a common theme among the ancient Arab cities in the Levant and Mesopotamia, a mix of Mesopotamian, Arab, Persian, and Greco-Roman civilization to form a cultural melting pot between the two ancient superpowers, the Persians and the Romans. The Kingdom of Characene in Southern Iraq was another Aramaic-speaking state populated by Arabs. As a vassal state of the Parthians, it is not particularly well known in world history, but in reality was a vital region for its trade and fertile land until its eventual conquest by the Sassanid Persians. Its Aramaic name of Myšn eventually was adapted into Arabic as Meysan, which still names the governorate in Iraq of the same place where the ancient kingdom once was. However despite the significance of these kingdoms, they were never able to truly create an independent Arab culture in the region, rather merging itself into the already existing Mesopotamian cultures in Syria and Iraq and using Aramaic as its language of administration [7, p69]. However, in the third century, a new kingdom would be established in Southern Mesopotamia that would firmly establish an Arab presence in Iraq, bringing with it the formation of a truly Arab identity.

Benu Lakhm, or the Lakhmids, were originally a Qahtani tribe (Meaning descendant from Qahtan, one of the two ancestors of the Arab people in traditional Arab genealogy) from Yemen. But like many tribes in this period, such as the aforementioned Beni Tayy and others such as Beni Tanukh, they found themselves migrating to the more fertile North, in Iraq and Syria. Establishing themselves in al-Hirah, a small Arab town derived from the word for

encampment in Syriac (Hirtah) [8, p65], they began a new era in Mesopotamian history. Like the previous Arab kingdoms in the region, the Lakhmids also had to side with a major power for protection, stopping their small kingdom from being overrun. In this case for most of Lakhmid history they had been subservient to the Persians, acting as a counterbalance against their Byzantine-controlled Ghassanid rivals directly to their West [7, p78-79] [8, p31].

Al-Hirah soon became the center of Arab culture not just in Iraq but in the region as a whole. It was one of the first truly great Arab cities of its time, at a crossroads of Arab, Persian, Roman, and Mesopotamian civilization, just like its predecessors in Hatra and Palmyra. What separated Al-Hirah however, was its uniquely Arab character, being instrumental in the development of the Arabic script. Based off of the already existing Nabataean Aramaic script, the Lakhmids created an Arabic script which managed to spread to Hejaz, even making its way to the Quraysh tribe, the tribe the Prophet Muhammad belonged to. With this, the Lakhmid script was able to lay the foundation for the modern Arabic script that would spread with the coming Islamic Conquests [8, p66]. Lakhmid architecture was a mix of not just Roman and Persian styles, but of the Babylonian/Assyrian and Arab styles, encapsulating the truly metropolitan atmosphere in the city. Christians, Zoroastrians, Arab and Mesopotamian Pagans, Jews, and Manichaens all resided in this city each leaving their mark on its culture [8, p69-70].

However, this golden age did not last forever. Relations between the Lakhmids and their Persian overlords in Ctesiphon broke down, possibly over King Nu'man III's refusal to wed his daughter to a Persian nobleman related to the Sassanid Shah, Khosrow II. Another factor may

have been Nu'man's conversion to Nestorian Christianity, the dominant religion of Al-Hirah. While the city had been Christian, most Lakhmid kings still practiced the Arabian Paganism of their ancestors. But with Nu'man's conversion, the Persians began to worry of a Lakhmid state that would not be loyal to their Zoroastrian state, or worse, ally with the Christian Romans [8, p52]. While visiting the Persian court at Ctesiphon, Nu'man III was executed by Khosrow II. The Lakhmid dynasty was replaced with Iyas ibn Qabisah al-Ta'i, an Arab Christian from Hira, described by Khosrow as an "ignorant Arabian". Following a humiliating defeat by Arab tribes at Dhu Qar, the facade of Hiran independence was ended when Iyas was replaced by a Persian named Zadeeh [8, p51-55].

The memory of Hira lasted far longer than its golden age, even after its decline as a city. The style of construction in al-Hirah became so prestigious in the Arab World that centuries after the fall of the Lakhmid dynasty, the Abbasid dynasty would take inspiration from Hiran architecture to build the palaces in its newly relocated capital of Samarra. Even when Harun al-Rashid, the famed caliph of the Abbasids was choosing a new capital outside of the "bukhar" (steam room) of Baghdad, he had considered restoring the famed city of Hira and its legendary palace of Khawarnaq, before abandoning the project because of the site's proximity to the rebellious people of al-Kufa [9, p66]. But like many of the civilizations of this period, they soon became ignored, even by Arab authors, as simply a period of the "Jahiliya", or "the ignorance", a term denoting the pre-Islamic period in Middle Eastern history.



Today however, there is growing support for giving more attention to this forgotten era in Iraqi history. And it comes at a crucial moment after the fall of ISIS following its destruction of ancient sites across Northern Iraq and Eastern Syria, and as both nations begin to rebuild from their civil wars, now is the time for increased archeological excavations and research into these sites [10]. Many of the artifacts lost in the US invasion of Iraq and subsequent insurgencies are beginning to return to Iraq's museums, and more archeologists are returning to the country as it becomes safer [11]. Further research into this period is the missing link between the civilizations of Babylon, Assyria, and Sumer, and the civilization of the Abbasids and the Islamic Golden Age. It shows us the transformation of both the Assyrian and the Arab peoples, and how they developed into the modern Arab and Assyrian ethnic groups. It's an era that represents the emergence of many of Iraq's minority religions like Christianity and Mandaism, as well as the development of others like Judaism. A truly all-encompassing understanding of Iraqi history cannot be considered complete without analyzing Iraqi history during this time.

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