

NOTICE

*Husayn Hamza*SUMERIAN IMPRESSIONS ON THE
‘ABBASID SAMARRA**Sumer and Samarra**

IN THE NINTH CENTURY AD, the ‘Abbasid Caliph al-Mu‘tasim, the son of Harun al-Rashid, came to an area located between Babylon and Assyria to build himself a new capital that was far removed from Baghdad, whose people had started complaining about the behaviour of his Turkish soldiers. This area had flourished and prospered in pre-Islamic times, partly as a result of the development of artificial irrigation projects.

Nahrawan was one of the largest of those projects. The name originated from the Babylonian word *narom*, meaning ‘river’ (the ‘m’ was often replaced by the ‘n’ in areas east of the Dijla, or Euphrates river, in ancient times). Moreover, the Qatul canal originated in the Sumerian word *ka-tul*, meaning ‘the beginning of the canal.’¹ In addition to artificial irrigation, pre-Islamic civilization left us a number of archaeological sites, including the remains of an old palace; the Libba tower, which was built out of plaster and gravel;² and a large statue of a deity³ located on the banks of the river Sanam, a tributary of the river Nahrawan. Samarra was inhabited before Al-Mu‘tasem arrived in the area partly by al-Nabeet,⁴ the country’s native people. There were also a number of notable Christian monasteries.⁵

There is a famous fort in the area known as the Sumir fort, which dates back to the pre-Islamic Sassanid era (AD 224-651).⁶ The phonetic similarity of the names ‘Sumir’ and ‘Samarra,’ as well as the geographic proximity of the two sites, warrant some thought and research into their origins and connections. Ancient sources provide some assistance in this regard.

Sources from the late Sumerian era (the end of the third millennium BC) refer to the region as Sumiri, while Assyrian sources refer to it as Surmarta. The Greek Ammianus Marcellinus (c. AD 400) called it

Sumera, and in Syriac writings the region was also referred to as Sumera.⁷ Alternatively, some sources say that when asked about the name of the region, one of the monks informed Al-Mu'tasem that it was Surra Man Ra'a (Arabic, He who sees it is delighted), and that it was the location of the city of Sam, the son of Noah.⁸

The map of the peninsula, however, which was drawn by the Muslim geographer Al-Istakhri (tenth century AD), urges us to reconsider the old name of Samarra, which was passed down through the generations. On this map, Al-Istakhri referred to the Samarra region as Samiri,⁹ although Muslim historians had referred the name of Samarra to its original three words *surra man ra'a*, meaning that it pleases anyone who sees it because of its beauty and grandeur. Yet some modern researchers believe that the name Samarra is a deviation of Sumer, just as the name Al-Warka' is a deviation of Uruk and Karbala' of Kreb Ail.¹⁰ Whatever the case may be, one can be certain that the Sumerian civilization left stronger impressions on the civilization of the 'Abbasid city of Samarra than any other Muslim city. It is ironic that this city, whose shining light of civilization glowed quite distinctly, existed for a mere half a century.

The builders of Samarra

Islamic sources mention that when the Caliph Al-Mu'tasim Billah was planning to build his new capital, he brought together experienced engineers, artists and craftsmen and showered them with gifts so they would build him a city fit for the 'Abbasid Empire. The Iraqis were so well-known for their excellent skills in various professions that Mu'awiya, the first Umayyad caliph who ruled in the early Islamic period (seventh century AD), employed Iraqi experts to build his city in Damascus, as did 'Abdullah bin al-Zubayr (seventh century AD) to rebuild the Ka'ba in the holy city of Mecca.¹¹ During the 'Abbasid era, even the citizens of Qayrawan in Morocco imported Iraqi glazed mosaics to build their great mosque¹²—the excellent skills of the ancient Iraqis in this particular craft is clearly demonstrated in 'Ishtar's gate in Babylon.

As we shall see, these skilled artisans were firmly connected to their Sumerian and Babylonian ancestors' heritage when they built their new capital city—it was so obvious in the plans of their religious structures, their wall reliefs and wood carvings that one wonders whether traces of the ancient religious beliefs might still have existed in the spirit of those 'Abbasid craftsmen.

Religious architecture in Samarra

Religious architecture in 'Abbasid Samarra was greatly influenced by the ancient religious architecture of Iraq. The first *ziqqura* (raised temple, or ziggurat) which appeared during the late Sumerian era at Ur (end of the

third millennium BC), with its elegant multiple layers, influenced the minarets of the Great Mosque of Samarra and the Abu Dulaf Mosque, judging from the evolution of the *ziqqurat* (plural of *ziqurra*) through the ages. Moreover, the plans of these two mosques were influenced by those on which the temple of Enki at Ur was built¹³ during the same period. This design was characterized by the fact that the main entrances were positioned on the same level as the platform of the idol, so that a person standing at the outside entrance would see the idol standing on the platform in its enclosure at the end of the temple. Because of the grandeur of this design and its simplicity, it was sought after for many of the ancient Iraqi temples and the places of worship of the three monotheistic religions.

The Great Mosque of Samarra

The Great Mosque of Samarra was built with brick and plaster over an area of 260 by 180 metres. The minaret was built twenty-seven metres north of the exterior wall on two square-shaped risers built on top of each other, reaching a height of 4.20 meters. The bottom riser is decorated in a style that is reminiscent of other *ziqquras*. The Malwiyya minaret rises above the two risers, spiralling five times to reach a height of fifty-two metres from the ground. At the top, there is a small room with a beautiful façade opening towards the *qibla* in the south (the direction of Mecca, towards which Muslim worshippers must pray), which is reminiscent of the sacred room on top of the *zaqqura*.

Although the Malwiyya is different in shape from the old *zaqquras* (which were square stepped towers) its solid mass, layers, wide staircase, and its distance from the structure of the mosque resembles the architecture of the *zaqquras*. Its spiral shape embodies the spirit of evolution and development. The concept of the spiral staircase was never far removed from the Iraqi imagination (after all, Herodotus expressed his admiration of Babylon in *The Histories*); neither was it far from the thoughts and research of those who excavated at Khorsabad and Nimrod in the nineteenth century.

Sumerian influence on the mosque's minaret is very clear, especially on the very wide staircase that links its base with the main entrance to the mosque.¹⁴ This demonstrates a strong similarity to the middle staircase of the deity's *zaqqura* leading to the main entrance of the temple.

As mentioned earlier, the design of the Great Mosque was influenced by that of the temple of Enki at Ur. Its main gate faces the *mihrab* (prayer niche, indicating the direction of the *qibla*), which is located in the middle of the south wall towards the end of the mosque. The Malwiyya minaret as well as the door of the small room at the top, where the *mu'adhdhin* looks out, with its wide staircase, main gate and *mihrab*, are all on the same level facing the direction of Mecca. Moreover, temples

and *zaqquras* were surrounded by a sacred wall (*temenos*), and there is evidence that such a wall existed around the Samarra and Abu Dulaf mosques and their minarets.

Abu Dulaf Mosque

The Abu Dulaf Mosque was constructed with brick and plaster by the caliph al-Mutawakkil, the son of al-Mu'tasim Billah. It is located over fifteen kilometres from the Great Mosque. The city had expanded to cover an area 34 kilometres in length; it was therefore difficult for the residents of new neighbourhoods to come to prayer at the Great Mosque. The design of this mosque is similar to the design of the Great Mosque, but it is smaller in size (138 by 215 metres) and its minaret that rose on a single platform is generally similar to that of the Great Mosque, but shorter (16.2 metres). This minaret, like that of the Great Mosque, is isolated, unlike the minarets of other mosques. However, the base of the minaret of the Abu Dulaf mosque was decorated with stepped grooves in the T-shape, as was the wall of the minaret from the inside (70 by 70 metres).

This decoration was previously seen in many of the Sumerian and Babylonian religious buildings. As far as we know, this decoration disappeared from architectural construction after the fall of Babylon at the hands of the Achaemenid Empire in the sixth century BC, and only reappeared fourteen centuries later on the base of the Abu Dulaf Mosque and one of the entrances to the room of the minaret of the Great Mosque. In addition to this strong imprint of the Sumerian civilization, we find another one on the *mihrab* of the mosque. The sides of this *mihrab* were made of two layers decorated with half pillars.¹⁵ The *mihrab* is very similar to the entrance of the sanctuary of the deity Nappu in its temple in the Assyrian city of Nimrod, although the half pillars are reminiscent of the Sumerian civilization and the temple of the deity Inanna, which was built at the end of the fourth millennium BC in Uruk, near modern al-Warqa².

Samarra's decorations

While excavating the 'Abbasid city of Samarra, Ernst Hertzfeld uncovered the remains of a layer from the new Stone Age below the Islamic layer. Its pottery was characterized by new forms, some of which were adorned with coloured drawings and lines. Hertzfeld thus named it "Samarra pottery," and its era came to be known as the Samarra era (fifth millennium BC).

Some pottery pieces of that age featured drawings of women holding hands and dancing. The style of some of the drawings was figurative and others abstract, as indicated by Andre Baro.¹⁶ It should be noted that group dancing by women, which prevailed in the Samarra culture during the Stone Age, extended to the beginning of the third millennium

BC, as indicated by a drawing on a pot from that era. On this pot, the women seem to be dancing to the beat of the tambourines they are holding in their hands.¹⁷

The art produced during the era of 'Abbasid Samarra indicates that group dancing by women was still common. Figurative depictions of women holding hands and dancing appeared on storage pots decorated using the barbutine technique.¹⁸

On the plastered walls of palaces as well as on the wooden ornamentation, there were a variety of beautiful decorations. Some seemed to glide smoothly across these walls, and at closer examination, one can see women dressed in baggy trouser-like garments (common during 'Abbasid times) dancing while holding hands.¹⁹ The artistic style here is symbolic.

The influence of the modern Stone Age extended to the decorations of the Muslim 'Abbasid Samarra, but in a different way. The mother deity is portrayed as a naked and headless woman holding her breasts in her hands, an image which became a common topic in the third Ur era as well as during later pre-Islamic ages, appearing in symbolic form in the decorations of 'Abbasid Samarra on the walls of palaces and wooden doors. These decorations were almond-shaped with twisted ends, which Hertzfeld said represented a return to ancient eastern art forms.²⁰

If one looks closely at these decorations, some feature the naked deity holding her breasts in her hands. The artist, at times, identifies her by placing the triangle symbol of the woman in the correct place, similar to a carving on wood from 'Abbasid Samarra and its era,²¹ representing the naked deity holding her breasts and standing on a platform. The carving was similar, despite its symbolism, to the figurative style that was used in the dolls of ancient Iraq.²² The similarity here is conclusive and cannot be said to be mere coincidence.

NOTES

- ¹ Rashid Fawzi, *Nuzum al-arwā' fi al-'Irāq al-qadīm* (Āfāq 'Arabiyya), 100-101.
- ² Aḥmad Sūsa, *Rayy Sāmarrā'*, 147-48.
- ³ Ṭāhir al-'Amīd, *Al-'Amāra al-'Abbāsiyya fi Sāmarrā'*, 19.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.
- ⁷ Fransīs Bashīr and 'Awwad Korkīs, *Sūmar*, vol. 8 (1952), 263.
- ⁸ Ṭāhir al-'Amīd, *Al-'Amāra al-'Abbāsiyya*, 59.
- ⁹ Falāḥ Shākir Aswad, *'Ilm al-Kharā'iḥ* (Figure A3-18), 105.
- ¹⁰ Rashīd Fawzi, Interview.
- ¹¹ Ḥamdān 'Abd al-Majīd al-Kubaysi, *Ḥaḍārat al-'Irāq*, 292-93.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 293.
- ¹³ Mu'ayyad Sa'īd, *Al-'Amāra min 'aṣr fajr sulālāt ilā nihāyat al-'aṣr al-Bābili al-ḥadīth: Ḥaḍārat al-'Irāq* (Figure 23), 139.
- ¹⁴ Sharīf Yūsif, *Tārīkh fann al-'amāra al-'Irāqiyya fi mukhtalaf al-'uṣūr* (Plan 61), 325.

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¹⁵ Kāzim al-Jināni, *Masjid Abi Dulaf* (Figure 26).

¹⁶ André Bateau, *Sūmar: Funūnahā wa-ḥaḍāratahā*, trans. into Arabic by ‘Isa Salmān and Salīm Ṭāha Al-Takrītī, 94.

¹⁷ Faraj Bašmajī, *Kunūz al-maḥṭaf al-‘Irāqī*, 191.

¹⁸ The Iraḳī Museum, Islamic Exhibition Hall, Ground Floor.

¹⁹ Ernest Herzfeld, *Tanqībāt Sāmarrā’*, translated into Arabic by ‘Alī Yaḥya Maṣṣūr (figure 87), 75.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 31.

²¹ The Iraḳī Museum, Islamic Exhibition Hall, First Floor.

²² Fu’ād Safar and Maysar Sa‘īd, *‘Ājīyyāt Namrūd*, (figure 9), 26.

