*Cunieform writing superimposed upon intricate stone carvings—uncovered by excavation at Nimrud, Northern Iraq.*

# *Iraq: An Historical Survey*

## Ancient History

JUSTICE can hardly be done to the ancient history of Iraq in a few hundred words, as it covers a longer period than the history of any other single country in the world. However, it is hoped that the following will prove sufficiently interesting to act as a stimulus to further study. In order fully to grasp the importance of Iraq's earliest periods, what must be borne in mind is the legacy they bequeathed to world civilisation : that Iraq was in fact the cradle of civilisation there can be no doubt. The past hundred years of archaeological investigation have revealed Iraq as the centre of the earliest human civilised endeavours, whence cultural influences went out to other parts of the world. It was here, in Iraq, that the foundations of civilisation were laid.

The prehistoric periods cover the major portion of the story of mankind and the earliest and longest of these periods is the Palaeolithic or Old Stone Age. During this

age southern Iraq was beneath the sea and consequently traces of Palaeolithic Man are only to be found in the north, where several caves and open sites (such as Zarsi, Hazara Mard, Shanidar and Barda Palka) have yielded tools and implements of the Palaeolithic periods.

The next step in human development was the Neolithic Period when agriculture and the domestication of animals began—events which have been considered the greatest revolution in man's cultural evolution: the Food Gathering Age became the Food Producing Age. Traces of this eventful epoch, which can be dated back some ten thousand years, have also been found in north Iraq, where archaeologists have unearthed some of the first agricultural settlements, at Jarmo, Hassuna and in the lowest strata of several other excavated sites.

Also in the north have been found traces of the Calcholithic Age, from the end of the Neolithic period, about 5,000 B.C., to the emergence of the first higher civilisation in Mesopotamia at the beginning of the third millenium. This new phase was also marked by inventions and discoveries, such as the development of agriculture on a more extensive scale than before, the use of copper and bronze, the introduction of wheeled vehicles, the potters' wheel, bricks, temples for religious purposes, sculpture and the beginning of writing and the use of seals. Thus the stage was set for the coming in of urban life, which began in lower Iraq just before the end of the period, for the first time in the history of mankind, and which inaugurated the historical periods.

Shortly before 3,000 B.C., new and important sources for the history of Iraq came into being with the first written words. The vast stretch of time from the beginning of history to the Arab Era may be divided into several main periods, sub-divided as follows:

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| 1. | The Early Dynastic Period .. .. .. .. | 3000–2400 B.C. |
| 2. | Sumer and Akkad, or the Imperial Period: | |
| | *a.* The Akkadian Dynasty .. .. .. | 2400–2200 B.C. |
| | *b.* The Gutian and III Dynasty of Ur .. | 2200–1998 B.C. |
| 3. | The Old Babylonian Period .. .. .. .. (Isin—Larsa and I Dynasty of Babylon) | 1998–1600 B.C. |
| 4. | The Kassite and Middle Babylonian Periods .. | 1600–700 B.C. |
| 5. | The Assyrian Periods .. .. .. .. .. | 1900–612 B.C. |
| 6. | The Neo-Babylonian Period .. .. .. .. | 626–538 B.C. |
| 7. | Periods of Foreign Rule: | |
| | *a.* Achaemenian Period .. .. .. .. | 538–331 B.C. |
| | *b.* Alexander and the Seleucid Period .. .. | 331–140 B.C. |
| | *c.* Parthian Period .. .. .. .. | 140 B.C.–226 A.D. |
| | *d.* Sassanian Period .. .. .. .. | 226–636 A.D. |

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*Gold objects, including head-dresses, from the Royal cemetery at Ur—now in the Iraq Museum of Antiquities.*

The first period in this brief outline may best be termed " the flowering of Sumerian Civilisation," because the six hundred years of the first Sumerian dynasties represent one of the richest and most prosperous periods in the ancient history of Iraq. It was then that the fundamental elements of higher civilisation were laid, and these elements were to leave a permanent mark, not only on the history of Iraq and Western Asia, but indirectly on the classical world and the world of to-day as well. To appreciate the Sumerian civilisation of this period, readers are invited to the Iraq Museum, which contains, among its other important collections, the magnificent works of art of the early Dynastic Period, from the end of which dates the remarkable tomb furniture of the so-called Royal Cemetery at Ur, pieces from which now adorn the British Museum and the University Museum of Pennsylvania.

The Early Dynastic Period, also known as the " Pre-Sargonic Age," was politically characterised by the city-states system of government. The country was divided into small states, prominent among which were the city-states of Kish, Erech, Ur, Lagash and Nippur. These were frequently quarrelling for the political hegemony, until Sargon, from the Semitic Akkadians, succeeded in uniting the whole country into a single kingdom, which he and his successors extended by foreign conquests into a great empire, including the major portion of Western Asia.

The Akkadian Empire lasted for about two centuries before coming to an end in political confusion. It was finally broken up by the warlike Gutian tribesmen from the mountains in the east. Their rule was mostly confined to the north of Iraq, and after less than a century the country was once more unified under the celebrated dynasty of Ur, whose capital, Ur of the Chaldees, is now represented by impressive ruins near the Ur Junction. Recent investigations of the tablet collections at Istanboul revealed the existence of a code of laws, bearing the name of the founder of this dynasty, Ur-Nammu.

The Empire of Ur, which lasted for about two centuries, was overcome by a joint invasion of Elamites and Amorites, a western Semitic people from the middle Euphrates valley. This invasion resulted in the establishment of two city-states or dynasties, called after their respective capital cities, the Isin-Larsa Dynasties. They both figured in the first half of our third historical period—the Old Babylonian Period. A third dynasty, also of western Semitic origin, was established at Babylon during the struggle between the two rival dynasties of Isin and Larsa. This third dynasty is also known as the First Dynasty of Babylon, whose sixth king, the illustrious Hammurabi, made Babylon into a mighty city and the centre of a large empire.

The Old Babylonian Period has a special significance in the history of culture, for it was the age of recording ancient literatures, scientific mathematics, and the codification of laws. In addition to the famous code of Hammurabi, two older codes have recently

been discovered. One of them is associated with the name of "Libit-Ishtar," the fifth king of Isin, who ruled some 150 years before Hammurabi. The other code, recently discovered during the Iraq Government excavations at a small site called Harmal, near Baghdad, belongs to the period of Bilalama, King of Eshunna, who ruled some 200 years before Hammurabi.

The First Babylonian Dynasty was displaced by an invasion of Hittites, who were in their turn expelled after a short time by the Kassites, a people from the mountains east of the river Tigris. They founded in Babylonia the Third Dynasty of Babylon, which lasted more than five centuries. These Kassites, being culturally inferior to the Babylonians, adapted themselves to the Babylonian civilisation and ruled from the old capital, Babylon. In the middle of their ascendancy, however, they founded a new capital, the imposing ruins of which are at Agar Guff (the ancient Dur-Kurigalzu), near Baghdad.

Some of the Kassite kings were the contemporaries of the Egyptian Pharaohs of the Al-Amarna Period, a period famous for the royal correspondence between its kings and the leading states of the Near East. This correspondence is an important source of information about the history of Iraq during the Kassite Period. Another source of information comes from Assyria, for about this time the Assyrians became a great power, with their capital at Ashur (the modern Qalat-Sharqat). The new kingdom was strong enough to engage in frontier wars with Babylonia, and after the defeat of the Kassite Dynasty, at the hands of a short-lived Elamite invasion, the way was clear for Assyria to annexe Babylon and incorporate it into the extensive Assyrian military empire, which dominated the Middle East from the tenth century down to the fall of Nineveh in 612 B.C. Nineveh became the capital of this empire, in place of Ashur, in the eighth century, and soon surpassed old Babylon in wealth and magnificence. Other Assyrian capital cities whose ruins can

*The famous decorated gold harp from Ur—now in the Iraq Museum.*

be seen to-day are ancient Calah (modern Nimrud, where recent excavations have led to extremely important results) and Khorsabad (the ancient Dur-Sharrukin).

After about four centuries, the great Assyrian Empire was destroyed by the combined forces of the Medes and the Chaldeans. Nabopolasser, the Chaldean general, founded a new kingdom, and his son, the celebrated Nebuchadnezzar, extended it into a great empire which was destined to be the last centred on the city of Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar was above all celebrated as a great builder, and bricks bearing his inscription have been found in almost every important city of Babylonia. He practically rebuilt his capital, so that what visitors see now in the ruins of Babylon mostly dates from the time of this energetic ruler.

The Neo-Babylonian civilisation, for all its magnificence, did not last long. After less than a century it was overcome by Cyrus, the Achaemenian Persian, who made Babylonia part of the Persian Empire, while Babylon itself became the Achaemenian winter capital. It was during this period that Xenophon and his "Ten Thousand" came to Babylonia.

*The remains of the Ziggurat of Agar Guff near Baghdad.*

The Achaemenians ruled over the land until 331 B.C., when Alexander the Great overwhelmed the Persian Empire. A new era was established, and the Greek and oriental civilisations intermingled. In 323, after a reign of 13 years, Alexander died at Babylon and, after wars between his generals over the disputed succession, Babylonia became a province of the kingdom of Seleucus I Nicabar (312–280 B.C.), whose capital was at Antioch. He also built, or rebuilt, a new capital which was named Seleucia after him, and which was situated on the right bank of the Tigris, about twenty miles below Baghdad. The Seleucid period lasted for 175 years. Babylon was invaded by the Parthians in 140 B.C., who rebelled against the Seleucids and founded a new dynasty, the Arsacid Dynasty. They built their capital at Ctesiphon (on the

*Stele of Nebuchadnezzar* I (*circa* 1160 *B.C.*), *King of Babylon, relating a campaign against the King of Elam, south-western Persia. The writing is mid-Babylonian.*

left bank of the Tigris, about three miles to the north of Seleucia, now known as Taq Kisra).

Dating from this period is the famous Hellenistic city of Hatra, from which recent excavations, carried out by the Iraqi Directorate-General of Antiquities, have obtained remarkable archaeological results, including a valuable collection of fine statuary and other *objets d'art*.

The rule of the Parthians in Iraq was challenged frequently by the Romans, without decisive victory for either side until the Parthian Dynasty came to an end about 226 when a new Persian house, the Sassanians, came on the scene. The Sassanians ruled for about four centuries, with Ctesiphon as their winter capital, until they were finally defeated by the victorious Arab armies.

**Mediaeval and Modern Iraq**

With the coming of the Arabs came Islam. Islam inaugurated a new era in the Near East. The battle of Qadisiyya, when the Sassanians were defeated in 637 A.D., laid Iraq open to the Arab conquest, which was finally achieved in 641. New garrison cities were founded at Kufa and Basrah, soon to be centres of culture, while Ctesiphon was abandoned. A wave of tribes moved in from the deserts and settled in the valley of the Tigris and Euphrates, developing an attachment to Iraq while retaining the tribal traditions they brought with them. The importance, in the newly established Islamic order, of these new arrivals in Mesopotamia is shown by the fact that Kufa became the capital of the fourth Orthodox Caliph.

During the Ummayad period, Iraq was the base for Muslim expansion eastward. In spite of being the centre of constant unrest, it played a leading part in cultural activities: in Iraq, Arabic studies were initiated and developed; it was the home of great poets and produced notable jurists. Iraq was, in short, a meeting place of ideas, traditions and peoples both nomadic and settled. Doubtless the length of time for which Iraq had been the seat of important civilisations made this inevitable, but though the country was full of the remains of former cultures, the influx from the desert made the new culture predominantly Arab in tradition and outlook.

Towards the end of the Ummayad period, Iraq became the headquarters of the Abbasid movement and the centre whence it spread eastward. With the triumph of