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Cities of Iraq

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Introduction

Iraq, a land nestled between the storied waters of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, holds within its borders a tapestry of cities that have witnessed the rise and fall of empires, the birth of civilizations, and the continuous thread of humanity's story. From bustling modern metropolises to ancient ruins, Iraq's cities are living testaments to the resilience, creativity, and enduring spirit of its people. For millennia, these urban centers have been at the heart of innovation, commerce, religion, and art — shaping not only the destiny of the region, but also influencing the course of world history.

Throughout the centuries, Iraq's cities have played pivotal roles as political capitals, religious sanctuaries, and cultural crossroads. Names like Baghdad, Basra, and Mosul evoke legendary images from the Islamic Golden Age, when scholars, poets, and traders mingled in thriving marketplaces and illuminated libraries. Even older urban landscapes, such as Ur, Babylon, and Nineveh, remind us that Iraq is often considered the cradle of civilization, where writing, the wheel, and the earliest known laws were first forged. Each city tells its own story, blending myth and history, grandeur and tragedy.

Travelers and visitors to Iraq are met not only by the echoes of the past, but also by the vibrant cultures and diverse communities that call these cities home today. Modern Iraq consists of a rich mosaic of Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen, Assyrians, Yazidis, and other groups — each contributing their unique traditions, languages, and beliefs to city life. The result is a country whose urban centers pulse with diversity, from Erbil's Kurdish citadel, to the Shia pilgrimage sites of Najaf and Karbala, to the port city of Basra where traders have sailed the Shatt al-Arab for centuries.

Amid periods of conflict and reconstruction, Iraq's cities continue to demonstrate remarkable resilience. Urban landscapes have shifted, yet the underlying spirit persists — evident in the steadfastness of residents and the revival of cultural institutions, markets, and historical monuments. Although some cities bear the scars of war and time, their roles as centers of knowledge, faith, and social life endure, reinforcing their significance not only for Iraqis, but for the shared heritage of humanity.

This book, **Cities of Iraq**, aims to unveil the remarkable stories and faces of Iraq's greatest urban centers. Each chapter provides a window into a distinct city — exploring its history, its cultural and economic character, and offering a guide to the sights and experiences that await today's visitor. Along the way, ancient towns and archaeological wonders are brought into focus, revealing how Iraq's urban legacy is woven into the landscape.

May this journey through Iraq's cities deepen the reader's appreciation for a country whose history is both ancient and ever-renewing. Whether you are a traveler seeking guidance, a student of history, or simply a curious mind, the stories within these pages invite you to discover a land whose cities have always stood at the crossroads of the world.

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CHAPTER ONE: Baghdad: Heart of Iraq

Baghdad, the capital and largest city of Iraq, stands as a sprawling metropolis along the banks of the Tigris River, a vibrant testament to millennia of human ingenuity and resilience. With an estimated population exceeding 7 million, it is the second-largest city in the Arab World and Western Asia, surpassed only by Cairo and Tehran, respectively. Its strategic location, nestled between the Tigris and Euphrates at their closest point, positioned it perfectly for trade and access to abundant water, fostering its meteoric rise.

The city's origins trace back to 762 AD when the Abbasid Caliph Al-Mansur founded it as his new capital. The caliph envisioned a "Round City" on the western bank of the Tigris, a testament to meticulous planning and a marvel of engineering for its time. Legend has it that Al-Mansur personally laid the first brick, setting in motion a construction project that drew thousands of architects, engineers, and laborers from across the Abbasid Empire. This initial settlement on the west bank is known today as Al-Karkh. As Baghdad flourished, development naturally spilled over to the eastern bank, forming the district of Risafa. The Tigris River, therefore, doesn't merely flow through Baghdad; it fundamentally shapes its identity, dividing the city into these two distinct yet interconnected halves.

For approximately 500 years following its foundation, Baghdad became the undisputed cultural, intellectual, and commercial heart of the Arab and Islamic world. During the Islamic Golden Age, it was a global center of learning, rivaling even Chang'an, with its population soaring to over a million. The city was a beacon for scholars, poets, and merchants, fostering a multi-ethnic and multi-religious environment. Academic institutions like the legendary House of Wisdom housed vast libraries and attracted scholars who translated and preserved ancient texts, contributing immensely to human knowledge.

Baghdad's early prosperity was fueled by its role as a vital crossroads on ancient trade routes, connecting East and Southeast Asia, the Mediterranean, and Western Europe, even extending to Eastern Africa. Goods like diamonds, soap, and ivory passed through its bustling markets, alongside locally produced silk, textiles, and paper. Officials known as "Muhtasib" diligently monitored trade to prevent fraud, ensuring fair commerce.

The city's growth, however, wasn't without its interruptions. Internal strife within the Caliphate, shifts in political power, and periods of foreign domination by groups such as the Iranian Buwayhids and Seljuk Turks led to phases of stagnation and even relocation of the capital to nearby Samarra for a time. The Mongol invasion in 1258

marked a devastating turning point, bringing an end to the Abbasid Caliphate and significantly diminishing Baghdad's prominence. Though rebuilt and revitalized under Ilkhanid rule, it never quite regained its former glory as a global powerhouse, remaining a provincial metropolis for centuries.

Under Ottoman rule, beginning in 1534, Baghdad experienced further decline, though it saw a period of relative revival in the latter part of the 18th century under Mamluk governance. It was not until 1920, with the establishment of the British Mandate of Mesopotamia, that Baghdad once again ascended to its role as a capital, first of a British-protected monarchy in 1921 and then of an independent Kingdom of Iraq in 1932. This period saw renewed growth and modernization, transforming it into a contemporary metropolis. King Faisal, instrumental in forming the modern Iraqi state, oversaw the construction of institutions like the National Museum of Iraq and the University of Baghdad.

Today, Baghdad remains Iraq's political, economic, and cultural heart. It is the seat of the government and a primary financial and commercial center, generating an impressive 40% of Iraq's GDP. Major industries and businesses are headquartered here, alongside various markets offering traditional goods such as carpets, spices, and handicrafts. Despite facing economic challenges, including poverty and unemployment, exacerbated by infrastructure disruptions after the 2003 invasion, Baghdad continues to be a vital hub.

The city's climate is characterized by hot, dry summers and cooler, moist winters. Average summer temperatures can reach a scorching 49°C (120°F), with daily highs often hovering around 33°C (92°F). Even nights offer little respite, rarely dropping below 24°C (75°F). Winters are mild, with temperatures typically ranging from 2°C to 15°C (35°F to 60°F), though occasional drops below freezing are not uncommon. Precipitation is sparse, averaging around 150 mm (6 inches) annually, with most rainfall occurring between December and April. Dust storms are a frequent occurrence, especially during the summer, due to the city's arid conditions and low humidity. Baghdad also faces significant threats from climate change, including increased heat waves, heavy rains, sand and dust storms, and prolonged droughts, which have led to serious water scarcity issues.

For visitors, Baghdad offers a profound journey through history and a taste of vibrant Iraqi culture. The National Museum of Iraq, sometimes informally called the Baghdad Museum, is a must-see, housing an invaluable collection of artifacts from Mesopotamia, as well as Abbasid and Persian civilizations, spanning over 5,000 years of history. Although many pieces were looted during the 2003 invasion, international efforts have helped recover thousands, and the museum has been refurbished and reopened. Highlights include the Warka Vase and the Lady of Warka, among other ancient treasures.

Baghdad is also home to numerous historic mosques that reflect its rich past and diverse religious heritage. The Al-Khulafa Mosque, originally built in 908 CE and later rebuilt and restored, is the oldest surviving mosque in Baghdad, its minaret dating back to the Ilkhanid period and once the highest point in the city. Another significant site is the Haydar-Khana Mosque, a beautiful example of Ottoman-era architecture known for its role in revolutionary gatherings and intellectual discourse. The Mausoleum of Abdul-Qadir Gilani, named after the founder of the Qadiriyya Sufi order, offers a peaceful sanctuary within the bustling city.

Beyond religious sites, visitors can stroll down Al Rashid Street, a renowned thoroughfare lined with cafes, street food stands, and traditional markets. Nearby, Souq al-Saray is an indoor market famous for clothing, school supplies, and leather products, while Mutanabbi Street is the city's literary heart, brimming with bookstores and outdoor stalls, a perfect spot to enjoy a cup of tea in one of its many cafes. For a taste of traditional Iraqi cuisine, Masgouf, the national dish of grilled carp, can be savored along the Tigris River promenade, especially in the evenings when locals gather to stroll and socialize.

Other notable landmarks include the Al-Shaheed Monument (Martyrs' Memorial), with its striking turquoise split dome, built to honor Iraqi soldiers who lost their lives in the Iran-Iraq War. The Freedom Monument at Tahrir Square is another significant monument for the Iraqi people. The Mustansiriya Madrasa, a medieval school, and the Abbasid Palace offer glimpses into the city's architectural grandeur from the Islamic Golden Age.

Despite the various challenges it has faced, Baghdad continues to embody a mystique and allure that few cities can rival. From its ancient roots as the "Center of Learning" to its modern role as Iraq's dynamic capital, Baghdad remains a city of profound historical significance and enduring cultural vibrancy, inviting exploration and appreciation of its rich heritage.

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