A History of Iraq

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Introduction

Iraq, occupying a strategic position in Western Asia and enveloping much of the ancient land once known as Mesopotamia, has long been at the crossroads of civilizations, religions, and empires. Often referred to as the “cradle of civilization,” this land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers hosted some of humanity’s earliest experiments with agriculture, writing, government, and urban life. From the bustling city-states of Sumer to the towering ziggurats of Babylon and beyond, the sheer depth and diversity of Iraq’s historical legacy cannot be overstated.

This book offers a comprehensive journey through Iraq’s long and complex history, charting its evolution from prehistoric times to the present day. We begin in the mists of antiquity, with the first known villages and settlements of the Stone Age, and follow the emergence of the great Sumerian civilization. As we move through the epochs, the narrative unfolds to include the rise and fall of mighty empires—Akkadian, Babylonian, Assyrian, and Neo-Babylonian—each of which reshaped the region’s political and cultural landscape in profound ways. The ancient Mesopotamians left a lasting imprint on human civilization through their innovations in law, writing, science, and governance.

The coming of the Persians and later the Greeks and Parthians introduced new social, cultural, and political dynamics, ultimately giving way to the Arab-Muslim conquest in the 7th century CE. Iraq became the heartland of the Islamic Golden Age, with Baghdad emerging as one of the most celebrated cities of the medieval world—renowned for its intellectual vigor, scientific accomplishments, and artistic brilliance. This period saw not only extraordinary achievements but also intense strife and, eventually, a series of invasions and occupations that transformed the political landscape anew.

With Ottoman control cemented in the 16th century, Iraq endured for centuries as part of greater imperial contests and witnessed local experiments in autonomy and modernization. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire after World War I heralded a new era: British occupation, the mandate system, forced state-building, and the eventual emergence of a modern republic. The 20th century was marked by turbulence, revolution, and reform, oscillating between external control and local aspiration for self-determination.

The modern history of Iraq has been shaped by dramatic events: the discovery of oil, suzerainty by competing superpowers, decades of authoritarian rule, wars with neighboring states, international intervention, and, most recently, post-invasion struggles to build a stable and representative government. Today, Iraq is a nation of

great resilience, enduring immense challenges yet still grounded in its ancient heritage and vibrant traditions.

Through twenty-five chapters, this book invites the reader to explore Iraq’s past in all its complexity—its triumphs and tragedies, its voices and silences, its great cities and rural heartlands. By drawing on recent scholarship and a wide array of sources, it aims to present a coherent narrative that honors Iraq’s immense contributions to world history and provides context for understanding the nation’s contemporary realities.

CHAPTER ONE: The Land Between Two Rivers: Geography and Early Inhabitants

The story of Iraq is inextricably linked to its dramatic and life-giving geography. At its heart lie two great rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates, which rise in the highlands of Anatolia and wind their way southeastwards towards the Persian Gulf. It is this twin waterway system that historically defined the region, giving it the ancient Greek name Mesopotamia – "the land between the rivers." These are not gentle, predictable streams; for millennia, their annual floods, fed by melting snows in the mountains, brought both devastation and abundance, an annual drama of destruction and renewal. When the waters receded, they left behind a rich, fertile layer of alluvial silt, a natural gift that would lay the foundation for some of the world's earliest agricultural communities and, eventually, its first cities.

The Euphrates, the longer of the two, takes a more circuitous route, arcing westwards through Syria before turning southeast into Iraq. Its flow is generally slower and its waters more saline than those of the Tigris. The Tigris, by contrast, follows a more direct and swifter course, carving deeper channels and carrying a greater volume of water, especially during its often-violent spring floods. The lands immediately flanking the rivers, particularly in the southern plains, are exceptionally flat, meaning that floodwaters could spread far and wide, creating vast marshlands and necessitating ingenious methods of water control, such as irrigation canals and drainage ditches, from a very early stage.

This fertile floodplain, often referred to as Lower Mesopotamia, is a vast, almost featureless expanse, built up over countless centuries by the sediment of the rivers. It is a land of stark contrasts: incredibly productive when watered, yet quickly reverting to arid waste if neglected. To the north, the terrain gradually rises, becoming Undulating Upland Mesopotamia, sometimes known as the Jazira (the island). Here, agriculture often relied more on rainfall, though the rivers and their tributaries remained vital lifelines. Further north and northeast, the landscape transforms again, with rolling hills giving way to the rugged Zagros Mountains, which form a natural border with modern-day Iran, and the foothills of the Taurus Mountains to the northwest, bordering Turkey. These mountainous regions were sources of timber, stone, and metal ores – crucial resources largely absent from the southern plains.

To the west and southwest of the Euphrates, the fertile lands give way to the vast Syrian and Arabian Deserts. These arid expanses, characterized by gravel plains and rocky outcrops, were historically home to nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples, whose relationship with the settled communities of the river valleys was often complex,

involving trade, raiding, and gradual infiltration. The climate of Iraq is predominantly continental, with scorching, dry summers where temperatures can soar, and cool, sometimes cold, winters. Rainfall is scarce across much of the country, particularly in the south, making irrigation an absolute necessity for sustained agriculture. This geographical and climatic tapestry – rivers, plains, mountains, and deserts – shaped not only the economic life of its inhabitants but also their cultures, societies, and political trajectories.

The very earliest whispers of human presence in this land date back to the Lower Paleolithic period, the Old Stone Age. Evidence, though sparse, suggests that early hominins, perhaps *Homo erectus* or their contemporaries, roamed these landscapes hundreds of thousands of years ago. Sites like Barda Balka, near Chemchemal in northeastern Iraq, have yielded stone tools, such as hand axes, that point to this ancient occupation. These early inhabitants were hunter-gatherers, living in small, mobile groups, their lives dictated by the seasonal availability of game and edible plants. The environment they encountered was different from today's, fluctuating with the glacial cycles of the Pleistocene epoch, which saw periods of cooler, wetter conditions alternating with drier spells.

Later, during the Middle Paleolithic, Neanderthals made their home in the region. The most famous evidence of their presence comes from Shanidar Cave, nestled in the Zagros Mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan. Excavations in the 1950s, led by Ralph Solecki, unearthed the skeletal remains of several Neanderthals. One individual, Shanidar IV, was found with clusters of pollen, leading to the evocative, though debated, theory that Neanderthals might have practiced ritual burials, perhaps even adorning their dead with flowers. Regardless of the "flower burial" interpretation, Shanidar Cave provided invaluable insights into Neanderthal life, suggesting they cared for their sick and injured, and possessed a level of social complexity. They were skilled hunters, adapted to the mountainous terrain, and likely utilized the cave as a seasonal shelter for tens of thousands of years.

As the last Ice Age drew to a close, around 12,000 to 10,000 BCE, the climate began to warm, leading to significant environmental changes. This transitional period, known as the Mesolithic or Middle Stone Age, saw shifts in human subsistence strategies. While still largely reliant on hunting and gathering, there are indications of more intensive exploitation of certain resources and perhaps a greater degree of sedentism, or settled living, in favorable locations. Sites like Zawi Chemi Shanidar, an open-air settlement near the famous cave, and Karim Shahir, have yielded tools indicative of this era, including microliths – small, finely crafted stone blades that could be hafted onto wood or bone to create composite tools. There's also evidence for the extensive collection of wild cereals and nuts, and possibly the very early stages of animal management, perhaps with wild sheep and goats. These were baby steps, but they hinted at the profound changes to come.

The real transformation, a revolution in human existence, began with the Neolithic period, the New Stone Age, starting around 10,000 BCE in the wider Near East. This era witnessed the independent development of agriculture – the deliberate cultivation of plants like wheat, barley, and legumes – and the domestication of animals such as sheep, goats, cattle, and pigs. This shift from a food-collecting to a food-producing economy had monumental consequences. It allowed for larger, more permanent settlements, the accumulation of surplus food, and eventually, the development of more complex social structures. Northern Iraq, particularly the foothills of the Zagros Mountains and the rain-fed plains of the Jazira, was one of the key areas where these developments unfolded. It formed part of the "Fertile Crescent," an arc of land stretching from the Levant through southeastern Anatolia and into Mesopotamia, which provided the wild ancestors of early crops and domesticates.

One of the earliest known Neolithic villages in Iraq is Jarmo, located east of Kirkuk. Occupied from around 7000 BCE, Jarmo consisted of multi-roomed, rectangular houses made of *pisé* (rammed earth) or sun-dried mud bricks, built around open courtyards. The inhabitants cultivated emmer and einkorn wheat, barley, and lentils, and kept domesticated goats and dogs. They used stone tools, including sickle blades for harvesting grain, grinding stones for processing it, and finely worked obsidian tools imported from Anatolia, indicating early trade networks. Pottery, initially crude and unfired, appears in the later levels of Jarmo, marking another significant technological advance. Jarmo offers a snapshot of a small, relatively egalitarian farming community, a far cry from the nomadic bands of the Paleolithic but still a world away from the cities that would later arise.

As the Neolithic progressed, distinct regional cultures emerged, characterized by their particular styles of pottery, architecture, and toolkits. Following the early experiments at Jarmo, the Hassuna culture flourished in northern Mesopotamia from approximately 6500 to 6000 BCE. Named after the site of Tell Hassuna, south of Mosul, this culture is distinguished by its pottery, which evolved from simple coarse wares to more sophisticated incised and painted designs. Hassuna villages were larger and more organized than earlier settlements, with houses built of packed mud and featuring multiple rooms. They practiced dry farming, reliant on rainfall, and their material culture included a variety of tools for agriculture and domestic tasks. There is also evidence of communal storage facilities, suggesting a degree of cooperation beyond the individual household.

Succeeding and partly overlapping with the Hassuna culture was the Samarra culture, which emerged slightly to the south, along the middle Tigris region, around 6200 to 5700 BCE. The Samarrans occupied an area where rainfall was less reliable, and crucially, they appear to have been among the first to practice irrigation agriculture. Sites like Tell es-Sawwan, located on the east bank of the Tigris near Samarra, show evidence of substantial ditches and canals, allowing them to cultivate crops like bread

wheat and flax in an otherwise challenging environment. Samarran pottery is renowned for its elaborate painted designs, often featuring dynamic human and animal figures, geometric patterns, and in some cases, a striking central swastika motif. Their architecture included T-shaped buildings, possibly serving as granaries or communal structures. The presence of rich burials at Tell es-Sawwan, some containing alabaster figurines and other prestige goods, suggests the beginnings of social differentiation.

Further north, and contemporaneous with the later stages of the Samarra culture, the Halaf culture emerged, flourishing from roughly 6000 to 5400 BCE. Centered in northern Iraq, Syria, and southeastern Turkey, the Halaf culture is especially famous for its exquisite polychrome pottery, arguably some of the finest ever produced in prehistoric Mesopotamia. This pottery, with its intricate geometric patterns, lustrous finish, and animal motifs, was widely traded, indicating extensive networks of communication and exchange. Halafian settlements are notable for their distinctive circular buildings with rectangular antechambers, known as *tholoi* (singular *tholos*). The function of these structures is debated; they may have been houses, workshops, or shrines. The Halaf culture represents a peak of Neolithic painted pottery traditions and a period of significant cultural interaction across a wide geographical area before it was gradually superseded by influences from the south.

This southern influence heralded the next major phase: the Chalcolithic or Copper Age, characterized by the beginnings of metallurgy alongside continued stone tool use. In Mesopotamia, this period is dominated by the Ubaid culture, which originated in southern Iraq around 6500 BCE but gradually spread northwards, eventually influencing or supplanting the Halaf culture by around 5400 BCE. The Ubaid period, lasting until about 4000 BCE, is of paramount importance as it laid the direct foundations for the subsequent Sumerian civilization. Named after the small site of Tell al-'Ubaid, near the ancient city of Ur, this culture saw significant developments in social organization, technology, and settlement patterns.

The Ubaid people were pioneers in southern Mesopotamia, adapting impressively to the challenging environment of the alluvial plains. They developed and expanded irrigation systems, allowing for more intensive agriculture and supporting larger populations than ever before. Settlements grew in size and complexity, evolving from small villages into larger towns, some of which would later become prominent Sumerian cities. Eridu, in the far south, is a particularly significant Ubaid site. Archaeological layers at Eridu reveal a long sequence of temples built and rebuilt on the same spot over many centuries, starting as simple mud-brick shrines in the early Ubaid period and growing progressively larger and more elaborate. This continuity of sacred space suggests the emergence of powerful religious institutions and an increasingly stratified society, with a priestly elite possibly overseeing communal labor, such as canal maintenance and temple construction.

Ubaid pottery, while perhaps not as aesthetically dazzling as Halaf wares, was distinctive for its dark geometric designs painted on buff or greenish clay. It was, however, mass-produced in greater quantities, indicating more specialized craft production. Other Ubaid artifacts include terracotta figurines, often with elongated, reptilian-like heads, and tools such as sickles made of baked clay, a practical solution in a region lacking abundant stone. The Ubaid culture also saw the development of the slow potter's wheel, which improved the efficiency of ceramic production.

Crucially, the Ubaid period witnessed the beginnings of a societal structure that transcended individual villages. The spread of Ubaid material culture across the entirety of Mesopotamia, from the Persian Gulf to the foothills of Anatolia, indicates a remarkable degree of cultural homogeneity, though local variations certainly existed. This widespread uniformity suggests shared ideologies, trade networks, and perhaps even political or religious ties between different communities. The temples at sites like Eridu, with their increasing size and associated storehouses, point to the accumulation of agricultural surplus and the centralized administration of resources – key features of later urban societies.

As the Ubaid period drew to a close around 4000 BCE, the stage was set for the next great leap in human development. The inhabitants of southern Mesopotamia, armed with the innovations of their Ubaid predecessors – sophisticated irrigation, emerging social hierarchies, foundational temple institutions, and extensive trade networks – were on the cusp of creating the world's first true cities and, with them, a new form of human organization known as civilization. The rich silts of the Tigris and Euphrates, once home to scattered bands of hunter-gatherers and then modest farming villages, were about to give birth to the dazzling, complex, and enduring legacy of Sumer. The land between the two rivers had nurtured its people through millennia of slow change; now, it was poised for an explosion of creativity and complexity that would forever alter the course of human history.

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