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BASRA

BASRA (Ar. al-Baṣra), town located near the Šaṭṭ al-ʿArab river in southern Iraq, a predominantly Arab town possessing a rich political, cultural, and economic history. This article concentrates mainly on describing the town's many significant ties with Iran.

Foundation and early history. Basra was initially established in about 17/638 as an encampment and garrison (Ar. *meṣr*,plur. *amṣār*) for the Arab tribesmen constituting the armies of the early caliphs. After campaigning in southern Iraq for several years and defeating the Sasanian forces there, the Muslims' commander, ʿOtba b. Ḡazwān, set up camp on the site of an old Persian settlement called Vaheštābāḏ Ardašīr which was destroyed by the Arabs, who called its ruins Ḵorayba (Yāqūt, II, p. 429). The site was near the modern village of Zobayr, not far from the port town of Obolla (class. Apologos). The new town was connected to the Šaṭṭ al-ʿArab by means of canals, particularly the Nahr al-Obolla, and in its earliest days consisted of rough huts made of reeds taken from the nearby marshes of southern Iraq. These were later augmented by mud-brick buildings and walls as the town grew, but even in much later times the poorer quarters still consisted of reed houses, as travelers' accounts, such as that of Pedro Teixeira (1604), reveal (Teixeira, p. 28).

Because of its role as an important garrison town, Basra figured prominently in the political history of the early Islamic state, since outside Arabia itself the predominantly Arabian ruling elite of the new state was closely concentrated in the *amṣār*. We therefore find Basra and its population frequently

mentioned in accounts of such episodes as the first and second civil wars, which mainly took the form of struggle among contending groups within the ruling elite for control of just such military and administrative centers as Basra.

In its early days, the town served as the staging point from which further conquests in Iran and the east were launched. Its armies were instrumental in the rapid initial conquests of the Iranian districts of Ḵūzestān, Fārs, Sīstān (Sejestān), Badḡīs, and Khorasan during the 640s and 650s, especially under the commanders Abū Mūsā Ašʿarī and ʿAbd-Allāh b. ʿĀmer b. Korayz. Its role as garrison and starting point for these conquests meant that it also became the place from which many of these far-flung provinces were administered, and from which they were pacified after the inevitable rebellions that followed the conquests. We know that in the years immediately following the establishment of the town, the governors of Basra supervised the countryside they ruled via a number of lesser strong points located at Forāt, Sorraq, Jondī-Šāpūr, Manāḏer, Sūq al-Ahwāz (Ahvāz), and Kowar al-Dejla, where small garrisons and tax agents were situated; it seems likely that similar procedures may have been followed in districts farther east as these were acquired by the Muslims. The more distant regions of Fārs, Sīstān, Khorasan, and those parts of Media called Māh al-Baṣra were, during the Omayyad period, usually part of the administrative responsibility of Basra, whose governor managed them by means of sub-governors. The tax administration during the Omayyad period operated through the agency of the Iranian *dehqān*s or landed squires, who were placed in charge of the collection of taxes on their districts, which they handed over to the authorities of the new state. At various times during the Omayyad period, the governorship of Basra was combined with that of its sister city Kūfa in central Iraq (which, like Basra, had large areas of Iran as administrative dependencies) in the hands of one governor, such as ʿAbd-al-Malek's powerful viceroy, Ḥajjāj b. Yūsof. For roughly a century, in other words, Basra served as the administrative capital of considerable parts of Iran as well as of southern Iraq.

The population of early Basra was, as noted above, predominantly Arab. Of the many tribes represented in its population, the most important at that time were the Tamīm and the various clans of Bakr b. Wāʾel, both of which had dominated areas near the site of Basra on the eve of the Islamic era. Tribes from the Ḥejāz, such as

Qorayš, Kenāna, and Qays ʿAylān, were less numerous in Basra, and because of

the greater distance to their traditional homelands they became increasingly marginal within the Arab population of the city. The tribes of ʿAbd-al-Qays and Azd, from eastern Arabia and ʿOmān respectively, begin to show up in Basra a bit after its initial foundation and seem to have increased in importance some decades later, probably due to continuing immigration. The juxtaposition in one place of so many Arab tribes, some of whom were traditionally hostile to one another, was doubtless partly responsible for the turbulent history of early Basra, although socio-economic and religious discontents of fairly recent origin were clearly at stake in some of the many uprisings there. To keep things in perspective, however, it should perhaps be noted here that Basra's early history was less turbulent than that of Kūfa, which had a tribal population of even greater diversity.

Although the Arab element was the dominant one in Basra's early population, however, the Arab settlers from the beginning had to share the city with many settlers from other ethnic groups. The commercial activities that focused on Basra (and its predecessor, Obolla) had drawn from various points around the Indian Ocean basin (Indians, Malays, and Blacks), and there was also a sizable Iranian component in the population. The Iranians of early Basra found themselves there for various reasons. A few had been *asāwera*, the Sasanian cavalrymen who had joined the Muslims at the time of the conquest of Iraq and had settled in the new town as allies of the Arabs of Tamīm. Others doubtless came from villages in the vicinity of Basra, some of which—particularly in the direction of Ḵūzestān—had Iranian populations. The largest group of Iranians in early Basra, however, probably consisted of captives and recent converts to Islam (*mawālī*), who were serving or allied to their Arab masters or patrons.

Basra's administrative position meant that it was, with Kūfa, one of the main sources of (or conduits for) Arab immigration into Iran during the first centuries of the Islamic era. The first immigrants were mostly sent to serve as garrison troops to support Arab/Muslim domination of Iran, and went in such numbers over the years that in certain areas they had an enduring cultural and even linguistic impact; indeed, Arabic dialects are still spoken to this day around the city of Marv, the most important of the subordinate garrisons, by distant descendants of the early Arab settlers. Because of the close social, administrative, and other ties that existed between the Basrans themselves and these Arab immigrants to Iran, the tribal divisions and antagonisms that afflicted the population of Basra came to be reflected also in Marv and other

garrisons in Iran, making the life of these eastern garrisons as turbulent as that of their restive parent. In Omayyad Khorasan, for example, the hostility between the tribal confederations of Bakr b. Wāʾel and Tamīm, on the one hand, and the clans of Azd, on the other, were to a large extent reflections of similar tensions in Basra. In other areas of Iran, the tribes of Qays predominated.

From the ʿAbbasids to the Ottomans.The accession of the ʿAbbasid dynasty in 132/749 occurred just when Basra was beginning to enter its most vibrant period of cultural activity; during the 2nd-4th/8th-10th centuries, the city was the intellectual crossroads of the Islamic world (the cultural language of which was still exclusively Arabic), and was the home of renowned theologians, poets, Arabic grammarians, historians, and other writers. Some of these cultural figures were of Iranian descent, including the early paragon of piety Ḥasan al-Baṣrī; Sebawayh, one of the founders of the study of Arabic grammar; the famed poets Baššār b. Bord and Abū Nowās; the Muʿtazilite theologian ʿAmr b. ʿObayd; the early Arabic prose stylist Ebn al-Moqaffaʿ; and probably some of the authors of the noted encyclopedia of the Eḵwān al-Ṣafāʾ. It was also during this period that Basra seems to have enjoyed its greatest economic prosperity, doubtless in part because the foundation of the new ʿAbbasid capital at Baghdad increased the demand for luxury goods and many other articles of the Indian Ocean trade, which passed from the Persian Gulf into Iraq via Basra and its nearby neighbor, Obolla. Although the town of Sīrāf on the coast of Fārs, and not Basra, was the main terminus of international trade in the Persian Gulf at this time, we should not underestimate Basra's commercial importance. Most of the goods transported between Sīrāf or other Gulf ports and Baghdad probably had to be transferred to different vessels at Basra or Obolla, because most ships suitable for the open waters of the Gulf would have difficulty negotiating the shallow, marshy course of the lower Tigris or Euphrates in southern Iraq. Basra and its environs produced vast quantities of excellent dates that were exported even as far as China. And we know that in the 2nd/8th century there were at least a few merchants residing in Basra who were regularly involved in the China trade. Moreover, Basra's commercial importance relied on more than the sea-borne commerce through the Persian Gulf. The city also had a certain amount of commercial contact with Ahvāz and thereby with other parts of Ḵūzestān by river, and one can assume that this engendered some overland commerce via Ḵūzestān with the Iranian plateau. More important yet was the overland trade with Syria and Arabia, particularly Yamāma and the Ḥejāz; indeed, Basra was unique as an

entrepôt where the products carried by the Arabian caravan trade, including camels and sheep, could be found together with the commodities of the Gulf and Indian Ocean trade. The importance of Basran merchants in the Arabian trade network is suggested by a third/tenth-century text informing us that most of the merchants in the large Yemeni town of Ṣaʿda were Basrans (Qodāma b. Jaʿfar, *Ketāb al-ḵarāj*,BGA 6, p. 189).

If the shift of the imperial center from Omayyad Damascus to ʿAbbasid Baghdad (and, after the 830s, to Sāmarrā) brought palpable economic benefits to Basra, however, it also coincided with, and may have caused, profound changes in the political and social life of the city. Its rapid growth, spurred by burgeoning commerce, resulted in a more cosmopolitan population, and one far less dominated than previously by Arab tribal values and tribal divisions. The relative proximity of the ʿAbbasid capital to Kūfa and Basra led to a decline in the independence and political importance of the two Iraqi *amṣār*,both because the regime could exercise more immediate control over them and because the rapid growth of the new caliphal court refocused the attention of everyone in the region on the town farther north. In particular, the old links between Basra and its former administrative dependencies in Iran were decisively broken under the ʿAbbasids, as Iranians and Arabs living in Iran now looked to Baghdad (or Sāmarrā) as the relevant political center. When the ʿAbbasids' real power declined in the 3rd-4th/9th-10th centuries, Basra gradually became the political backwater it was to remain ever after—a provincial town whose political life was shaped more by local Arab tribes than by the power of the central government to which it ostensibly owed obedience. The Tamīm tribe, which had dominated Basra and the countryside around it during the city's early days, had been fairly well controlled by the Omayyad caliphs through their extensive connections with Arab tribal society; but the Tamīm's successors to local preeminence, such as the Ḵafāja tribe in the 5th/11th and 6th/12th centuries and the Montafeq tribe (11th-14th/17th-20th centuries), proved much more difficult to contain. When they did not plunder or seize Basra, expelling the government's representatives, they frequently forced the "authorities" (Saljuqs, Ottomans) to recognize them as virtual rulers of the town. From about the tenth century on, then, the political history of Basra cannot be properly understood without an appreciation of the role of these powerful Arab tribes and their relation to the city.

The decline of caliphal power also permitted the emergence of various kinds

of rebellions and uprisings against the authorities, in Basra and southern Iraq as elsewhere in the ʿAbbasid domains. The turbulence of the Ẓoṭṭ (ca. 205-20/820-35) seems to have had primarily social origins, whereas the uprising of the Zanj (255-69/869-83), who seized Basra and plundered it, and of the Qarmaṭīs, who plundered it in 923, seem to have had both social and religious roots. For a time the town came under the control of the Barīdīs, a family of local origin that reigned in Ḵūzestān and southern Iraq in the mid-tenth century, first as governors for the powerless late ʿAbbasids and then as independent princes, until they were expelled in 336/947 by the first Buyids. The tenth century also saw outbreaks of violence in Basra between the city's Sunni population and its Shiʿite minority.

The rule of the Daylamite Buyid dynasty, which seized control of the ʿAbbasid government in the 4th/10th century, reaffirmed to some extent Basra's ties with parts of Iran, especially Fārs, the locus of one of the main centers of Buyid power. The town was thereby drawn into the power struggles within the Buyid dynasty itself. Generally, Basra was ruled by various Buyid princes more or less loyal to the great Buyid prince in Baghdad, who stationed a Daylamite garrison in the town, and it was also the home of an important fleet used by the Buyids to project their power across the Gulf of Oman and to suppress piracy. But it was a turbulent time; not only did sectarian violence continue (exacerbated, no doubt, by the fact that the Buyids were themselves Shiʿites); there were also several rebellions by Buyid princes or Daylamite officers against the reigning prince (*amīr al-omarāʾ*)and attempts to seize the city by outside groups such as the Qarmaṭīs, who tried to profit from disarray among the warring Buyid princes by launching an attack (unsuccessfully) against the city in the 370s/980s.

All this turbulence in Basra and surrounding areas of southern Iraq and Ḵūzestān caused a sharp decline both in commerce and in the population and general prosperity of Basra, starting in the late 4th/10th century. Although the Arab geographer Ebn Ḥawqal (mid-4th/10th century) still found the city constructed mostly of brick, mentioned its burgeoning commerce (which, unfortunately, he passes over as too well known to warrant description), and praised the palaces, gardens, and plentiful fruit and date trees found along the Nahr al-Obolla, his copyist notes that when he saw the city in 537/1142 most quarters were in ruins, the old city ramparts were far outside the inhabited areas, and the number of residents in the remaining quarters was greatly reduced. He attributed these changes to the repression and tyranny of

governors and to the annual or biennial incursions of the powerful Ḵafāja bedouins (Ebn Ḥawqal, pp. 235-38). In addition, however, one must point to a shift in commercial routes and conditions as causes of Basra's decline. The 5th/11th century seems to have seen a shift in the commerce between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean basin from the Persian Gulf to the Red Sea route. On the other hand, the demise of the Buyid dynasty, which had kept close watch on the trade routes from central Iran to the Persian Gulf coast entrepôts of Hormoz and Sīrāf, meant that these routes were made more risky for commerce by a resurgence of the unruly Šabānkāra Kurds. As a result, some trade from the Iranian plateau now became directed instead toward Basra during the early Saljuq period (late 5th/11th century). It may have been in recognition of this renewed economic link between Basra and southwestern Iran that the first Saljuqs combined Basra with Ḵūzestānto form a single administrative district.

But this commercial boost was to be short-lived and relatively small; for one thing, the collapse of the Buyids had also allowed the emergence of an aggressive nest of pirates at Qays, who preyed on Persian Gulf shipping and thereby reduced its volume. By the time the Mongol armies arrived in Iraq in the mid-7th/13th century, Basra was but a shadow of its former self; it surrendered without a struggle to the armies of Hülegü (Holāgū) Khan in 656/1258 and seems to have caused the new overlords few problems. For the Il-khans, as for their successors the Jalayerids, the Qara Qoyunlūs, and the Āq Qoyunlūs whose attentions were concentrated mostly on northwestern Iran, northern Mesopotamia, and eastern Anatolia, Basra was little more than a distant outpost of their fleeting empires.

The Mongol and Turkman periods (mid-8th/13th to early 11th/16th centuries) were virtually the last during which Basra maintained any integral contacts with Iran. There continued to be an important Iranian element in the population of Basra. Ebn Baṭṭūṭa, who visited the town in the 8th/14th century, described it as consisting of three quarters—the Hoḏayl quarter, the Banū Ḥarām quarter, and the Iranian quarter (*maḥallat al-ʿAjam*; Ebn Baṭṭūṭa, *Reḥla*, p. 186; Ebn al-Aṯīr, *Lobāb*,s.v. Banū Ḥarām). If the first two reveal that Basra was still predominantly an Arab town, the existence of an Iranian quarter clearly reveals the legacy of long centuries of intimate contact between Basra and the Iranian plateau. The demise of the original city became complete in 900/1495, when the original site of Basra was abandoned because of a dearth of fresh water and the population moved to a new location, the site of modern

Basra, about twenty-five km to the east of the original town (near the old Obolla).

From the Ottomans to modern times.After a brief period of rule by the Safavids following Shah Esmāʿīl's conquest of Iraq (914-41/1508-34), Basra submitted to the Ottomans and entered a new era in its history. The generally hostile relations between the Ottomans and their rivals on the Iranian plateau meant a sharper border demarcation between Ottoman-controlled Iraq and Iran than had thitherto existed, and this must have contributed to a gradual attenuation of the Iranian contact with Basra and its population. It became more and more a purely Arab provincial town, often restless under its Ottoman overlords, but important to them as an outlet to the Persian Gulf for goods from Iraq and the north. The town was by turns an island of Ottoman rule and official stability, in the turbulence of southern Iraq's restive nomadic Arab tribes and piratical marshmen, and an independent fief controlled by powerful governors or rebellious Janissaries, who took advantage, of their distance from the Ottoman provincial capital at Baghdad, their ties with the Montafeq and other tribes, or the uncertainty of communication through the marshes north of Basra to make themselves independent. The most important of these local rulers was doubtless Afrāsīāb, a local man who seized control of Basra in the early 11th/17th century, and his descendants, who continued to control Basra for almost half a century, despite repeated efforts by the Ottomans to dislodge them. The end of the 12th/18th century and the 13th/19th century saw a great resurgence of the Montafeq tribe, which repeatedly threatened Basra and cost the Ottomans great effort to control.

Despite this instability, Basra remained in the Ottoman cultural orbit. Its only real brush with the politics of the Iranian plateau occurred in the 1770s, during the invasion of Iraq launched by Karīm Khan Zand, when Basra was blockaded and finally forced to surrender in 1190/1776 and a Persian garrison was installed. But the Zands, like the Ottomans, found it impossible to control the town without the backing of the Montafeq tribe, and upon Karīm Khan's death in 1193/1779 the governor, his brother Ṣādeq Khan, withdrew from the city. After a brief period of direct control by the Montafeq tribe, Basra returned once again to the Ottoman fold. The Ottoman centuries saw a resurgence of seafaring activity in the Persian Gulf, this time with Europeans playing the leading roles, and Basra soon became an important base for Portuguese, Dutch, English, and French agents as well as for Indian merchants and Arab merchants from Oman and elsewhere. The (British) East India

Company established a factory in Basra in the 1130s/1720s. The many European travelers who passed through Basra during the 11th/17th and 12th/18th centuries described it as a decidedly Arab town, fairly prosperous, with merchants from many parts of the Persian Gulf, Arabia, and Mesopotamia gathered there, but little mention is made of commerce with the cities of the Iranian plateau. Pedro Teixeira (1604), for example, speaks of commerce with Hormoz as well as shipping up the Tigris to Baghdad, and Tavernier (1639) mentions Dutch, English, Portuguese, and Indian merchants, as well as traders from Constantinople, Smyrna (İzmir), Aleppo (Ḥalab), Damascus, Cairo, Diyarbakr (Dīārbakr), Mosul, and Baghdad (Teixeira, pp. 26-28; Tavernier, I, bk. 2, pp. 198-200).

The instability that had plagued southern Iraq and acted as a drain on Basra's commercial potential for so many centuries began to give way in the late 13th/19th and early 14th/20th centuries under the impact of such reform measures as the *tapu* land-registration system, introduced by the Ottomans in the 1860s and 1870s, and the creation of modern armed forces by the Ottomans and their successors in Iraq. Together these measures broke the ability of the Montafeq shaikhs to organize effective, large-scale resistance and gave the state an edge too over the elusive marshmen, who had for so long preyed on commerce between Basra and the north. In the 14th/20th century, under British Mandate and the government of independent Iraq, Basra has undergone a rapid transformation into a modern city, with important civic, commercial, and industrial improvements, including a modern port, airport, communications, and public services. It is now the main focus of Iraq's export trade, especially for Basra's traditional prize product, dates (much of the petroleum from the oilfields of southern Iraq is transported by pipeline to estuaries on the Persian Gulf coast), and is one of the leading port cities and commercial entrepôts of the Persian Gulf.

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political and cultural significance during the early and medieval Islamic periods caused it to be mentioned in virtually every Arabic chronicle (Ṭabarī, Balāḏorī, Yaʿqūbī, etc.), as well as in most of the works of Arab geographers and travelers (Eṣṭaḵrī, Ebn Ḥawqal, Hamadānī, Yāqūt, Ebn Baṭṭūṭa, etc.). Primary sources specifically mentioned in this article are cited in the following editions: Ebn Baṭṭūṭa, *Reḥla*,Beirut 1964; Ebn al-Aṯīr, *al-Lobāb fī tahḏīb al-ansāb*,Beirut, 1873; Ebn Ḥawqal, BGA 2, Leiden, 1938-39; Qodāma b. Jaʿfar, *Ketāb al-ḵarāj*, BGA 6, Leiden, 1889.

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