



## KUFA

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**KUFA**, a city about 105 kms south of Baghdad. Kufa was founded as a garrison city (*meṣr*) in 17/638 by Sa'd b. Abi Waqqāṣ, after his victory at the battle of [Qādesiya](#). It replaced [Hira](#) as the local administrative center for several former Sasanian provinces (Morony, p. 154). Unlike other garrison towns, it was not settled by one dominant tribe, but by small tribal groups from both southern and northern parts of the Arabian Peninsula. Many of these were early converts to Islam, who had participated in the first campaigns and as a reward for their commitment to the Muslim cause acquired wealth and status under the stipend system (*aṭā*) established by the second caliph, 'Omar b. al-Ḳaṭṭāb (Massignon, pp. 15 ff). Kufa emerged as a center of opposition to the Caliph 'Oṭmān (r. 644-56) around two issues: First, the declining status of the early converts vis-à-vis the influx to the city of about 40,000 new converts to Islam (*rawādef*), who received lower stipends, and the question of whether or not surplus revenue from the provinces, that is after the local *aṭā* had been paid, should be forwarded to Medina (Hinds, pp. 351-53). The internal social cleavages largely explain Kufa's continuous rebelliousness, but also its political inconsistency and weakness for years to come. The early-comers became organized in opposition to 'Oṭmān's policy with Mālek b. Hāreṭ al-Aṣṭar, a notable warrior, as their spokesman. They took the name of *qorrā*' (lit. reciters, readers), which probably meant reciters of the Qur'an and drew attention to their Islamic status. The *qorrā*' deposed the governor, Sa'id b. 'Āṣ, replaced him by [AbuMusā Aš'ari](#), marched to Medina, and took part in the murder of 'Oṭmān in 35/656 (Ṭabari, I, p. 2928 ).



The new caliph, 'Ali b. Abi Ṭāleb (r. 656-61; q.v.), chose Kufa, the base of the *qorrā'*, his strong supporters, as his capital. Yet, most Kufan clan leaders (*ašrāf*) cared more for the preservation of the 'aṭā' system and wanted him to compromise with his rival Mo'āwia b. Abi Sofyān (r. 661-80). Concurrently, some of the intransigent *qorrā'* abandoned 'Ali following the battle of Şeffin (37/657) to become the **Kharijites** (Ḳawārej; Hinds, p. 363). With his powerbase weakened, 'Ali was murdered by a Kharijite while praying at a mosque in Kufa in 40/661 (Ṭabari, I, 3456-64) but Kufa remained a center of 'Alid support in the centuries to come.

Kufa remained quiet under Mo'āwia's rule, except for a minor pro-'Alid revolt by Ḥojr b. 'Adi Kendi in 51/671. The population of Kufa grew rapidly from about 20,000 to 30,000 inhabitants to around 140,000 Arabs during the early Omayyad period thanks to its location on the edge of the desert and the caravan routes (Kennedy, p. 86). With the accession of Yazid b. Mo'āwia (r. 680-83), local leaders (*ašrāf* and *ro'asā'*) invited Ḥosayn b. 'Ali to lead a rebellion against the Omayyads, but then refrained from helping him, fearing the approaching Omayyad army. Following the killing of Ḥosayn and his companions at **Karbala**, three thousand Kufans, known as the Tawwābun (penitents), led by Solaymān b. Şorad, went to die in battle against the Omayyads in order to atone for their sin of forsaking Ḥosayn (Ṭabari, II, pp. 497-513, 538-74). Their act gave the massacre at Karbala religious significance and served to transform Shi'ism into a formal Islamic religion.

Under the banner of support for the cause of Ahl al-Bayt (see **AHL-E BAYT**), Kufa continued to serve as the center of opposition to the Omayyads. This opposition was fueled by the growing number of *mawāli* (new converts to Islam), who were discriminated against by Omayyad fiscal practices. Most significant was the revolt of Moḳtār b. Abi 'Obayd Ṭaqafi in 66-67/865-66 in the name of Moḥammad b. Ḥanafiya, a son of 'Ali by a woman of the Banu Ḥanifa tribe. His movement was supported by dissident tribesmen, *mawāli*, and slaves in as well as some of the *ašrāf* of Kufa. However, his propaganda, which emphasized the interests of the downtrodden and the *mawāli*, harmed his efforts to win over the *ašrāf*, many of whom feared the radical nature of the movement. Together with about 10,000 of their supporters, they left Kufa and joined Moş'ab b. Zobayr, the military leader of the Medina-based rebellion against the Omayyads. Moş'ab moved against Moḳtār and besieged him in Kufa; Moḳtār was killed during an escape attempt in Ramazān 67/April 687, and Moş'ab subsequently executed about six thousand of his supporters. The

Omayyads defeated the Zobayrid rebellion and recaptured Kufa in 691. Their governor, Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf Ṭāqafī, established harsh rule over the city, discriminating against its inhabitants in the payment of *‘atā* while forcing its warriors to fight the Kharijites. In response, the leader of the Iraqi tribal troops, ‘Abd-al-Raḥmān b. Moḥammad b. Aš‘at, captured Kufa, his hometown, in 701. Under pressure from the *qorrā*’ faction, he rejected Omayyad offers of compromise and was eventually defeated by Ḥajjāj in Rabi’ I 82/April 701 (Shaban, p. 68).

Following the rebellion, Kufa lost its political preeminence when Ḥajjāj built Wāseṭ to its south as the new administrative center of Iraq. Moreover, the Omayyad policy of large-scale land reclamations, mainly around Wāseṭ, and the intentional neglect of the lands around Kufa destroyed the power of the local élite.

Kufans promised their support to the revolt led by Zayd b. ‘Ali b. Ḥosayn, who had arrived in the city from the Ḥejāz in 740. But, as before, they deserted the ‘Alid cause in the face of the superior Omayyad army and Zayd was killed (Lassner, p. 141).

Kufa became one of three centers of [‘Abbasid](#) revolutionary activity against the Omayyads, linking Ḥomayma near the Dead Sea and Khorasan, with Abu Salama Ḥafṣ b. Solaymān as chief organizer. Following the death of Ebrāhim, the head of the ‘Abbasid family, in an Omayyad prison in 749, the other leading family members hid in Kufa (Shaban, p. 151). Abu Salāma negotiated with members of the ‘Alid family to appoint one of them as caliph. However, [Abu Moslem Ḳorāsāni](#), the leader of the revolutionary army of Khorasan, preferred the ‘Abbasids and had Abu’l-‘Abbās al-Saffāḥ (r. 749-54) proclaimed as caliph in Kufa in Rabi’I, 132/October 749 (Ṭabari, III, pp. 27-33; Shaban, pp. 164-66).

As the first ‘Abbasid administrative center, Kufa experienced a great influx of Khorasanis, which produced a partial Iranization in its toponymy, for example by crossroads being called *čahārsuq* (Djāit, *EI2* V, p. 347). Yet, in view of its strong ‘Alid orientation, al-Saffāḥ moved his capital to Ḥira (Lassner, p. 147).

The caliph al-Manṣur (r. 754-75) began the construction in 762 of a new capital, Baghdad, which marked the beginning of Kufa’s decline as a regional political center. In 155/771-2, al-Manṣur had Kufa surrounded by a wall and a moat (Ṭabari, III, p. 373), probably for the first time in its history. Kufa gave its



support to another 'Alid revolt in Jomādā II 199/January 815. The rebellion was initially very successful, and the rebels came to control most of southern Iraq and almost reached Baghdad, but it was eventually crushed. While the Shi'is lost politically to the 'Abbasids, Kufa remained an important center of Shi'i learning and religious propagation for years to come.

Alongside its political tribulations, Kufa had emerged as an important cultural center already under the Omayyads. Kufic script is regarded as the earliest form of post-Islamic Arabic writing, which was a result of imposing design, order, and organization on the Ḥejāzi script (Kadri, p. 1). It was also the home of Abu Meknaf (d. 157/774), one of the first great Arab historians. Almost a century after Basra, the rival Kufan school of grammar emerged with the semi-legendary Abu Ja'far Moḥammad Ro'āsi and his students Abu'l-Ḥasan 'Ali Kesā'i (d. 179/795), and Abu Zakariyā' Yaḥyā Farrā' (d. 207/822). This school was regarded as more deeply rooted in the Arab environment, with a passion for anomalies (*šawādd*) and a more acute sense of poetry (Bernards, pp. 129-40).

In the 7th century, Kufa became a leading center of Hadith transmission under the leadership of Ebrāhim Naḳā'i (d. 72/691), Sa'id b. Jobayr (d. 95/713), and 'Amer b. Šaraḥil Ša'bi (d. ca. 110/728). By the 8th century Kufa had emerged as a center for jurisprudence (*feqh*) emphasizing rational reasoning (*ra'y*), in contrast to Medina, where the agreed practices of the community relied only on transmitted reports from the Prophet. Kufan jurists led by Abū Ḥanifa (d. 150/767), founder of the Ḥanafī *maḏhab* (legal school), and his disciples Abu Yusof (d. 182/798) and Moḥammad Šaybāni (d. 188/804) rejected authority based on local practice as tantamount to equating contemporary practice with prophetic practice, positing instead authority based on local reasoning (Takim, pp. 18-21).

Kufa also served as a leading center of Shi'i intellectual activity. Over eighty percent of the more than three thousand individuals mentioned by Abu Ja'far Moḥammad Ṭusi (d. 460/1067) in his list of those who related traditions from Imam Ja'far al-Šādeq bear the ascription "al-Kufi." According to Liyakatali Takim, in Kufa, there was an uneasy juxtaposition of the reasoning of individual jurists, local consensus, and precedents reported from the Prophet. The friction between the Kufan school of reasoning (*ra'y*) and the local tradition of the Medinan school is reflected in the relations between the early Shi'i jurists (*rejāl*) and the imams. The freedom that these jurists enjoyed in Kufa encouraged some of them to interpret the teachings of the imams based

on the hermeneutical principles embodied in reason and deduction (*ra'y* and *qiās*), eventually leading them to differ with the imams' teachings and to promote their own juristic authority (Takim, pp. 101-2).

The decline of Kufa became an established fact by the 10th Century. It suffered a series of attacks in 293/905, 312/924 and 315/927, by the Qarmatians (Qarāmeṭa, see [CARMATIANS](#)), from which it hardly recovered. The Shi'i Buyid dynasty cultivated Najaf as the center of Shi'i devotion and pilgrimage, a position previously held by Kufa. In 386/996 the Buyid Amir Bahā'-al-Dawla (r. 379-403/989-1012) gave Kufa to the chief of the Bedouin 'Oqaylid dynasty, nominally the vassals of the Buyids, as a military fief (*eqṭā*). Other tribes, namely the Banu Asad, Banu Ṭayye', and Banu Šammar, which settled and dominated Kufa in subsequent years failed to revive it. The founding of the town of Ḥella by the Mazyadid bedouin dynasty in 495/1102 dealt Kufa another blow by replacing it as the leading town of the area in future centuries.

Under Ottoman rule (1638-1918), Kufa was administered from Najaf. In the early 1680s, a canal was constructed to bring water from the Euphrates. Still, it remained a poor town whose charitable endowments (*waqf*) were insufficient to support the local mosques (Nakash, pp. 19, 236). Around 1916, The British Admiralty War Staff Intelligence division reported a population of 3,000 inhabitants, of whom about 75 percent were Shi'i Arabs and the rest Iranians (*A Handbook of Mesopotamia* II, pp. 405-6).

In 1932, Kufa was the site, along with other Shici cities in Iraq, of large scale demonstrations in response to the publication in late 1932 of a fiercely anti-Shici book by a Sunni government employee (Hasani, III, pp. 267-68).

Kufa regained some of its political importance under Ba'thi rule in Iraq. In 1987, the regime built a university there in order to overshadow the Shi'i seminaries (*madāres*) of Najaf. The Shi'i *mojtahed* Moḥammad-Šādeq Šadr made his mosque in Kufa the center of his efforts to revive Shi'i religious activism in Iraq following the Persian Gulf War (1991-92), which was triggered by the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Following his assassination in 1999, his son Moqtadā Šadr "continued with covert attempts to organize Shi'i militias in Najaf and Kufa" (Stansfield, p. 77). Kufa, whose population amounted to about 119,000 at the beginning of the 21st century, had remained a stronghold of the Sadrist movement on the eve of the fall of the Ba'th regime in 2003.



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