



## OBOLLA

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**OBOLLA**, a port of Lower Iraq during the classical and medieval Islamic periods. It lay in the delta region of the Tigris, at the head of the Šaṭṭ al-‘Arab, on the west bank of the Tigris and on the north side of the canal, the Nahr al-Obolla which, together with the Nahr Ma‘qel, connected Obolla with Baṣra during the early Islamic period.

The town certainly existed and flourished in pre-Islamic times, possibly under the Seleucids and more firmly under the Persian rulers of Mesopotamia. It must be the “port of Apologos” mentioned in the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (possibly 2nd century C.E.) as lying near the coastland. Although the administrative centers of its four component *ṭassujs* all lay on the eastern side of the Tigris, Obolla must in Sāsānian times have formed part of the province of Mesene or Mayšān/Mayšān; certain sources make it a foundation of Ardašir I (see in general, Le Strange, *Lands*, pp. 46-8; Schwarz, *Iran*, pp. 57-8, 61).

When the Arabs first burst out of northeastern Arabia, they found Obolla garrisoned by 500 Persian cavalrymen, but the town was taken in 14/635 by ‘Otba ebn Ġazvān al-Māzeni, who seized from it 600 dirhams. ‘Otba appointed Nāfe‘ ebn al-Ḥāreṭ al-Ṭaqafi as governor there, and set up a *minbar* from which the *koṭba* was pronounced; he then wrote to the caliph ‘Omar that he had seized “the port of Baḥrayn, ‘Omān, Hind and SĀin” (Balāḍori, *Fotūḥ*, p. 341; Ṭabari, I, pp. 2378 ff.). Obolla soon became overshadowed by the new military encampment of Baṣra constructed four *farsaks* to its west, which became the administrative and military center for Lower Iraq. However, Obolla still remained a flourishing port for trade with the Indian and Far Eastern worlds,



now somewhat further from the sea with the gradual receding of the Persian Gulf, though tidal water still came up to it and into the two canals running to Baṣra. Much work was done to help navigation, including the elimination of a dangerous whirlpool in the Tigris opposite Obolla, achieved by sinking there large quantities of stone, at the expense of an ‘Abbāsīd princess, and the erection of a beacon to guide shipping. Obolla at first also supplied Baṣra with drinking water, until Solaymān ebn ‘Alī constructed a canal to bring fresh water thither; but by the 4th/10th century, the growth of population in Baṣra again necessitated the bringing of water in boats from Obolla (Moqaddasi, p. 129). It was a center of manufacturing, with its turbans and kerchiefs and especially famed (*Ḥodud al-‘ālam*, tr. Minorsky, p. 138, and Serjeant, p. 37), as also its linen clothing; whilst the agricultural fertility of the region was proverbial (cf. Ebn al-Faḡīh, p. 104, tr. H. Massé, Damascus 1973, p. 128, and Yāqut, *Mojam al-boldān*, Beirut I, pp. 76-8, in which the philologist al-Aṣma‘ī is quoted that the Nahr al-Obolla was one of the three terrestrial gardens of paradise). Nāṣer-e Kōsraw passed through it in the mid-5th/11th century, and praises its fine palaces, markets, mosques and *rebāṭs* (*Safar-nāma*, p. 118, tr. p. 95). But in the post-Mongol period it seems to have declined to the status of a village, and this is how Ebn Baṭṭūṭa found it, with only traces of its palaces and public buildings (II, pp. 17-18, tr. Gibb, II, pp. 280-1). Writing at just about this same time, Ḥamdollāh Mostawfī mentions only the Nahr Obolla, and not the town (*Nozhat al-qolub*, ed. Le Strange, 38, tr. 45). At present, the ‘Aṣār quarter, the residential and administrative one, of the modern Iraqī city of Baṣra, occupies the site of Obolla.

The question of why, in mediaeval times, and especially after the decline of Baṣra, Obolla, with its superior natural advantages, did not supplant the military camp of Baṣra is an intriguing one. It is true that Obolla had not been a great urban center like al-Ḥīra was *vis-à-vis* Kufa in central Iraq, and also, Baṣra always enjoyed greater administrative and military prestige, and was adjacent to the Arabian Desert; see the discussions in Charles Pellat (p. 2, and other references in the index).



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