

## The Christian Heritage of Basra

I was privileged to be able to travel to Basra, in southern Iraq to attend the opening of the first of the galleries of the new museum of heritage and culture that took place on September 27<sup>th</sup>. The new Basra Museum, which aims to showcase the area's archaeology and history from prehistory to the present, will be a major cultural resource not only for the city but also for Southern Iraq and the wider region.

It was a particular pleasure to read a paper on the Christian heritage of Basra and southern Iraq in the two-day public workshop and conference that took place on 28-29 September, with invited UK and international speakers. This event provided an unprecedented opportunity for area specialists and museum professionals to explore the rich history of Basra and its place in the wider region.

The Christian heritage of the southern region has spanned almost two millennia, first at the port of Spasinou Charax and later with the founding of Basra. As is well known, the southern region played a major role in trade and export, not only of goods and commodities, but also of religions. It was from the region of Basra that the export of Christianity took place, following the maritime trades routes via the Gulf to India.

As with the rest of Mesopotamia, the origins of Christianity in southern Mesopotamia are shrouded in the mists of antiquity. Some hints are provided by the *Acts of Thomas* a legendary tale in Syriac that relates how the reluctant apostle was sent from Jerusalem to India to build a palace for a king 'Gundaphar'. The *Acts of Thomas* is valuable in suggesting that there were already nascent 'Christian' communities in Basra in the second century. Clearer evidence for a Christian presence emerges in the third century, a time when episcopates were being established throughout the length and breadth of Mesopotamia, and further abroad. David, bishop of Basra went to India to evangelize and it seems probable that the traditional emigration of Syrian Christians in the fourth century to the Malabar coast was via the sea-route from southern Mesopotamia.

The *Synodicon Orientale*, a collection of synod reports dating from the fifth century that were edited in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, documents the importance that Basra had achieved. In 410, the Synod of Isaac (named after the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, the capital city of the Sassanian empire) confirmed the hierarchy of the 'Persian' church. The diocese in the royal capital, was sustained by six metropolitanates that formed the next rank in the organization of the Sassanid Church. These represented the major growth points of Christianity in cities throughout the Sassanid domains and included the modern cities of Nisibis, Erbil (Arbela) and Kirkuk (Karkha de Bet Selokht) in the north, along with Basra (Prat de Maishan) in the south. The Metropolitan of Basra had jurisdiction over the dioceses in the Gulf area that included the Iranian region of Khuzistan, as well as Qatar and Oman.

In 544, Basra and the southern region of Mesopotamia, was visited by the patriarch of the Church of the East, Mar Aba, accompanied by Paul, bishop of Gundeshapur. The entourage toured various locations in southern Iraq, including the province of Basra and also went further to Khuzistan in order to quell insurrection that had arisen amongst the Persian bishops. Despite these difficulties and also the arrival of Islam in the area in the mid-seventh century, Basra continued to be a bishopric loyal to the Church of the East. In the late eighth century, Patriarch Timothy I (780-823), one of the greatest patriarchs of the Church of the East who was a learned scholar of Aristotelian philosophy and debated into the historic debate the Caliph Mahdi, ordained Hananisho, as bishop of Basra. The newly founded Islamic city of Basra must have hosted churches but archaeological evidence has not –to date- come to light. Hopefully, future discoveries will be made.

Around 840, Iso'denah of Basra wrote his *Book of Chastity* or *History of the Founders of Monasteries in the realms of the Persians and the Arabs*. This was a collection of 140 short notices concerning monastic figures, beginning with Mar Augen, who was reputed to be the traditional founder of monasticism in 4th century Mesopotamia. The notices continued to the mid-9th century, and in doing so provide very valuable contemporary insight into the presence of East Syrian monasticism which had made a significant foothold in the Gulf. In the early decades of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Solomon, bishop of Basra wrote his *Book of the Bee*, a kind of religious and philosophical history of the world from creation to the coming of the Antichrist and the afterlife. Taking his cue from a bee collecting nectar from flower to flower, Solomon assembled a great variety of information gleaned from many books including the Bible as well as apocryphal works.

In this flourishing of Christianity in the region, Basra must have played a seminal 'export' role. Conversely in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the city received an 'import' i.e. the introduction of Roman Catholicism when Emir Afrasiyab gave permission to the Portuguese to build a church outside the city. The rise of the Chaldaean Catholic Church in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, led the Uniate church to become the largest Christian denomination in Basra, and prompted the building of churches within the city. The Virgin Mary Cathedral was begun in 1907 and is still the largest, and most significant church in Basra. The Chaldaean Catholic Church of St. Thomas that was built in 1886 is the oldest. Situated in the city's old quarter, this brick-built church is a rare architectural feature with its façade featuring a tympanum and a dentil frieze as well as rounded Georgian-style windows. The church was functional until 2004, but a leaking roof meant that it could no longer be used for worship. However, the roof has recently been repaired.

For more than thirty years, Basra and the Shatt-el-Arab have been at the centre of violence: the Iran-Iraq War (1981-1988), the 1<sup>st</sup> Gulf War (1990). These vicissitudes, coupled with the rise of Islamic fundamentalism following the Allied offensive in 2003, have led to a sharp decline in Christian communities in Basra. His Grace, Habib al-Naufaly, Chaldean Catholic Archbishop of Basra since 2014, estimates that today there are only 350 families living in the city. Despite its very troubled past, the city still hosts a variety of active churches: Chaldaean Catholic, Syrian Orthodox and Armenian Orthodox as well as Evangelical and Adventist denominations. Crosses on the churches are visible from the street and some are even illuminated at night. In Basra, one still does see the cross and minaret demarcating the skyline. On November 15<sup>th</sup>, His Grace gave a very graphic lecture to a packed audience at the Centre of World Christianity, SOAS ([www.soas.ac.uk/cwc](http://www.soas.ac.uk/cwc)) where he outlined the activities and outreach programmes of the Chaldaean Catholic communities in Basra and southern Iraq. It was gratifying to learn about the continued presence of Christians and the significant efforts being made to establish cordial, working relationships with the Shi'a clergy and tribal elders.

### **Concluding comments:**

The Christian presence in Basra is a precious heritage, which fortunately is continuing today. The overall situation in southern Iraq is still very fragile, but offers a glimmer of potential hope for the future. Despite the diminishing of communities, Christians and Muslims do live side by side in Basra. The contribution of Christianity to the city has been recently acknowledged in a booklet produced by the Religions Heritage campaign under the supervision of Qahtan Al Abeed, the Antiquities Inspector of Basra region. It is a very useful compendium, written in English and Arabic, giving brief details about the dates of construction and history of all the churches of Basra. It also includes the museum of Christian artefacts set up by His Grace, Habib al-Naufaly. The booklet is graphic testimony to religious diversity and tolerance that still has a foothold in this southernmost city of Iraq. Like the two rivers that flow through the Mesopotamian heartland, hopefully both Christianity and Islam will continue to function side by side in Basra, and in Iraq.

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