

Street Names in Baghdad, Iraq (Part I)

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TODAY THE CAPITAL OF IRAQ, with its suburban areas, represents a city of some one million inhabitants. Both its size and its long history of continuous habitation make it one of the few most important cities in the Middle East for the study of the system applied to its street names over the last millinum. Whether the names for the streets represent a typical Middle Eastern city, we shall not know until more comparative studies are made, of which the present one is offered as a start.

In the year 712 A.D. Caliph Mansour founded the city, laid out governmental buildings in a circular order on the west side of the Tigris River, and made it the capital of the Abbasside Caliphate. This so-called Round City, the modern Shalchiya area, had four straight streets corresponding roughly to the cardinal points of the compass, leading from the center. Very quickly business and residential sections sprang up on the outside of the walls of the Round City. Shortly after the initial founding, the Caliph built a palace on the east bank, called the Persian side of the Tigris, or Raṣāfa. On both sides the subsidiary streets bore the names of the owners of adjoining property.¹

The descriptions given by several capable geographers and travelers of the early periods remain to us, and from these reports Guy Le Strange, in 1900, reconstructed the arrangement of the city at different times over a period of some 400 years and identified some of the names with parts of his reconstruction. From this description and others less cogent to this study we recognize certain patterns or cycles in the life of different sections of the city, both a natural growth and decline and a cycle hastened by floods and war damage.

¹ "... the full list is given in Ya'kubi, but this being merely a catalogue of proper names, it is needless to transcribe." — Guy Le Strange, *Baghdad during the Abbassid Caliphate*, Oxford, (Clarendon Press) 1900, p. 27.

Even in those sections of the early city unaffected by the eventualities of war there seems to be a cycle of something over one hundred years during which sections of the city were built, came into prominence and even became famous by individual names, and then declined so that later travelers were unable to identify famous streets, bridges, and buildings by name. Particularly after the Mongol invasion such a period of depression came over the city that it lost most of the amenities of civilized life that it had earlier enjoyed, and the limits shrank to a surprisingly small area for the next several centuries.²

During Abbasside times Baghdad was besieged and captured several times, and in each case some part of the city suffered heavy destruction from war machines and actual fighting. In general it seems that once a section of the city suffered such severe damage, it was not rebuilt as such; rather new building was done in another part of the city, leaving the damaged part to remain in its ruined condition and go from bad to worse. Thus, for example, after the destruction of the Round City it was not rebuilt and used for governmental purposes. Instead the capital shifted to Samarra' for about seventy years. When the government moved back after 865 A.D., it built new governmental palaces on the east bank. With this shift of residence centers, many local street names dropped out of use, and new streets grew up to call for new names.

The greatest break in continuity came after the capture of the city by Hulagu and his Mongol army in 1258 and the subsequent capture by Tamerlane in 1400. While older accounts may be exaggerated, it still seems true that a very large portion of the inhabitants were butchered in cold blood, and that as a result the empty part of the city drew outsiders who moved in from out of town. Since they would not know the names of streets or landmarks, many of the latter must have died out except in areas where enough survivors were left to maintain them.³

² For example, the city lost the effective sewage system that it had had in its early centuries, and that lack has not yet been thoroughly remedied. — "Important Sewerage Scheme for Baghdad," in *Great Britain and the East*, 58 (January 16, 1941) 54.

³ Le Strange, *op.cit.* p. 344; Memouh Zeki, "Tamerlane Conquered Countries like a Hurricane," in *Iraq Times*, No. 11201, June 29, 1957, p. 17.

The depression that followed the Mongol conquests continued for centuries. In 1638 when Turkish suzerainty was finally firmly established, the population was still as low as some 14,000, and most of the glories of the old metropolis had disappeared.⁴ This reduction, of course, meant the abandonment of many houses and streets as the city shrank to a small core, presumably with the complete loss of the street names.

One of the few efforts at reconstruction was the building of a wall around what had been the heart of the city for the purpose of protecting the citizens against wandering tribes, whose attacks the weakened capital could restrain only with difficulty.⁵ The ruins that lay outside the walls remained to be reclaimed by the desert. In the middle of the 19th century the wall was between five⁶ and eight miles in circumference.⁷ These crowded conditions meant many but small streets in a restricted area.

Since the definitive incorporation of Baghdad into the Turkish Empire in 1638 the city has escaped the destruction of war machines. The British entry in 1917 was almost without a shot,⁸ and the mili-

⁴ Reuben Levy, "Baghdad, Old and New," in *Current History*, 26 (May, 1927) 235. For example, in Abasside times Baghdad not only had one of the first paper factories outside the Orient (founded 795 A.D.), but was a world center for the production of scholarly works in manuscript, a center for bookbinding, and was the home of "hundreds" of public and private libraries of 5,000 volumes or more. But in the 18th century, "the situation had sunk so low that a British journalist who visited Baghdad, recorded in his diary that Baghdad did not have one single book-shop." — Memdouh Zeki, "Future Iraqi Paper Industry," in *Iraq Times* No. 11,292, February 15, 1958, p. 25 and No. 11,244, August 24, 1957, p. 17.

⁵ Reconstruction of the wall after the Tamerlane invasion is credited to Sulṭān Aḥmad, who threw the Mongols out in 1407 A.D. — Clément Huart, *Histoire de Bagdad dans les temps modernes*, Paris (Ernest Leroux) 1901, p. 20.

⁶ "The whole city wall on both sides of the river is about five miles in circumference; but a large portion of the area which it encloses is laid out in gardens and plantations of date-trees." — "Bagdad," in *Penny Magazine* 14 (January 4, 1845) 9–11. "It is built on no regular plan, and there are few towns, even in Asia, the streets of which are so narrow and torturous." — *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁷ "Bagdad is surrounded by a wall about eight miles in circumference and strong enough to keep out Persians and Bedouins, though useless against artillery." — "A Visit to Bagdad," in *Every Saturday* 2 (November 3, 1866) 531. "Outside the walls, extending over a tract of land that must have been formerly occupied by streets of the city, is a burying ground." — *Ibid.*, 532.

⁸ The heavy fighting was already over before they reached the capital. — Charles Stiénon, "Sur le chemin de Bagdad" in *Revue des Deux Mondes*, Ser. 6, Vol. 35 (September 1, 1916) 148–174; Edmund Candler, *The Long Road to Bagdad*, 4th printing, London (Cassell & Co.) July, 1919, 2. 80–97.

tary actions accompanying political changes during the national period have meant little destruction to buildings and streets. With few setbacks both population and street requirements have steadily increased.

Very destructive floods have plagued the city all through its existence and probably have done as much damage as war. Until very recent years any especially heavy winter snowfall in the Taurus Mountains has meant spring floods in Baghdad. Since most of the streets have been unpaved, and since in the past many houses were made of sun-dried brick, a flood — with water standing for a long period — can very well cause the walls of buildings to collapse and destroy the identity of the street itself.⁹ New engineering projects render destructive floods unlikely from now on.

It took the city nearly fifty years to regain the inhabitants lost in the catastrophe of 1841 and reach the figure of 60,000 again.¹⁰ In 1879 with 70,000 inhabitants the city not only still remained within the walls of four centuries before but even then there were wide, vacant areas.¹¹ By 1885 the population had grown to about 100,000 but still remained within the walls. This condition meant still more crowded living conditions.¹² In 1884 the city suffered another severe flood.¹³

(Footnote 13 on next page)

⁹ The flood of April 1831 is described in "Baghdad and Back by Water," in *London Society*, 36 (1879) No. 216, pp. 497–501, and "The Plague of Baghdad," in *Penny's Magazine* 5 (November 30, 1833) 458–460. This flood was also reported by a German traveler, Wellstedt. — See C. Falkenhorst, "Die Stadt der Kalifen," in *Gartenlaube*, Halbheft 7 (1901) 201. Among other serious floods are those of A.D. 979, 1069, 1213, 1374, 1840, 1841, 1862, 1892, 1894, 1916, 1925, 1954. In each case loss of life accompanied the floods so that not only did the water wash the streets away but likewise the people who knew their names. Even in modern times, when refugee aid was furnished by the government, those whose homes were washed away were often re-settled in other areas. — Memdounh Zeki, "Big Changes ahead in Communications," in *Iraq Times*, No. 11,280, February 1, 1958; Huart, *Histoire de Baghdad*, p. 14.

¹⁰ "Bagdad and Back by Water," in *London Society* 36 (1879) 492–501.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² "Every house resembles a fortress or a prison . . . a city where the luxury of a wheeled conveyance is unknown; for who could drive anything that goes on wheels in lanes six feet wide that twist round every house corner, and where the mud lies ankle-deep in winter and dust darkens the air in summer?" — "Baghdad," in *The Saturday Review* 60 (September 26, 1885) 409–410. Another report of three years earlier placed the population at 150,000, evidently an exaggeration: "And yet with all its brave show towards the river, the City of the Caliphs hardly at first

The plagues that have treated many Near Eastern cities so cruelly often accompanied the floods. Whatever the identification of the disease, epidemics commonly referred to as plagues have several times actually depopulated certain sections of the city, helping the work of the flood waters to reduce areas and wipe out both streets and their names. The plague of 1831, for example, combined with flood waters to decimate the population.¹⁴

With this shift in residential areas and the obliteration of old areas, it is not likely that the present names have any real antiquity. Altogether from A. D. 762 to the final fall of Baghdad to the Mongol conquerors and the end of the Abbasside Dynasty Le Strange gathered a list of the names of 63 gates, 27 bridges, 27 mansions (Dār-), 24 canals, 24 markets or Sūqs, 16 monasteries (Dayr-), 15 alleys (Darb-), 12 mosques, 10 cemeteries, 19 palaces (Kâṣr-), 7 roads, 5 squares, but only 13 streets aside from the personal names which he omitted, and a scattering of other names. These figures by no means represent the whole picture. During its most flourishing period, about the year 1000 A.D. Baghdad held an estimated population of two million and covered some nineteen square miles, while in 1900 the area was reduced to a little over one square mile.¹⁵

suggests the idea of containing, as it does, a population of, in round numbers, at least 150,000 souls." — "Baghdad on the Queen's Birthday," in *Blackwood's Magazine* 132 (November, 1882) 587–595. The complaint about narrow streets applies to the area of Raṣāfa in recent times. During the original construction streets were wide and clean. Only later were they made narrow to increase air currents and create more shade. Buildings were only one story high. — Memdough Zeki, "Life Revolved around Palace, Home, and Market," in *Iraq Times*, No. 11,244, August 24, 1957, p. 17. More sober estimates placed the population at 170,000 to 200,000 as late as 1914. — "La Mission des Carmes à Bagdad et l'influence française," in *L'Asie française*, 14^e année (April, 1914) 134–142.

¹³ "For months, indeed, in the early part of last year, it [the desert] was a veritable sea: the waters of the Tigris . . . inundated the whole country from Baghdad to Basra. . . ." — "Baghdad," in *The Saturday Review* 60 (September 26, 1885) 409–410.

¹⁴ "[The] population did not exceed fifty or sixty thousand . . . More than one half of the area enclosed within the walls is a waste, the result no doubt of the great plague of 1831 and the inundation of the river that came upon the city while the inhabitants were in the throes of the plague." — "Bagdad and Back by Water," in *London Society* 36 (1879) 498.

¹⁵ This huge figure, while it seems to reflect the prosperity of the city, is closely linked with its decline. In the two centuries before its fall, increasing taxes on farmers and landholders drove more and more of the owners to abandon their estates to the

An area of nineteen square miles means many hundred streets, perhaps several thousand;¹⁶ therefore the loss to our knowledge of street nomenclature is enormous.

After the Mongol conquest and during the four centuries of Turkish domination, Baghdad remained within its protecting walls. Construction had barely ventured outside those walls by 1917 when political events replaced Turkish control by a British mandate, first as a military government, and then as a mandate under the League of Nations.¹⁷ Immediately the city began to break out of the confines of the wall, and under the protection of British troops and local armed forces the exploitation of oil deposits began to bring a commercial wealth not enjoyed for nearly a thousand years. Even after the area achieved political independence in 1932 the city's growth continued at an increasing pace. The expansion spread up and down rather than away from the river; and as late as 1936 there was considerable open space east of the city between the residential construction and the city wall, which was no longer needed for protection from Bedouin raiders or foreign armies but continued under the (English) name of the Eastern Bund, and, as an earthen embankment, helped protect the city from flood waters.¹⁸

The bund not only furnishes protection from flood waters but also helps in segregating economic classes and in the policing of the permanent settlement. During the '40's and '50's the prosperity of the city and the attraction of metropolitan advantages drew more and more Bedouin tribesmen from pastoral life and subsistence

desert and the dispossessed farmers to begging in the city. — Memdough Zeki, "Aladdin Juwani Had no Magic Lamp: Himself a Servant," in *Iraq Times*, No. 11, 192, June 22, 1957, p. 17. See also Le Strange, *op. cit.*, p. 326.

¹⁶ Estimates run as high as 10,000. — Edmund Power, "Bagdad under the Arabs," in *Studies* 5 (1917) 260–274.

¹⁷ Eugen Wirth, "Die Lehmhüttensiedlungen der Stadt Bagdad," in *Erdkunde. Archiv für wissenschaftliche Geographie* (Bonn) 8 (1954) 310. See also the sketch map in *ibid.*, p. 311, showing the city before the First World War and in 1953. In the meantime the city had already begun to show stirrings of modern civilization. A movie house opened as early as 1916. — Edgar Stern, "Kino in Bagdad," in *Kölnische Zeitung* No. 974 (September 24, 1916) 4–5.

¹⁸ See map accompanying Nat Cooke & Alexander R. Cury, *Bagdad: How to See It*, 3rd Ed., Cairo (World-Wide Publications) 1936. The map accompanying the present study is based on the *Baghdad Bus Map. Directorate General of Passenger Transport Service*, Baghdad, 1957. Scale: 1:25,000.

farming to wage-earning in the city. They settled outside the bund in large numbers, and in magnificent disarray built mud huts in which they maintained a precarious existence that fluctuated with the availability of low-wage labor. These *ṣarīfa*-dwellers, as they are called, furnish a quixotic army of male political dissidents, quick to follow promotional political schemes, while the women exploit the livestock kept about their mud huts to furnish a large part of the milk supply of the city. Mostly illiterate, these *ṣarīfa*-dwellers have no streets, no street names, and apparently no mail, nor mail delivery. Yet they number high in the thousands and furnish an unstable population from the point of view of street names since they live in ephemeral houses whose existence is highly sensitive to flood waters. The severe flood of 1954 nearly wiped them out, but they soon rebuilt.¹⁹

By the middle '50's the permanent construction of the city had spread right to the bund or old wall, then up and down the river, roughly north and south. Although the city had covered much of this area in Abbasside times, the area had returned to the desert or to the gardens of large landowners, and there is no indication that any of the street names survived.

North of the North Gate the residential sections of *Sarrāfiya*, *Waziriya*, and *Adhamiya* grew up with more modern aspect than the old city of *Raṣāfa*.²⁰ South of South Gate new sections grew up at *Battaween*, *Sa'adoon Park*, *Alwiya*, *Hindiya*, *Masbaḥ*, and even as far out as *New Baghdad* and *Tel Mohammed*.²¹ Fortunately these new areas had the benefits of adequate city planning, and their advantage over the rest of the city is obvious from the first glance.

While these new areas were reclaimed from the desert and private estates within the last three decades, their names are not new. For example, the name *Sarrāfiya*, now the area about the city water works, goes directly back to the original owner, *Zafar*, a servant of one of the early caliphs. Even when the area was desert, the name

¹⁹ George L. Harris, *Iraq, Its People, Its Society, Its Culture* (New Haven: Hraf Press, 1958), p. 256. In 1954 the *ṣarīfa* population was estimated at 60,000–100,000, but since then they have increased considerably. — Eugen Wirth, *op.cit.*, 312. For photographs of the *ṣarīfa* areas, see *ibid.*, p. 313 and J. H. G. Le Bon, "The Site and Modern Development of Baghdad," in *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie d'Égypte* 29 (1956) 23.

²⁰ For a photographic view of *Adhamiya*, see Le Bon, *op.cit.*, Plan IV.

²¹ For population distribution see Le Bon, *op.cit.*, Figures 5, 6, 8, 9.

persisted. On the other hand the names of the streets nearly all represent the names of leaders, mostly political leaders, of recent times.²²

Across the river, in the Karkh or western side of the river, beginning with the districts of Suq-al-Jadid, Khidr Elias, Alawi-al-Hilla, and Salhyah, new divisions have grown up at Karrāda Mariam, Mansour City, and government housing projects about the Railway Station and even further out.

Of the thirteen street names listed by Le Strange, not one remains in Baghdad today.²³

Of the seven roads (Ṭarīk) one name may be a remnant of the Abbasside period: Ṭarīk Mahdī Canal in the ancient Shammasiyah Quarter in the north part of the city. A street by the name of Mahdi today exists in that part of the city, but the lack of intervening documentation makes it impossible to be certain that the two are the same or that they represent an unbroken line of existence.²⁴

Of the fifteen alleys (Darb) not one name remains today.²⁵

Of the twenty-seven bridges (Kaṭarah) which represented passageways over the canals — not the river — the whole has disappeared with the displacement of the old canal system by modern engineering systems and water supply by buried pipes.²⁶ Of the one real river bridge, or Jisr, more later.

²² Examples of personal names used as street names: 'Abbās Afandī Street, Abū Naṭṭiha Street in Masbaḥ, Abū Qlam, Amīr Zaid, Ben 'Aqil, Faraj Allah, Haj Fathi, Hassan al-Sadar, etc.

Sarrāfiya from Zafar is probably a false etymology. More likely the name represents Aṣ-Sarrāfiyah "the money changer." The transcription of names in these footnotes and in the text (except for names quoted from Le Strange) is that commonly used in Baghdad English-Language newspapers, the English edition of the city telephone directory, and street signs. While this system is not scientifically accurate and is not always consistent, it is widely used. Characteristics of this system are the omission of the article, pronunciation of certain letters in the Baghdad dialect, failure to discriminate between certain letters of the Arabic alphabet, failure to show the assimilation of the article, and a certain freedom in the coloring of vocalic allophones. I have used the macron to distinguish long vowels (Le Strange used the circumflex) and the subscript dot to distinguish between dental and retroflex consonants. Otherwise I follow the conventional spelling when it seems established. I have attached at the end of this paper a list (List No. 1) of these common names alongside a more accurate transcription. Names quoted from Le Strange, of course, follow his transcription. I am indebted to Mr. John Mutziger, U.S. Board on Geographic Names, for calling my attention to many of these differences.

²³ See List No. 2. ²⁴ See List No. 3. ²⁵ See List No. 4. ²⁶ See List No. 5. (To be continued in the next issue.)