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“Kufa”
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After the defeat of the Iranian Sasanian dynasty in 637-638 CE, the conquering Muslim army occupied Iraq and established on the banks of the Euphrates a garrison town called Kufa. The new province would henceforth be ruled from this newly founded settlement. In time, it grew into a major administrative capital that had a mosque, a governor's palace, markets, and accommodation for a growing population of soldiers and immigrants.

As the diverse population of Kufa that included various Arab groups as well as converts of Iranian origin increased, it also grew as a centre of learning, attracting scholars and also becoming a commercial centre for trade and agriculture. The expansion of the economy of the growing Muslim state and the rise of a cosmopolitan Muslim community were largely under the control and direction of the caliph in Medina. Under Caliph 'Uthman (r. 644-656 CE), growing differences and an increasing pattern of decentralisation of authority often caused conflicts with regard to official appointments and the distribution of land and wealth, mirroring emerging tensions within the Muslim community based in Medina.

Opposition to Uthman's policies, emanating from Kufa, erupted into conflict and resulted in his assassination, throwing the young Muslim community into turmoil. Imam 'Ali, the prophet's cousin and son-in-law, whom many regarded as the originally designated successor to the Prophet, received majority support and became the new caliph. He shifted his headquarters to Kufa, effectively making it the new centre of authority. He was opposed by several leaders in Medina who were supported by the Prophet's wife 'Aisha. He was forced to put down the revolt, but he faced a more serious challenge from the governor of Syria, Mu'awiyah, an appointee as well as a close relative of 'Uthman who was putting pressure on Imam 'Ali to execute those he held to be responsible for the murder. These divisive events are recorded by Muslim historians as *fitna* (civil disorder), and Imam 'Ali eventually found himself having to confront Mu'awiyah in battle as the governor's larger ambitions for power became apparent.

After attempts were made to prevent bloodshed, hostilities were ended, and arbitration was agreed upon. However, emotions ran high on the part of some of Imam 'Ali's followers who were adamantly opposed to Mu'awiyah and to arbitration, and the group seceded, turning its wrath on both armies. One of the secessionists murdered Imam 'Ali while he was at prayer in the mosque in Kufa in 661 CE.

After Imam 'Ali's death, Mu'awiyah succeeded in gaining power and, eventually, control of many of the new Muslim dominions, and he imposed his authority in all regions. He appointed a new governor for the region that included Kufa, who was ordered to institute public cursing of Imam 'Ali's name during the Friday prayers in the mosque of Kufa, and to brutally suppress all partisan

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support in favour of Imam ‘Ali. During the ‘Umayyad period up to 751 CE and later under the ‘Abbasids, Kufa had evolved into a major city, particularly as the, ‘Abbasids made it their headquarters while awaiting the construction of Baghdad, their new capital.

As other towns and cities developed and the focus of trade and political power shifted to other regions, Kufa declined in importance. However, as a centre of Shi‘i influence and scholarship and as the city closest to Najaf, where a mausoleum was erected over Imam ‘Ali’s grave, Kufa continued to be influential as a centre of learning and Shi‘i activity throughout the period of later Muslim history. In particular, Kufa became well known as a centre for Arabic literature, language, and grammar. It gave birth to a new Arabic script called Kufic, and it continued to attract important scholars, jurists, historians, and poets. In addition, it remains to this day a major site for visits and remembrance, including to the grave of Muslim b. Aqil, a cousin of Imam Husayn who was executed by the Umayyads for supporting the ‘Alid cause. In modern times, Kufa has continued to be a cultural and religious centre, and a home to various scholars and centres of Shi‘i learning and scholarship.

Further Reading

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