

# ERBIL CITADEL

Photo Sefti

## THE WORLD'S LONGEST LIVING TOWN

*'We saw some four miles away from us in the plain, a great circular mound crowned with a ring of buildings. This was Arbil, the ancient sacred city of the Assyrians, existing under the same name as early as 1800 BC, where kings prayed for victory and mighty conquerors flayed their captives alive before the altar of Ishtar. Here it was that Alexander the Great after his victory pursued the fallen Darius, and though disappointed of his victim overtook the royal treasure. Here, too, at one time ruled the best-known Kurd in history, the great Saladin.'*

Two years in Kurdistan, *Rupert Hay (1921)*

**T**oday, you will only get a view of Erbil Citadel 'some four miles away' from the window of a plane: there is a building boom going on in the modern city that surrounds the ancient settlement. Even so, the sight of the great citadel cannot fail to impress. It sits on top of a 32m-high tell that rises steeply from the flat plain and dominates the urban sprawl below, its 11ha securely wrapped within a solid wall of Ottoman period houses.

Erbil – also Arbil, Irbil, or, in Kurdish, Hawlêr – is the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan. It is the fourth largest city in Iraq, and getting larger every day. But I am here to visit the ancient citadel that sits gently decrepit atop the tell in the midst of the 21st century bustle.

The citadel is a rare example in this part of the world of a fortified urban settlement, designed for civilian occupation rather than as a military structure. While little remains of these defences, historical records from the Middle Ages describe an encircling contiguous defensive wall with towers and gates, and, at the base of the tell, a moat. In about 1960 the southern gate – the earliest and, at one point, the only means of access in and out of the city – was demolished and replaced.

However, Erbil's unique quality is that it is the oldest continuously inhabited urban site in the world, with evidence of unbroken occupation dating back about 7,000 years. However, David Michelmore, Adviser for Conservation and Revitalisation for the High Commission for Erbil Citadel Revitalisation (HCECR), who introduced me to many of this fascinating city's finest sights, believes that its earliest levels may be older still.

Since 2007, HCECR has been working in the citadel to preserve and conserve the existing 330 buildings, some of which are in a precariously dilapidated state – 90% of the buildings are now derelict. Between 1930 and 1974, all but one of the residents left, leaving the city empty for nearly two decades. The years of neglect have taken their toll. These houses require constant maintenance: their flat roofs are covered with a soil and straw mix, which must be rolled with a large round stone after every rainfall to maintain a watertight seal – a Herculean task for the HCECR today.



**ABOVE** Erbil Citadel sits atop an ancient tell that rises above the modern lower city - the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan.

**BELOW** The honey-coloured bricks, with their typical decoration, glow golden in the soft afternoon sun.

The Mufti of the Great Mosque, Uthman Rashad Mufti who is the 17th generation Mufti of the Great Mosque embodying 500 years of serving the community, remembered the rainy nights of his childhood when he lived in one of those houses: 'When it rained, we heard a ping and put a bucket there; then, half an hour later, we would hear it in another place, and put another bucket there; after four hours we had a symphony. Then we would have to roll the roof. Every home did this. In the autumn everyone mixed soil and straw together and laid it on the roof. After five or six years, half was taken out and renewed.'

## Timeless charm

At first glance, the citadel appears dusty and disappointing, its walls crumbling, its buildings desolate. But in the late afternoon's soft light, when the bricks glow golden-brown, the real beauty of the site is revealed in the honeycomb and herringbone brick patterns.

The citadel is divided into three districts or *mahallas*: the Serai, which was occupied by the wealthier families; the Takya, area of Sufi houses and dervishes; and the Topkhana, which was occupied by artisans and farmers. Wandering through the narrow tangle of ancient streets that branch, tree-like, from the Main Gate on the southern side, the traveller is led through donkey-width alleyways and into courtyards.

'Erbil is the only place in the world that can give you an idea of what it might have been like to walk in the streets 4,000 years ago,' says Michelmore. The houses have been replaced and rebuilt over the centuries, but the alleyways and accesses appear largely unchanged in layout and character. Indeed, the German explorer Carsten Niebuhr's description of the citadel in 1766 is recognisable to the 21st century visitor: 'Today there is not much left other than this castle, and this is not even surrounded by a wall anymore, but the outer houses, which are all constructed by unburnt bricks, stand so near to each other on the border of the hill that today one can only reach the city by a staircase.' >



## ERBIL'S PAST

The tell of Erbil sits in upper Mesopotamia on the plain between the Great and Little Zab rivers, west of the Zagros Mountains. The area lies within the so-called Fertile Crescent, where Neolithic communities first exchanged their hunter-gatherer way of life for a settled agrarian existence.

Evidence suggests the area was settled as early as the 5th millennium BC, though one of the earliest references to Erbil relates to Shulgi, king of the Third Dynasty of Ur, in the 21st century BC.

During the Bronze Age, the fertile plains were dotted with tells that, like Erbil, were ideally placed to take advantage of the east/west and north/south trade routes. Most were abandoned towards the end of this period, but by this time Erbil was an Assyrian sacred city for the Goddess Ishtar, and thus a royal residence. It survived.

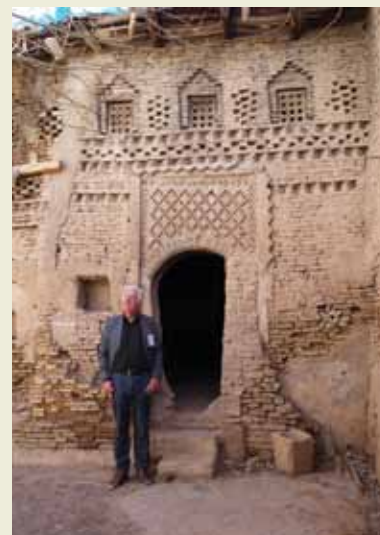
While other Assyrian sacred cities, Ashur and Nineveh, were sacked and abandoned, Erbil continued to prosper. In AD1236-1238 the Mongols arrived, laying waste to the lower city, but leaving the citadel relatively unscathed. However, Erbil's fortunes now began to dwindle, a decline that continued until the modern era.

In the 1930's, the wealthier families began to leave the confines of the citadel for the lower city's modern conveniences and greater space. In 1973-1974, the less well-off followed suit, prompted ironically by the Government's introduction of improved modern utilities: the water pipes and soil pipes leaked, caused erosion to the mound. Only the man who maintained the water tower remained.

In the 1990s, refugees fleeing the internal conflict took up residence in the abandoned buildings, damaging or rearranging their interiors in the process. By 2006, as peace returned, the authorities again cleared the Citadel, except for the one family.

Today, the future looks bright for Erbil once more, with the creation of the High Commission for Erbil Citadel Revitalisation (HCECR) directed by Dara al-Yacoubi, which is setting up a detailed programme of conservation and restoration of the citadel's ancient buildings.

**RIGHT** David Michelmore, advisor to the HCECR, stands outside an early Ottoman house that is part of the conservation programme for the ancient citadel.





## City ghosts

Many in the city still remember what it was like to grow up in these streets. Over steaming glasses of mint tea, I chatted with three men who spent their childhoods in the tight-knit community of Erbil Citadel: the Mufti of the Great Mosque; his brother Kanan Rashad Mufti, General Director of the Ministry of Culture; and Nehad Shukur, the business manager for a local school who left the citadel in 1974 when he was 14 years old.

Kanan recalled: 'They were good times here. I went inside people's houses without even knocking on the door, and they did the same.'

The Mufti, too, had stories to tell. He talked of childhood games – football for boys, hopscotch for girls – and a long running feud between the citadel boys and those from the Tayrawa district lying below. 'You see this?' he said, pointing to a scar above his eye, 'I got it from a stone in that game. It was a great game!'

Another occasion stuck in the Mufti's memory: 'Usually girls wore black djellaba, but on their wedding day they wore red. I remember one girl getting married: she was totally covered in a red djellaba like a red ghost in the centre of black ghosts walking to her husband's father's house. She brought a mirror, a knife, bread, and water with her.'

Nehad grew up here with four siblings in a 30m<sup>2</sup> house. 'At lunch-time, my mother would send one dish from our house next door, and they would pass another dish to us. In this way we all had a table full of variety,' he explained. Few houses had washing facilities, so families relied on the *hammam* (bathhouse), prompting another memory: 'I would often take a bath in the *hammam*. Someone would always be singing. The voice and the echo! I would love to hear that



**LEFT** Walking through the narrow alleyways, which fan out from the Main Gate, is like walking back through time.

**ABOVE** The house of Pirbal Agha stands on the remains of the only defensive tower remaining from the old fortifications destroyed in the siege of 1743. From the balcony the unstable construction of the houses, built on top of the slope and not the mound, is very obvious.

voice again,' Nehad recalled, wistfully.

Yet, some traditions do endure. Every Friday, after midday prayers, the upper city folk would visit each other to exchange stories. Today, each Friday, the old community still comes together at the citadel's Great Mosque.

Now, plans are afoot to breathe new life into this ancient settlement: the High Commission for Erbil Citadel Revitalisation has been tasked with preserving the cultural integrity of the city while ensuring its continued function in the 21st century – and beyond. Perhaps Nehad will get his wish and hear those singing voices in the *hammam* once more. ▣

**Hilary Munro** is a freelance writer with a special interest in historical sites.

**BELOW LEFT** Urgent conservation and restoration are underway to save the houses that are in danger of succumbing to years of neglect.

**BELOW** Half of the ceiling has fallen, revealing the structure behind. The colourfully painted decorations hint at the beautiful interiors that graced these grand houses.



### GETTING THERE

Valid visas are required before arrival for anyone who is not a citizen of the EU, USA, Canada, Japan or Australia. Extendable visas are valid for ten days.

The best time to visit is from March to May when the Kurds head for the hills to picnic, and the country bursts into flower.