

# Abu Tbeirah Excavations I. Area 1

## Last Phase and Building A – Phase 1

edited by  
Licia Romano and Franco D'Agostino





Collana Materiali e documenti 44



Abu Tbeirah  
Excavations I. Area 1  
Last Phase and Building A – Phase 1

*edited by*  
*Licia Romano and Franco D'Agostino*



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*This book is dedicated to Amir Doshi,  
whose friendship is the pillar  
of our work at Abu Tbeirah*





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# CHAPTER 1

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## INTRODUCTION







# CHAPTER 1

## FOREWORD

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When the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MAECI) started a program for the civil and cultural rehabilitation of Iraq in 2008, run by the "Task-Force Iraq", a grant was requested by F. D'Agostino in order to carry out a project aimed at capacity building in the field of Heritage and Archaeology of Mesopotamia for the representatives of the *State Board of Antiquities and Heritage* (SBAH). The area selected for the development of the project was that of Dhi Qar, where the local Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT), at that time with their headquarters in the Tallil Air Base, was led by Dr Anna Prouse, representative of the Italian MAECI. The Minister of Culture, and our good friend, HE Abdulmir al-Hamdani in Ch. 2 tell the story that led to the excavations of Abu Tbeirah.

The following report presents a general introduction to the site and its palaeo-environment as well as the results of the work in Abu Tbeirah's Area 1, focusing in particular on the last phases of occupation. In § 2 Abdulmir al-Hamdani reassumes perfectly the premises of the project and all the events that led to the beginning of the Abu Tbeirah archaeological mission, reporting, in addition, useful cartographic and Corona imagery of Abu Tbeirah and its surrounding area.

§§ 3-5 focus on the geological and environmental setting of the site as well as on the ancient canalization system surrounding it. Salvatore Milli and Luca Forti (§ 3) revise the previous literature on the geological setting of the site, and also present the Quaternary Deposits and the Holocene stratigraphy and sedimentology of the southern Mesopotamian plain. In addition, the chapter focuses on the reconstruction of the palaeo-shoreline of

the Arabian Gulf and its historical changes. Preliminary data from a recent bore-hole made with a hand auger inside the Abu Tbeirah Area 5 artificial basin is included.

Alessandra Celant and Donatella Magri present a survey of the scientific literature on the Mesopotamian palaeo-environment, on the basis of pollen records and plant macroremains, depicting the changes in the postglacial vegetational landscape, due to the geomorphological evolution of the floodplains, as well as changes in the precipitation regime and the impact of anthropic activity. Some preliminary results from Abu Tbeirah records confirm the general outlined framework. The realization of the chapter has been possible thanks to the late Prof. Maria Follieri: years ago, when Abu Tbeirah project was far from begun, she left to Celant and Magri a collection of notes and article on Iraqi plant and pollen records.

Jaafar Jotheri's reconstructs Abu Tbeirah's ancient landscape (§ 5) on the basis of remote sensing and groundtruthing. The features surrounding the Tell, such as other settlements, palaeochannels, the southern Mesopotamian version of "hollowways", crevasse splays and grooves in Abu Tbeirah's region are discussed by the author.

Licia Romano (§§ 6-8) presents a general archaeological overview of the site, including an analysis of the post-depositional agents and their effects on Abu Tbeirah's record and the interpretation of the described contexts as well as formulating some hypotheses on the funerary practices, on the function of Building A and on its abandonment timeline. Some considerations on the implications of Abu Tbeirah's evidence on the interpretation of

other 3<sup>rd</sup> mill. BC Mesopotamian contexts are presented, *e.g.* a proposal of a revision of the “burnt burials” excavated by Woolley in the so-called Royal Cemetery of Ur. All the material recovered in these phases and their relative contexts are reported in detail in the catalogues of §§ 7-8. We decided to gather together the information on the contexts, the tables of the finds and their description, avoiding a final general section of pictures. We hope in this way to allow a faster and more profitable consultation of the book by the reader. The catalogues are enriched with the description of use-wear on macro-lithic artefacts by Stefano Caruso.

In § 9 Susanna Cereda analyses the heavy residues (HRA) of the pavement of Building A - phase 1 Room 23, showing the workshop-like (processing of bitumen) connotation of this space: this chapter clearly demonstrate the potentiality of HRA in defining the original function of a room on abandoned contexts such as Abu Tbeirah’s Building A last phase.

§§ 10-11 present a preliminary description of the pottery recovered during the excavation of the phases analysed in the book. Licia Romano and Marta Zingale describe Abu Tbeirah’s pottery from the typological point of view, preliminarily approaching also the *chaîne opératoire* and behavioural sequence in pottery production, use and reuse. Giulia Festa, Licia Romano and Vanessa Forte in § 11 present the fabrics subdivision and the results of Neutron investigation on selected pottery fragments, providing some hints about the firing process.

Mary Anne Tafuri’s and Francesca Alhaique’s analyses (§§ 12-13), respectively of human bones and faunal remains, sketch a preliminary picture of lifeways at Abu Tbeirah, contributing in defining the palaeo-diet and the impact of the ancient life style on the population of the settlement. The results of the isotopes analyses, though limited due to post-depositional alterations, are also presented.

Though often underestimated, the impact of lithic industries on metal using society is worth noting, as demonstrated by the frequency of lithic industries and tools in the strata excavated at Abu Tbeirah. Daniele Moscone and Davide D’Errico analyse this important but often neglected material class in

§§ 14-15, respectively from the technological and functional points of view. The authors describe in detail the sickle found in Room 23, hafted through the use of bitumen as adhesive: their analysis might in the future contribute to a better understanding of gestures and movements of the ancient user of the tool.

Franco D’Agostino and Angela Greco (§ 16) present a group of toponyms as possible candidates for the identification of Abu Tbeirah’s ancient name: the toponyms are selected on the basis of Sumerian literary compositions which depict routes involving the city of Ur.

Most of the authors of this book are exophonic writers: we believe that our readers will appreciate the content and be lenient with us and our misuse of idioms or poor grammar. We choose to write in English to reach a wider audience, as the Italian language is surely more difficult both for Iraqi and other non-Italian readers.

## 1.1 REGISTERING SYSTEMS

Whilst excavating Abu Tbeirah, we decided to use the stratigraphic method, labelling with the acronym “US”(unit of stratigraphy) each action identified on the field.

US found in Area 1 (south-eastern sector of the tell) are numbered from 1 to 499. The US excavated in Areas 2- 4 and 6 (north-eastern sector of the Tell) are numbered from 500 to 999. Area 5 (Harbour – western sector) US are numbered from 2000.

As far as graves are concerned, these are numbered from 1 to 99 in Area 1, from 100 to 199 in the north-eastern area. The numbering of the graves follows the order of discovery and thus does not have any relation with their stratigraphic position.

Findings are numbered as follow:

**Objects:**

AbT.13.1 ....AbT.13.86

Where AbT = **Abu T**beirah

13 = 2013

1 = progressive inventory number. The numbering restarts every year.

**Pottery:**

AbT.13.534.1.....AbT.13.534.75

Where AbT = **Abu T**beirah

13 = 2013

534 = number of the US

1 = progressive inventory number

## 1.2 ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is the achievement of the efforts of the entire Iraqi-Italian team working at Abu Tbeirah and is the output of several field seasons and years of study and research of scholars and archaeologists from both countries. We have so many people to thank for these results that it would be impossible to acknowledge the support of all the colleagues and friends that helped us in these years, to whom we are all deeply grateful.

First of all we wish to thank the Dean Prof. Eugenio Gaudio and his predecessor Prof. Luigi Frati who strongly believed and believe in our project in Iraq. The work at Abu Tbeirah is sponsored by generous grants from Sapienza University of Rome (Grandi Scavi) and from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MAECI), and from the following organizations to which our sincerest gratitude is given for their generous support: Prof. F. Pomponio and the University of Messina, Gennaioli Foundation, Iveco and MTT Iraq, Studio Galli Ingegneria (SGI), and Egeos Telespazio.

A special thanks to Giovanni Bardelli and the Franco Bardelli Foundation for their generosity and their continued trust in our archaeological mission.

The Italian Ambassadors in Iraq and their staff have given a fundamental contribution to the success of our activities in Iraq. In particular we would like to express our gratitude to HE Gerardo Carante, HE Massimo Marotti, HE Marco Carnelos and HE Bruno Pasquino.

We would like to acknowledge the outstanding efforts of the Iraqi Ambassadors in Italy and to the Holy See and their staff who have eased our work in every way in Iraq during these years. Our deepest gratitude goes to HE Saiwan Barzani, HE Habib al- Sadr, and HE Ahmad A.H. Bamarni. Special thanks are due to Diyar Saaid, secretary of the Ambassador.

The report on pottery at § 10 is the result of the project “C.U.P.S. Cataloguing and Understanding Pottery of Sumer” financed by Sapienza University of Rome and the Department Italian Institute for Oriental Studies (DIISO). For this support we thank Prof. Matilde Mastrangelo and Prof. Alessandra Brezzi, respectively former and actual

Head of the Department. In these years DIISO has also helped us in managing administrative tasks, so far removed from our archaeological competences. In particular, we are deeply grateful to Dr Olivia Mauro and Dr Claudio Lombardi, for providing the “administrative” foundation of our work.

We deeply appreciate the efforts and help given to us by Fondazione Sapienza and Prof. Antonello Folco Biagini, and by the Centro Interdipartimentale per la Ricerca Scientifica e la Cooperazione con l’Eurasia, il Mediterraneo e l’Africa Subsahariana (CEMAS) and Prof. Andrea Carteny. We are confident that by working together we can continue to do great things.

Our gratitude also goes to our Sapienza colleagues who, though not directly involved in the writing of this book, gave us fundamental scientific help: our thanks to Cecilia Conati Barbaro, Maria Paola Bracciale, Cristina Lemorini, Maria Laura Santarelli, Giovanni Carboni and Marco Scarsella. A special thanks to Savino Di Lernia for the precious inputs he gave us in organizing and creating the book’s outline.

In these years we have taken advantage of the invaluable expertise of Sapienza Press Office staff, who have allowed us to expound the discoveries made by our Iraqi-Italian team to a wide public. We offer them our heartfelt thanks.

We are most grateful to the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage and its staff for their hard work and assistance in all these years of common work in Iraq and for giving us all the necessary permits for the field studies and laboratory analyses (including destructive processes) presented in this work. Our warmest thanks to Dr Qais Hussein Rasheed, vice-minister of MOTA, who since the beginning has strongly believed in our project, signing our first permit of excavation, with the support of Abdulmir al-Hamdani. We offer our warmest congratulations to Abdulmir al-Hamdani now appointed as the Iraqi Minister of Culture: we are sure that His work will be invaluable to the future of the new Iraq!

We have only been able to achieve most of our objectives thanks to all the SBAH representatives who, on the base of their responsibility and competence, have invariably advised and supported us, not only on the field, in these years:

Wusal Na’im Jasim, Wasan Abd-el-Isa, Aqbal K. Ajel, Saba Omeri, Ali K. Ghanim, Taher al-Hosseini, Amjad Neama, Dr. Ahmed Kamil, Saleem Khalaf al-Hadary, Dr Haider al-Mamori, Dr Mohammad Sabri, Amer Abdul Razzaq and the other colleagues of the SBAH and Museums of Nasiriyah and Baghdad.

When we started our project in 2012 we had the pleasure of sharing the dig-house and equipment with the Iraqi-American team led by Elizabeth Stone, whose help and generosity we will never forget. We have had in these years the opportunity of enjoying the collaboration with other archaeological missions in Southern Iraq. Among them we are as ever grateful to Jane Moon, Robert Killick and Stuart Campbell, leading Tell Khaiber team, for their kindness, friendship and openness in sharing the methodology and the results of their excavations. We are confident that this excellent spirit of cooperation will continue in the future with all the archaeologists working in Southern Iraq.

Living inside the dig-house of Ur, kindly provided us by the SBAH, we have had the opportunity to build a strong relationship with the Mohsen family, whose members, Dhaif above all, are the guardians of the site. We have found in them not only fabulous collaborators but close and trustworthy friends.

Our work in Iraq was made easier by the laudable work of the Iraqi police department: we are deeply thankful to General Hasan Salman Dakhil, Colonel Fuad Karim Abdallah and to Dhaher Al-Bakka’.

We greatly appreciate the support of HE the Governor Yahya al-Nasri and of all the staff of Dhi-Qar Governorate and Province Council.

Specific mention should be made of important groups within the Nasiriyah civil and scientific society that have shown an active interest in our Iraqi-Italian archaeological mission: Nature Iraq with our great friends Jassim al Asadi and Azzam al-Awash; Luay Khairullah; the members of the Writers Union; the University of Dhiqar with Dean Prof. Ridha Shanti and His scientific staff; Ali ash-Shayal.

### 1.3 MEMBERS OF THE EXCAVATION CAMPAIGNS AT ABU TBEIRAH

The book will show how much credit is due to a relatively small and mostly very young staff for the admirable way they have carried out their work and also coped with the unexpected demands outside their specific duties and competences.

#### **1<sup>st</sup> campaign: January-February 2012**

Massimo Vidale, Mauro Angelozzi, Ali K. Ghanim, Wusal Na'im Jasim, Wasan Abdel Sahib 'Isa, Jamal Abdel'ali, Rafeet Abd el-Kadhem Manshad.

#### **2<sup>nd</sup> campaign: October-December 2012**

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#### **3<sup>rd</sup> campaign: September-November 2013**

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#### **4<sup>th</sup> campaign: September-December 2014**

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#### **5<sup>th</sup> campaign: September-November 2015**

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Flavia Pacelli, Mary Anne Tafuri, Tommaso Scarpelli, Edoardo Zanetti, Marta Zingale.

#### **6<sup>th</sup> campaign: September-November 2016**

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#### **7<sup>th</sup> campaign: September-November 2017**

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#### **8<sup>th</sup> campaign: November-December 2018**

Wusal Na'im Jasim, Wasan Abdel Sahib 'Isa, Rafeet Abd el-Kadhem Manshad, Jafar Jotheri, Luca Forti, Marta Zingale, Veronica Porzi, Leonardo Antonucci.

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