

# *BASRA*

ITS HISTORY, CULTURE  
AND HERITAGE

PROCEEDINGS OF THE CONFERENCE CELEBRATING  
THE OPENING OF THE BASRAH MUSEUM,  
SEPTEMBER 28–29, 2016

Edited by Paul Collins



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## CHAPTER ONE

# THE MESOPOTAMIAN MARSHLANDS (AL-AHWĀR) IN THE PAST AND TODAY<sup>1</sup>

FRANCO D'AGOSTINO AND LICIA ROMANO

§1. On 17 July 2016, the Plenary Session of UNESCO held in Istanbul accepted onto the World Heritage List (WHL) the Marshlands of Southern Iraq and three Sumerian cities historically and culturally tied to the marshes: Ur, Eridu and Uruk (Fig. 1.1.; TABLE 1). The name of the file is *The Ahwar of Southern Iraq: Refuge of Biodiversity and the Relict Landscape of the Mesopotamian Cities*, and as the name itself suggests, it is a mixed natural and cultural environment. The authors of this paper had the honour to participate in the writing of the cultural file as part of the Iraqi and International Commission created *ad hoc* to support the assembling of the historical dossier, coordinated by the *Arab Regional Center for the World Heritage* housed in Manama (Bahrein).

Indeed, beyond the cultural or environmental-landscape sites, the UNESCO WHL also includes a list of thirty-two “mixed” sites (less than ten percent of the entire list), where the focus is distributed equally between the cultural-historical and the natural and environment characteristics of the selected area. In the Arab world only two such sites had been accepted

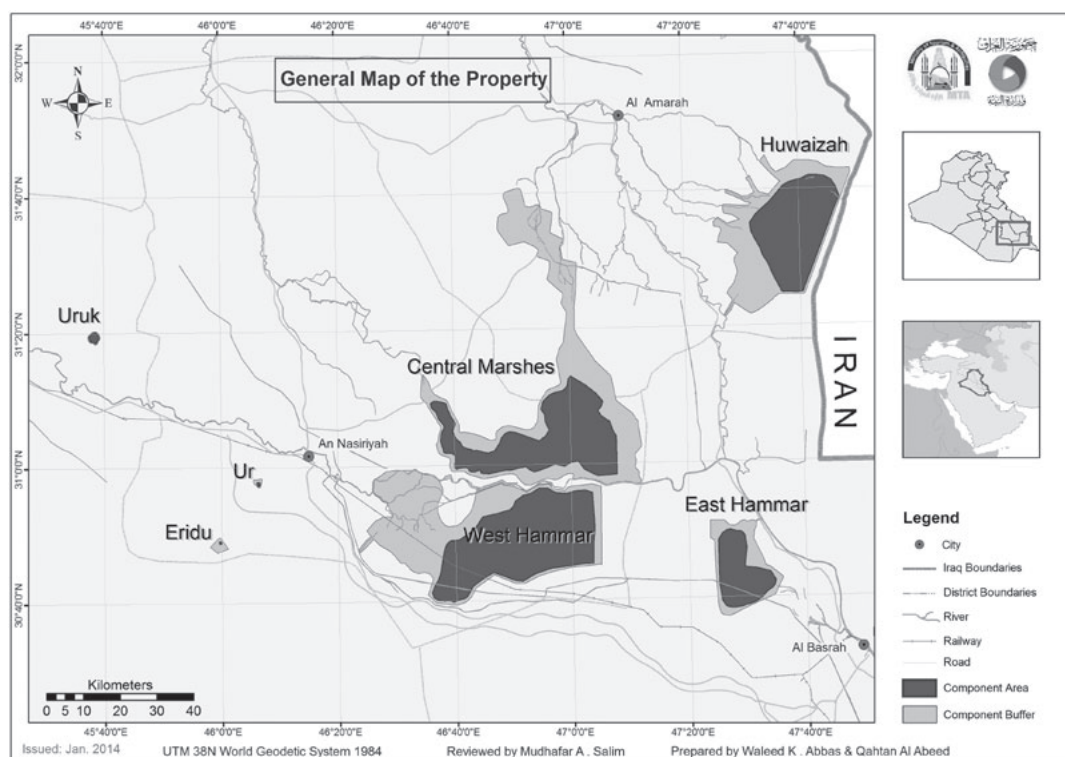


Fig 1.1. Sites of cultural and environmental importance in southern Iraq. UNESCO World Heritage List

<sup>1</sup> This text reproduces that read at the conference in Basra. §1 and fn. 4 by Franco D'Agostino, §2 by Licia Romano.

Name & Location	Coordinates	Area
The Iraqi side of Huwaizah Marshes	N31 33 44 E47 39 28	Property: 48,131 ha Buffer zone: 42,561 ha
The Central Marshes	N31 5 7 E47 03 15	Property: 62,435 ha Buffer zone: 83,958 ha
The East Hammar Marshes	N30 44 21 E47 26 19	Property: 20,342 ha Buffer zone: 12,721 ha
The West Hammar Marshes	N30 50 30 E46 41 03	Property: 79,991 ha Buffer zone: 68,403 ha
Uruk Archaeological City	N31 19 27 E45 38 14	Property: 541 ha Buffer zone: 292 ha
Ur Archaeological City	N30 57 47 E46 6 11	Property: 71 ha Buffer zone: 317 ha
Tell Eridu Archaeological Site	N30 49 1 E45 59 45	Property: 33 ha Buffer zone: 1,069 ha

TABLE 1.1. The environmental and cultural file in detail

into the WHL: Tassili n'Ajjer in Algeria and Wadi Rum, a Protected Area, in Jordan. Now the Marshlands of South Iraq make a third. It must be stressed that in order for a cultural and environmental system to be recognized as heritage under the protection of UNESCO, it is mandatory to prove that *only* in that particular environment could a past civilization, to which the archaeological evidence is connected, develop and flourish.

The motivation of the Commission reads as follows:

The Ahwar is made up of seven components: three archaeological sites and four wetland marsh areas in southern Iraq. The archaeological cities of Uruk and Ur and the Tell Eridu archaeological site form part of the remains of the Sumerian cities and settlements that developed in southern Mesopotamia between the fourth and the third millennium B.C. in the marshy delta of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The Ahwar of Southern Iraq — also known as the Iraqi Marshlands — are unique, as one of the world's largest inland delta systems, in an extremely hot and arid environment.

The main reason for coupling natural and cultural-historical traits in the same file is obviously due to the consideration of the progradation, or better aggradation, of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers across the millennia. A new and fresh approach to the paleo-geography of southern Mesopotamia, founded on the study of satellite imagery (especially of Corona images taken in the 1960s), has highlighted the exceptional importance that the deltaic and littoral environment and economy had on the development of organized life in the region. As Jennifer Pournelle (2003: 5) puts it, the hydrogeological analysis through satellite imagery offers:

an interpretive methodology especially appropriate to viewing regional scale interactive spheres inaccessible through single-site excavation, and establish a hypothesis emphasizing the essential nature, not merely of water, but of littoral ecotones, in supporting and shaping complex social institutions that underlay urbanization in southern Mesopotamia.

It is also clear that this situation lasted far longer than previously supposed and that the littoral ecotope heavily characterized the landscape of southern Mesopotamia at least until the end of the third millennium B.C.

In other words, notwithstanding the geographical situation, in which the three archaeological sites today lie quite far from the core of the environmental part of the request, it was not difficult to demonstrate in the file the hydrogeological relationship in antiquity between these cities and the delta and the littoral ecotope. §2. To cite one of the most significant archaeological pieces of evidence, the western and the northern harbours of Ur demonstrate quite easily the relationship the city had with the aquatic (deltaic) milieu surrounding it. The same kind of evidence, of course, can also be detected for Uruk and especially Eridu.

More important and complex was the need to demonstrate through the archaeological data from Ur, Eridu and Uruk their cultural relations with the biotope of the Marshlands, as is hinted at in the citation above. In fact, the central argument of the Iraqi request was focused on the cultural continuity represented by the life of the Ma'dan, the group of tribes settled in the marshes today, and the everyday life of the most ancient inhabitants of the very same area as it can be reconstructed by the excavations in southern Mesopotamia. This aspect was fundamental in order to show that here, and only here, that a relationship between man and landscape took place and developed, as the prerequisite of UNESCO, cited above, states. That does not mean, obviously, that the Ma'dan are the heirs of the Sumerians and, for the avoidance of doubt, this is not the interpretive approach taken in the file.

Evidence from the excavations of Tell Abu Tbeirah, of which the authors of this brief paper are co-directors, helped very much to establish this relationship between past and present, offering a first-hand view of the historical continuity of habits and technologies.

To start with a brief ethnographic culinary note, in Area 1, at the south-east of the mound, we recovered an upturned dish under which we found fish bones, turned completely black because of the way in which the fish had been cooked (Fig. 1.2. left). Now, a very typical way to cook fish, mainly carp, in the Marshlands today (and from here all over Iraq and the world) is called *masghouf*, literally “ceiling” (Fig. 1.2. right).

In this kind of preparation, a fish is:

split lengthwise down the belly, cleaned and spread out into a single flat piece. It is then partially scaled, gutted and cut in two identical halves from the belly up . . . , opening the fish in the shape of a large, symmetrical circle. The fish is then either impaled on two sharp piles of wood, or more commonly today placed in a big cast iron grill with a handle and a locking snare, designed specifically for this dish. The fish, together with the grill or the piles, is then placed near the fire of the ‘fire altar’ . . .<sup>2</sup>

The name of this preparation, *masghouf*, seems to derive from the peculiar way in which the fish is put on the fire, almost forming a ceiling to the flame (well, at least it is the popular

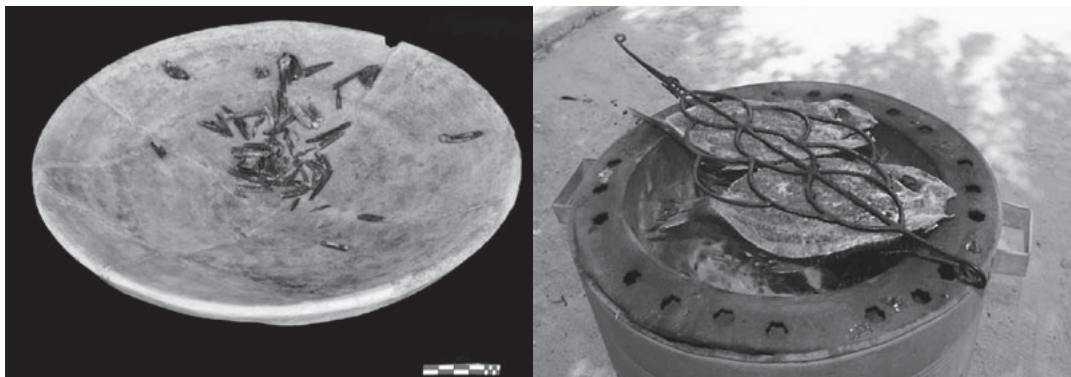


Fig 1.2. *Left*: Fishbones and plate from Building A, Room 1, Abu Theirah. *Right*: The so-called *Masghuf* of the Marshlands

<sup>2</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Masgouf>



etymology our Iraqi friends offered us). Is it possible to consider the burnt fish bones of Abu Tbeirah as the remains of a meal of fish cooked using the *masghouf* method?

Be that as it may, much more direct evidence is found in the use of the most abundant and ubiquitous raw material of the area, nowadays as in the past, namely reeds. One of the most common reed artefacts recovered in Abu Tbeirah is the reed mat, although other reed objects have also been found, such as buckets, dishes and boxes. Maria Montorfani has recently written a dissertation on the imprints of reed objects in clay found at Abu Tbeirah, at Università la Sapienza in Rome by. She has been able to demonstrate that the weave of the artefacts known from excavation is ethnographically comparable with the one used today by the Ma'dan people in the marshes. Thus, the weave of a reed mat found in a room of Building A (SE) (Fig. 1.3. left) is similar to one made by Abu Haider, a friend from Chubaish, who prepared his mat using the typical reeds from the marshes, known scientifically as *phragmites australis* (Fig. 1.3. right).

In Abu Tbeirah we have evidence of the other important uses to which reeds were put in antiquity and that are also known through ethnographic studies; specifically their use for building. It is a pleasure to recall here our friend, the archaeologist Dr Abdulmir al-Hamdani, who was kind enough to share with us his immense knowledge of the historical way of life in the Marshlands, helping us to understand our archaeological evidence. In Rooms 14 and 15 of Building A we found fragments of clay with the imprint of reeds in a row, suggesting a fence used to divide the space inside the rooms themselves, a practice still found spaces inside the reed-huts where Ma'dan live today. Moreover, in Room 14 of the same building we found evidence of a bundle of reeds, known as reed pillars or arches for the building of the *mudhif*, the reed house representing the heart of everyday life in the marshes (Fig. 1.4. left and right). Line 13 of Tablet I of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, where the scribe invites the reader-listener to look at the magnificent walls of Uruk, can be translated, notwithstanding some epigraphic uncertainties, as: "Look at its wall, which is stro[ng<sup>3</sup>] as (bound) reeds!"<sup>3</sup>, hinting to us to the typical arches of a *mudhif*.

But perhaps the most striking discovery, linking in the most direct way the building habits of the ancient inhabitants of Abu Tbeirah and the Ma'dan, is represented by the evidence found in Room 9. Here we have found an exceptionally well-preserved reed mat, covering the entire floor of the room, cut in the middle in order to create an oval shaped space to host a hearth, as made clear by burnt traces. There was also evidence for post holes, clearly made after the reed mat had been put in position, as can be demonstrated by the fact that the intertwined reed was forcibly inserted into the wooden post holes, where we found them (Fig. 1.5. left and right). The complex archaeological context suddenly became clear by comparison with ethnographic evidence.

As is evident from the pictures taken in the 1970s by Nik Wheeler (Young and Wheeler 1977; 1980) the archaeological evidence can be easily explained: the Ma'dan use reed mats

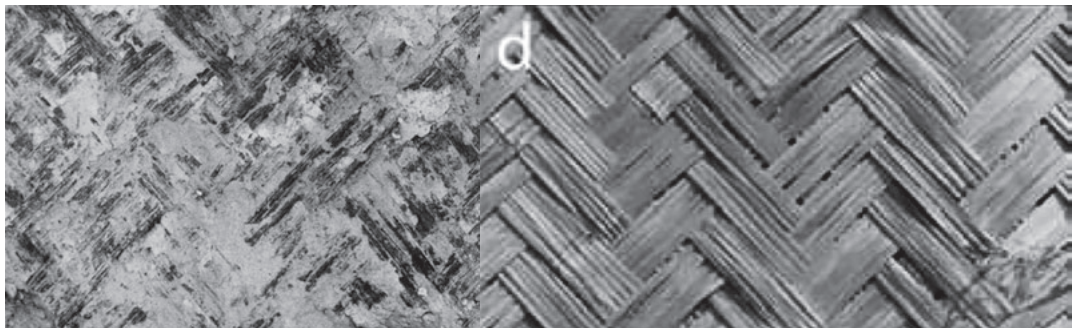


Fig 1.3. *Left*: View of the reed-mat in Room 1, Building A, Abu Theirah. *Right*: Detail of a contemporary reed-mat

<sup>3</sup> Author's translation



Fig 1.4. *Left*: Remains of reed bundle in Room 14, Building A, Abu Theirah. *Right*: Detail of a contemporary reed bundle



Fig 1.5. *Left*: Burnt traces of a hearth. *Right*: Post hole through a reed-mat in Room 9, Abu Theirah

to cover the beaten floor inside their rooms, cut in the centre so that a fire can be placed for lighting or cooking. The ceiling, itself made often by reeds bound together, is supported by wooden posts fixed directly into the reed mat. The photograph helps us to understand why the holes are so small, not exceeding 4–5 centimetres: the posts are in fact tapered at their ends.

During the sixth campaign we have begun to excavate the harbour of Abu Tbeirah (western sector), and we are confident that many more of our finds will be explained through comparison with life in the Marshlands today.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Italian cooperation with the Iraqi request has also been through other means. The activity of Università la Sapienza at Ur, financed by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was designed to prepare plans for the conservation of the main monuments of the ancient city. It helped to support Iraq's concern for its heritage as well as to produce new information for the file itself. The updated map of Ur used in the UNESCO file was drawn up by means of a drone (or rather Unmanned Aerial Vehicle, UAV) in 2014 put at its disposal by the project. At the same time, a 3D reconstruction of the Dubla-mah, with a proposed plan for its conservation until a complete restoration can take place, and of the Royal Tombs of Ur III, have been realized. Future work will be a complete ortho-photogrammetry with 3D reconstruction as part of a conservation plan, of the ziqqurat of Ur-Namma, restored by Taha Baqir in the 1960s.

