

Strategie e Programmazione della Conservazione e Trasmissibilità del Patrimonio Culturale

A cura di

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Williams Troiano

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REDISCOVERING THE HISTORY OF ANCIENT IRAQ: THE EXCAVATIONS AT ABU TBEIRAH*

RISCOVERIRE LA STORIA DELL'IRAQ ANTICO: GLI SCAVI A ABU TBEIRAH

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Il contributo presenta innanzitutto l'attività di scavo e i risultati scientifici delle tre campagne effettuate sul sito di Abu Tbeirah (Nasiriyah, Iraq Meridionale) tra il 2011 e il 2012. Oltre ad una survey generale del Tell, che ha individuato, come è prassi nelle città antiche della Mesopotamia, aree specializzate in attività artigianali, quali produzione ceramica e metallurgica, lo scavo si è concentrato nell'area sud orientale di Abu Tbeirah. Qui è stata portata alla luce una struttura di importanti dimensioni, identificata mediante foto satellitari, di cui è stata per ora evidenziata la parte nord-occidentale. Due fasi di utilizzo sono state sinora individuate, databili sulla base delle evidenze ceramiche alla parte finale del cosiddetto periodo Protodinastico (2500-2350 a. C. ca.). Gli aspetti più importanti sinora rivelati riguardano la straordinaria continuità della cultura materiale di quest'area, che permane immutata sino ai giorni nostri. Contestualmente verranno descritte le attività collaterali della Missione, incentrate su aspetti di formazione del personale locale (universitario e appartenente alla soprintendenza) nel settore archeologico e dei Beni Culturali, sponsorizzati dalla Cooperazione del Ministero degli Affari Esteri, attraverso l'Ambasciata d'Italia a Baghdad e fortemente voluti dalle autorità locali.

Key words: Iraq, Ibrahim's Mounds, Sumer, Early Dynastic, excavation, training, formation.

(*) Acknowledgments. It is a pleasure for us to thank here all the colleagues and friends we have in Iraq and who make possible and pleasant our work there: the Minister for Tourism and Antiquities HE Dr Liwaa Sumaisem; the Director of the Excavations of Iraq, Dr Ahmed Kamil; the Superintendent of Ur Archaeological Area, Ali Khadem; the Superintendent of Dhi Qar Region, Wussal Na'im Jaseem; the archaeologists Jamal Abdul 'al and Wasan Abdulsahib 'Isa; the collaborators Daher, Dhaif, Nasrallah, Ghani, Taklif, Amir, Ngameh, Haider. The Journalist and man of culture, Dr Amir Doshi, is a very good friend of us in Nasiriyah and has always helped us in many different ways. A special thank must be

1. Premise¹

1.1 Political Setting of the Project

It can appear obvious speaking of Iraq, but all the activities presented in this paper started from the desert, more specifically from a sand-storm in Ur in Fall 2009. At that time one of the writers was engaged, thanks to a grant from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in teaching Assyriology and History of Ancient Near East to personnel of the University of Dhi Qar and of the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage² and spent much of the year in Southern Iraq (Province of Dhi Qar, capital city Nasiriyah).

At that time there was not the possibility to live in the city, because of security reasons, so we lived in the

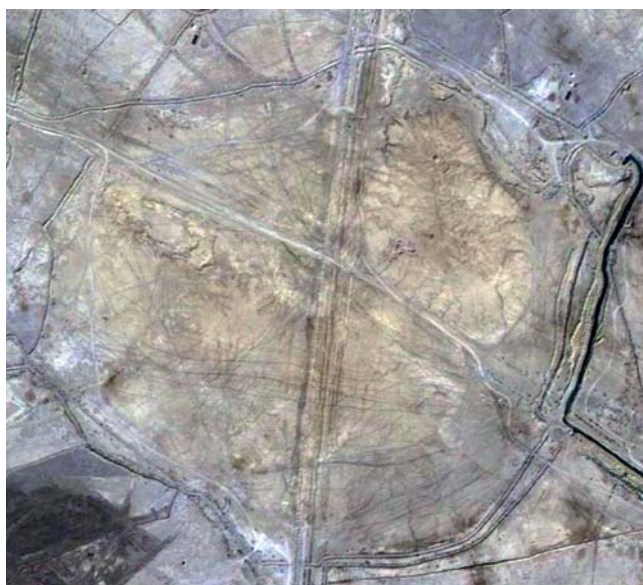


Fig. 2 - Satellite view of Abu Tbeirah.

On the opposite page, Fig. 1 - Impression of the seal with banquet scene discovered on the surface of Abu Tbeirah.

American Air Base, called Camp Adder (also known as Imam Ali Air Base). Located approximately 20 km west of Nasiriyah, the base has now been left by the American Army in December 2011 and has been re-occupied by the Iraqi Army. In the base, which had been built in the 70^s by the Russians for Saddam Hussein Army³, we were supported by the Italian *Provincial Reconstruction Team* led by Dr Anna Prouse, which had taken over the position held by the Italian Carabinieri from 2007 with projects of civilian reconstruction⁴.

During this period, with the help and encouragement of Dr Abdulmir al Hamdani, former superintendent of the Dhi-Qar Region, and Dr Ali Kadhem, superintendent of Ur Archaeological site, it was decided to start a project of excavations in the area of the city of Nasiriyah⁵. The project was intended as a first step toward the normalization of the activities of the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage, after the long period of standstill started with the first Gulf War (*Desert Storm*) in 1991, and as a training field for the Iraqi students and scholars all over Iraq and potentially for everyone interested in Mesopotamian archaeology all over the world⁶. Well, in a day of October, during a visit of some colleagues to the sites of southern Iraq⁷, the former Director of the State Board for Antiquities and Heritage, Dr M.R. Qays in front of the Ziqqurat of Ur, during a terrible sand-storm, as said before, granted his support to our project with a shake of hand, and in Spring 2010 we got the permit of excavation.

In September 2011 the first survey of the site was done that led to the preparation of the first campaign, which took place in January-March 2012, followed by a second one in autumn of the same year⁸. It is worthwhile mention that the excavation of Abu Tbeirah restarted the digging activities in the area after a long period of more than 40 years of stasis. This is indeed the first international archaeological team which was granted a

addressed to HE Dr Saywan Barzani, Iraqi Ambassador in Italy and HE Dr Habeeb al-Sadr, Iraqi Ambassador to the Holy See, who have always supported with enthusiasm our archaeological activities in Southern Iraq. The Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, represented by HE Massimo Marotti, Italian Ambassador in Iraq, has always demonstrated a great generosity in supporting our work in Iraq in every occasion. Last but not least, it must be stressed clearly here that an archaeological Mission is a complex organism of many different competences and it is not a task for a 'single' man, so it is a great pleasure to cite here all the members of our group: Dr Francesca Gorello (Epigrapher – Sapienza), Silvia Santiloni (Archaeologist – Sapienza), Dr Melania Zingarello (Archaeologist – Sapienza), Dr Mary Anne Tafuri (Anthropologist – Cambridge), Dr Francesca Alhaique (Archaeozoologist – Washington Univ.), Dr Giulia Barella (Restorer – Istituto Centrale del Restauro), Dr Alessandra Celant (Paleobotanica – Sapienza), Dr Carmen Guetschow (Restorer – Berlin).

¹ D'Agostino is author of chapters 1, 4; Romano is author of chapters 2, 3; chapters 5 is common work of the two authors.

² The aim of a project was restarting the scientific life of the area in the frame of the civil reconstruction of Iraq.

³ In this period the area of the excavations of Ur (Tell al Muqayyar) was incorporated inside the area of the Military Camp (at that time known as Tallil Air Base); in Spring 2008 the American management of the Base gave order to the soldiers not to enter the area, while only in 2011 the archaeological surface was taken out from the Camp compound. It is worth to note that the excavations did not suffer much damage during the war and the occupation, given its position inside a relatively controlled area (CURTIS et alii 2008).

⁴ On the base of UN resolution Nr. 1483, May the 22nd 2003, the Italian Carabinieri started their mission, called *Antica Babilonia* (Ancient Babylonia), in July the 15th 2003; as it is well known, on the 12th of November of that same year there was the attack which killed 25 people (19 of whom Italians); the Carabinieri left the base at the end of 2006.

⁵ It is a pleasure for me to acknowledge here the help of all the staff of the PRT, and especially of Dr Anna Prouse, Team Leader, who since the very beginning of the project did her best to give me the possibility to overcome all the difficulties and allow the implementation of the project itself.

⁶ For all the premises of the project see also D'AGOSTINO, ROMANO in press a.

⁷ CURTIS et alii 2008.

⁸ See the account of the first visit to the tell in D'AGOSTINO 2011, pp. 36-44.

permit of excavation by the Ministry of Tourism and Archaeology and the State Board for Antiquities and Heritage of the new Republic of Iraq.

1.2. Social Setting of the Project

As it is unfortunately well-known, Iraq is a country which has spent the last four decades in a continuous state of war and isolation, a situation which led to the impoverishment of the cultural and scientific life of the Country. Moreover, given the situation of unrest and instability which has characterized the last 10 years after the Saddam Period, many Iraqi archaeologists, philologists and experts of Ancient Mesopotamia have fled away to western countries, so that there is a gap of at least three generations in the peculiar and fundamental aspect of the Cultural Heritage. It is to be mentioned, if necessary, that Iraq has one of the greatest archaeological patrimony in the World, which is second only to that of Italy.

To sum up, due to the situation described above, there is the necessity in Iraq to train people especially in the following fields: knowledge of the technical tools to manage scientifically the archaeological and Cultural Heritage; knowledge in the field of enhancement of the archaeological sites and Cultural Heritage in general; expertise in the field of techniques and technologies used in a modern excavation, like restoration, topography, stratigraphy etc. All this means that an archaeological activity in nowadays Iraq, beyond the normal scientific purposes, must be essentially a form of cooperation aimed at the formation and training of the young generation of Iraqi archaeologists and scholars.

1.3. Scientific Setting of the Project

The site, officially spelled Abu Tubairah⁹, is known popularly as the 'Ibrahim's Mounds' and is located 7 km South of Nasiriyah (coordinates: 30 98' 43" E; 46 26' 97" N), in a petrol area known as Al-Rafidayn. The Tell¹⁰, ca. 45 ha of area, has never been excavated before but its surface is disturbed by modern activities connected with petrol and gas exploitation, though not showing traces of any intentional looting (fig. 2)¹¹.

The Tell is divided in four sectors by traces of an old canal running North-West to South-East and by a pipeline running North-East to South-West. According to H. Wri-

ght's survey in 1966¹², the canalization system in the area East of Ur appeared during the Early Dynastic (2900-2350 BC) and disappeared at the end of the Old Babylonian Period (2000-1500 BC).

Two big canals ran around Ur, one North and one South of the City. The Northern canal probably continued North-Eastwards, as demonstrated by the presence of several sites disposed along the supposed prosecution of the artificial stream.

Comparing Wright's maps with modern satellite imagery it is not improbable to hypothesize a connection between the canal running North of Ur and the one crossing Abu Tbeirah, a theory that needs obviously to be verified on the field but that would fit well with the dating of the site between the Early Dynastic and the Old Babylonian periods¹³.

From the point of view of the history of Third Millennium Mesopotamia, one of the most interesting aspects in the project of excavation at Abu Tbeirah is represented by the possibility of shedding new and important light on a crucial moment of the history of the area. This period, which is divided in three different phases, is called Early Dynastic (2900-2350 BC), due to the fact that precedes the affirmation of the first Dynastic Empire centered on the northern city of Akkad (2350-2220 BC)¹⁴, and witnessed the consolidation of the idea of 'State' which started in the middle of the Fourth Millennium in the same area¹⁵.

More specifically, the evidence unearthed so far at Abu Tbeirah, as we shall see, offers new information on the last development of this Era, that is the critical historical moment represented by the passage from a system of power based on the local level (city) to a new one based on the wider world perspective (empire). So, chronologically the site is to be related to the long period 2900-2000 BC.

Another important aspect, which has been highlighted in the diggings, is the information on many traits of the everyday life of the people in the second half of the Third Millennium BC: alimentary habits, way of living, handicraft, burial practices are represented directly from the findings and are offering us the possibility to describe the reality of the Sumerians.

The consideration of the long unaltered tradition of this area, which has survived almost identical to itself

⁹ It is a 'hypocharisticon of ṭabīr', 'hatchet'.

¹⁰ Tell is an Arabic word meaning 'hill' and it is used in the scientific literature to hint to a not-natural accumulation of strata.

¹¹ The choice of Abu Tbeirah was taken, in agreement with the local authorities, also because of its location in a petrol area – requests for the excavations of new oil pits by the National Iraqi Oil-Company have been reported (but never confirmed). Moreover, in the Development Plan of the city of Nasiriyah, a program of new buildings in the zone of Abu Tbeirah has been proposed, so that this excavation gave the opportunity to the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage to protect this area.

¹² WRIGHT 1981.

¹³ See D'AGOSTINO, ROMANO in press a, fig. 4.

¹⁴ The founder of this Empire was Šarru-kin, which means "the king is stable", a name which in the Bible and in the Greek tradition is read as Sargon; this is the reason why the period is also called Sargonic.

¹⁵ See FRANGIPANE 1996.

especially in the area of the Marshlands, will be used in the request of inserting Southern Iraq in the List of the sites patrimony of Mankind, protected by UNESCO.

1.4 Cultural Setting of the Projects

The popular name of the site of Abu Tbeirah is "Ibrahim's Mounds". The Patriarch Abraham (Ibrahim in the Arabic world, where He is considered a Saint) is directly tied with this geographical area. As it is well known, in the Genesis (17 ff.) it is narrated how Abraham, who lived in the city of Ur, the only Sumerian city which is mentioned in the Ancient Testament, inspired by God, started his journey to Harran and Canaan. Abraham is, thus, a figure which is connected with all the three Monotheistic Religions.

The house of the Mission at Abu Tbeirah is located in the archaeological site of Ur, not far from Abraham's house, and very often Muslims come and visit Ur in order to pay homage to the place of birth of Ibrahim.

Our project is called "Ibrahim's Mounds" and has also the aim of representing a bridge which can try to put in relation on the religious, cultural and scientific levels all the people interested in a pacific cooperation inside the Country, overcoming the prejudices through a scientific attitude which could show respect for all the different ideas and feelings of the people involved.

In this frame, members of the Mission helped creating the Structural Plan for the next 25 years of development of the three southern regions of Dhi-Qar, Maysan and

Basrah as far as the archaeological and touristic aspects are concerned¹⁶. The work has been done having in mind from one side the enormous importance of the history of ancient Iraq and from the other the necessity to overcome the long period of standstill and destruction which characterized the Country in the last part of its history. The main focus was the idea that there is a common past which is important and must be preserved regardless the cultural or religious attitude¹⁷.

2. The Archaeological Project: the Excavation Campaigns (2010-2012)

2.1 Trench I - The Cemeterial Area

The analysis of satellite images allowed us to identify traces of different mud-bricks buildings, revealed on surface by the darker traces left by the buried walls, contrasting with the strongly salinized surface of the Tell. In particular, in the South-Eastern area it is clearly recognizable a large articulated building which, given its size, might have been used for public purposes: this area (Trench 1)¹⁸ has been chosen for starting the excavations. The excavations allowed us to bring to light at first a Cemeterial area of which three graves have been so far excavated – these burials represent the last occupational phase of Trench 1 area (fig. 3).

In Grave 1 there was a body laid down over a reed mat, in fetal position, with the head toward West and looking South¹⁹. The skeleton discovered belonged to a su-

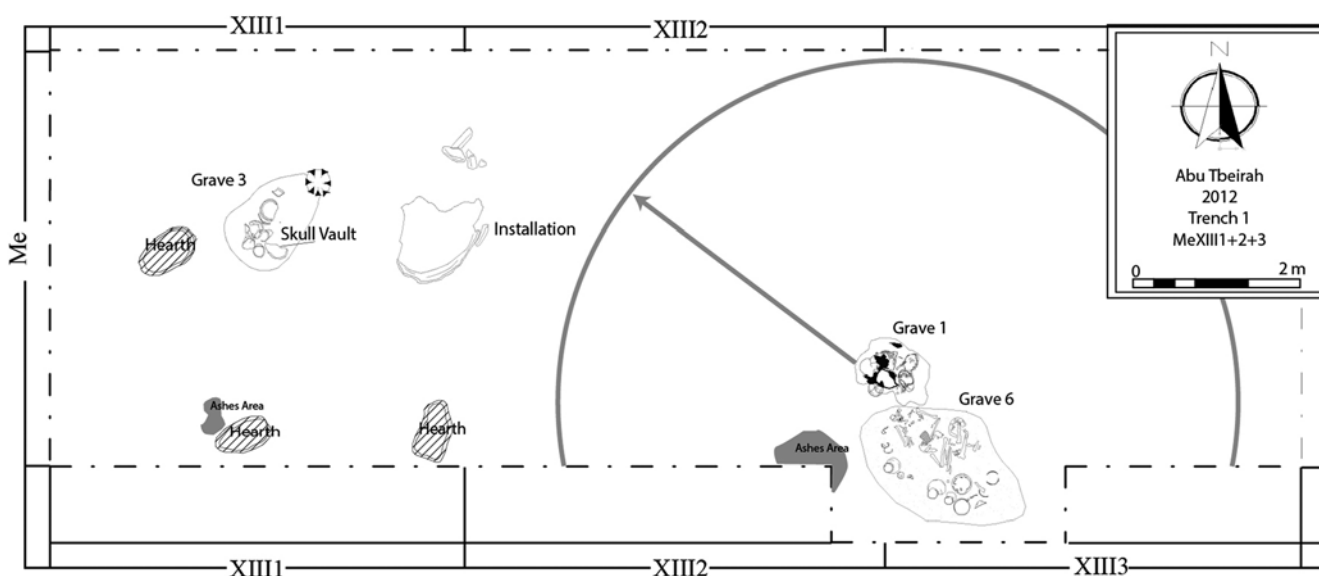


Fig. 3 - Plan of the Cemeterial Area, Trench I, Abu Tbeirah.

¹⁶ The survey has been carried out on behalf of SGI - Studio Galli Ingegneria (<http://www.sgi-spa.it/>).

¹⁷ It has been a great pleasure for us to realize that Jews and Christian antiquities are considered equally important by the representative of the State Board in all the regions we have worked in.

¹⁸ The area excavated so far are Trench I (South-Eastern part of the Tell); Trench II (North-Eastern part); Trench III (North-Eastern part – stratigraphic trench): for more details see D'AGOSTINO et alii 2011, *passim*.

¹⁹ For the grave equipment see D'AGOSTINO et alii 2011, p. 27; D'AGOSTINO, ROMANO in press b.

²⁰ See D'AGOSTINO, ROMANO in press a, pp. 89-90.

adult whose age at death can be assessed to about 5 years²⁰.

The assemblage of Grave 3 consisted in 6 beakers, 1 jar and 2 conical bowls, while only a few remains of the vault of a human skull and one tooth were recovered (nevertheless it has been possible to interpret the individual as a mature male)²¹.

In the layer cut by the tombs three hearths have been unearthed. It is likely that the fireplaces were connected with the burials, though only one of them was located near a tomb (Grave 3). Also a large pottery installation²² can be related to the activities connected to the use of the Cemeterial area. During the second season a rich Grave (Grave 6) has been unearthed, cut immedi-

tely under the surface. The inhumations brought to light during the first campaign (Grave 1 and Grave 3)²³ had a poor equipment, composed principally by bowls and beakers that were not helpful for context dating. The discovery of Grave 6, instead, has given some more hints towards the determination of the Cemetery's date. In fact, the rich equipment gives the general impression that we are dealing with an early Akkadian cemetery (2300 BC ca.)²⁴. Moreover, the 14C analysis of a sample from one of the fireplaces near the graves discovered during the last season gave as result a date comprised between 2470-2295 calBC²⁵.

The deceased, a woman, was laid down with the head toward North-West and looking South-West, with the legs bent equally toward South-West, and holding in the hand a beaker-shaped container made of organic material, of which only the impression on the soil has been found. Deposited over the feet of the deceased, a pile of bones has been discovered. The bones were bigger than those of the woman and in a very bad state of preservation. The salt incrustation and the formation of salt crystals in the empty spaces between the bones and the surrounding soil made the identification and the excavation on the field impossible. Therefore, we decided to bring the bones all together in the laboratory, for more accurate micro-excavation and study.

The bones revealed to belong to another male adult, perhaps the first occupant of the grave that was removed in order to bury the new body and then re-deposited over the feet of the woman²⁶. The use of the same grave is a clear sign of a strong relationship (whatever it was) among the occupants. This impression was confirmed by the anthropological analysis of the two bodies: it revealed a genetic similarity, proved by a common skeletal malformation (*fig. 4*)²⁷. The presence in the Cemetery of practices of secondary inhumation was already hypothesized, but not confirmed, by the discovery of Grave 3. However, the discovery of a genetic relationship between the male and the female occupants of the grave hints at the presence in the cemetery of an area used by a specific familial group. If we look to the plan of the cemetery it seems unusual, in fact, the concentration of two graves (and three bodies) in a small area (*fig. 3*).

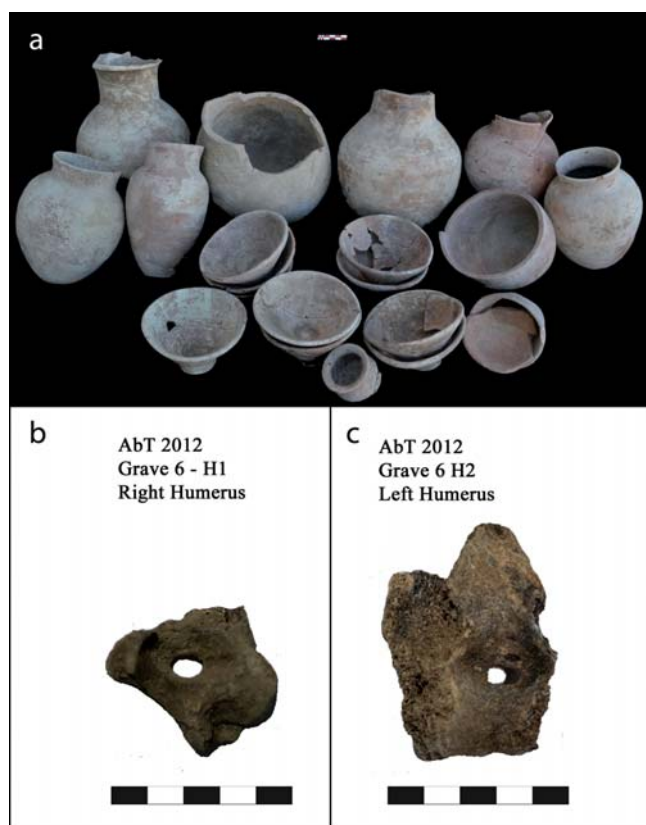


Fig. 4 - Grave 6, Cemeterial Area, Trench I, Abu Tbeirah: **A)** the pottery equipment of the Grave; **B)** skeletal malformation of the right humerus of the woman; **C.** skeletal malformation of the left humerus of the man.

²¹ See D'AGOSTINO et alii in press a, p. 90.

²² Originally interpreted as a looted grave (Grave 2) but then recognized as an installation on the basis of a parallel from Nippur (MACMAHON 2006, Nippur - Burial 15 - Akkadian Period).

²³ See D'AGOSTINO et alii 2013, p. 27 f.

²⁴ For details see D'AGOSTINO, ROMANO, in press b, pp. 70-72.

²⁵ The analyses have been carried out by the INFN LABEC of Florence. Another similar dating came from the Grave 1NE that is dated to 2575-2290 calBC. Unfortunately, the samples of organic material recovered immediately under the surface have been strongly damaged by the salinization of the soil.

²⁶ Secondary inhumations are attested neither at Abu Salabikh (MARTIN et alii 1985, p. 66), nor at Nippur, while earlier examples of multiple inhumations come from the Diyala Region (DELOUGAZ et alii 1967, for example Grave 87, Grave 91, Grave 92 - Houses 6 - ED period), though the re-use of sub-pavimental graves inside houses and a new dislocation of the bodies does not surprise. Until now, secondary burials in Mesopotamia are testified principally for the prehistoric Periods (CROUCHER 2012, pp. 60-61).

²⁷ Septal aperture of the olecranic fossa of the humerus (Tafari apud D'AGOSTINO et alii in press, p. 91).

2.2. Trench I - Building A

During the first campaign a mud-brick wall has been found in the North-Eastern sector of Trench I. The excavations of the second campaign have been mainly devoted to the big structure (Building A) visible from the satellite imagery²⁸ and to the analysis of its planimetry (*fig. 5*). Three rooms have been partially excavated and a fourth one has been so far only outlined. The excavations brought to light at least three different phases of occupation of the building, partially unearthed in the three rooms. The most interesting discovery consisted in different findings that testify the daily life of Sumerian people, a way of living that appears to be astonishingly similar to the modern life style of the Marshes' Arabs.

In fact, in one of the room of the first phase²⁹ we found a plate on a beaten earth floor, full of burnt catfish bones. This way of preparing the fish is still very common in Iraq and is called *Masghuf* (*fig. 6*).

Moreover, in a room (second phase of the building)³⁰ we found a reed-mat covering the floor, probably preserved by the collapsed walls. On the reed-mat at least one wooden pole was fixed to the pavement: we discovered, indeed, the presence of a little, circular hole, partially filled by the reeds. Connected to this pavement, a fireplace was found in the South-Eastern part of the area, and it was surrounded by other four postholes, perhaps linked to the roofing or belonging to a simple firing structure used to cook over the hearth.

The space seems to have been a closed one, comparable with ethnographic examples from the Marshlands of Southern Iraq.

It was, in fact, a common use to cover the pavement of the *Mudhif* (the famous reeds-houses) with reed-mat and leave an empty space to host the fireplace. Also poles, fixed in the pavement (and thus in the reed-mat) and used for sustaining the roofing, are well known from the Marshes (*fig. 7*).



Fig. 5 - Building A, Trench I, Abu Tbeirah.

²⁸ See D'AGOSTINO et alii 2011, p. 22 f.

²⁹ The first phase of Building A has been investigated in Room 1 and 2. The walls of the building were erected over pre-existing structures, using a strata of clay to uniform and stabilize the base of the new walls (see for comparison MACMAHON 2006, p. 6). We discovered two doors in Room 1, one leading Westwards to the external area, the other opened towards Room 2. Another door has been identified in the South-Eastern wall of Room 3, connecting with another still not excavated room (Room 4). The first phase of occupation in Room 1 was characterized by a beaten earth floor and a circular fireplace. Some pottery fragments have been found in connection with this phase: 6 conical bowls, 3 beaker, 1 plain rim jar, 1 band rim jar, 1 convex base jar, 1 ring base jar, 1 fragment of a goddess-handled jar. Only this first occupational phase was excavated in Room 2. The big dimension of the area and the findings suggest its use as a courtyard. It was, in fact, characterized by the presence of a Tannur (oven) inside which four beakers and a shell have been discovered. The area surrounding the Tannur revealed a concentration of ashes and pottery fragments. We decided to expose all the area of the room before continuing the excavation in order to better understand the stratigraphic relationships inside the area.

³⁰ The second phase of the building has been investigated only in Room 1 and 3. The circulation system in these two rooms was different if compared to the later Phase 1: in Room 1 only the door along the N-W wall of Room 1 was present. Under the pavement of both the rooms some bowls have been found, perhaps connected with the foundation ritual of the building (see D'AGOSTINO et alii in press, p. 77). On the discovery of foundation bowls see GIBSON, ARMSTRONG, MCMAHON 1998; MCMAHON 2006, p. 13, fn. 11). The second phase of occupation of the building was testified inside Room 3 by the discovery of a beaten earth pavement connected with a small angular Tannur. To this phase belongs a copper alloy chisel (see D'AGOSTINO et alii in press, p. 77, fig. 20) that has been cleaned, restored and consolidated during the campaign and is now stored in the Baghdad Museum. Among the other findings, there are a fragment of a limestone vessel, a carnelian bead and a sickle blade.

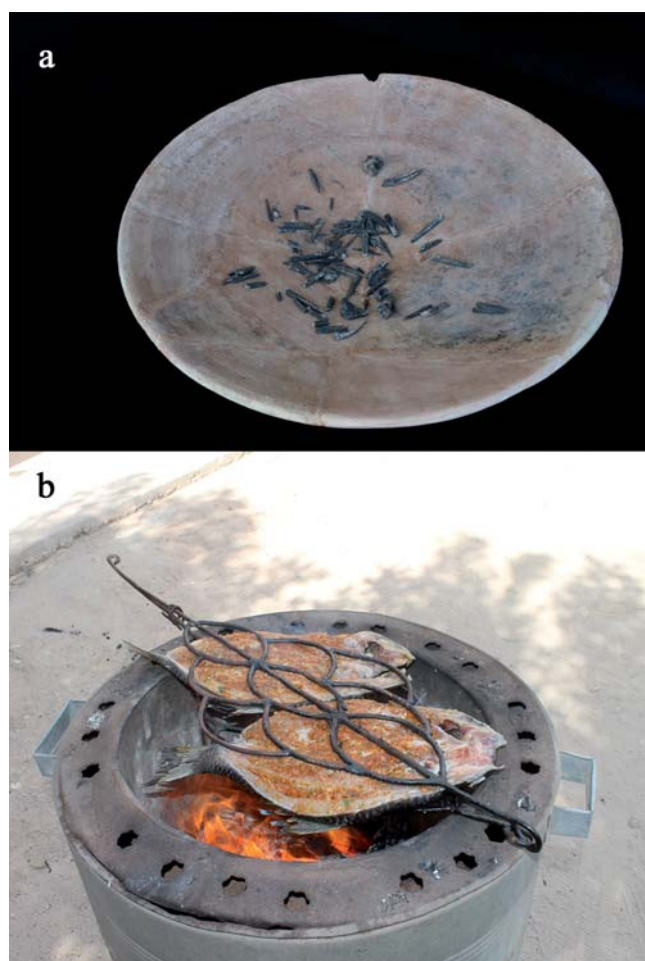


Fig. 6 - Phase 1 of Building A, Trench I, Abu Tbeirah: **A)** the fishbones and the plate discovered in Room 1; **B)** the so-called *Masghuf* of the Marshlands.

Cut immediately under the pavement of the rooms, four graves have been discovered where mainly children were buried³¹.

2.2. Trench II - Grave I NE

The second excavation area is represented by a grave discovered on surface in the North-Eastern part of the Tell, at the beginning of the season, in the first days of the survey. A cluster of fragments of copper was discovered eroding out of a buried deposit that evidently belonged to a burial. It was decided, in accordance with the Authorities of the State Board, to rescue the objects and excavate the deposit³². The grave revealed to be very rich not only in pottery and stone vessels, but also in

bronze objects (four vessels, a dagger³³ and a toilet set)³⁴. The discovery of three precious carnelian beads, typical production of the Indus' Valley, helped us to date the grave to the end of the Third Millennium BC (fig. 8).

3. The Technological Frame

One of the most urgent and important aspects in the modern archaeological research on the field is represented by the necessity, for an archaeological mission, to cooperate with institutions which have the scientific competence in order to analyze the various types of remains and findings in general that are unearthed during an excavation.

Not only 14C analysis for the organic material and thermo-luminescence for the ceramic objects and fragments, which help in a very substantial way the archaeologist to date the involved strata, but also the palaeobotanical, archaeo-zoological and anthropological remains allow to get fundamental results for the reconstruction and description of ancient history (which is the main goal of every archaeological activity).

All these analyses, beyond having a cost which must not be underestimated by an archaeological project, need at the same time sophisticated labs capable to manage and apply the long and complex procedures.

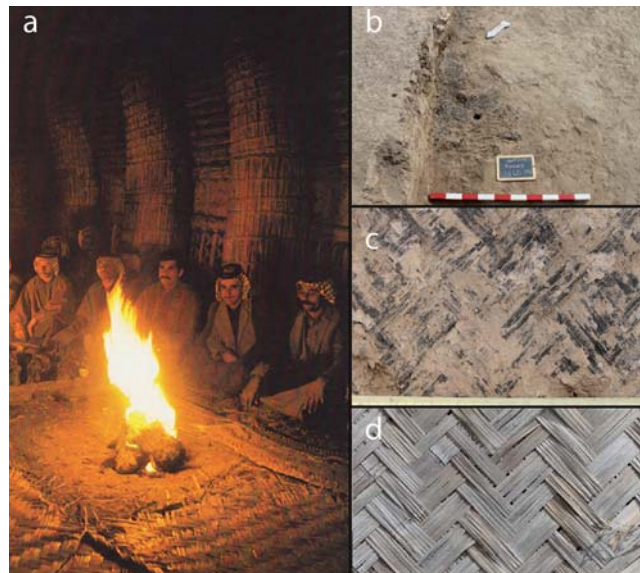


Fig. 7 - Phase 2 of Building A, Trench I, Abu Tbeirah: **A)** Marshland Mudhif (from YOUNG 1977); **B)** view of the reed-mat in Room 1, Phase 2 of Building A; **C)** detail of the reed-mat in Room 1; **D)** detail of a contemporary reed-mat.

³¹ For details see D'AGOSTINO et alii in press. In particular the graves under the pavement of Room 3 have an equipment composed by pottery vessels typical of the Early Dynastic IIIb (ca. 2450-2350 BC) horizon: a trumpet-base jar (similar to MOON 1987, n. 592 – 6G38, p. 110); a double ridged rim jar; one big spouted jar (MOON 1987, n. 666 – 6G64, p.591).

³² We intend to continue the digging of this area in the next future; For the time being see Vidale apud D'AGOSTINO et alii 2011.

³³ See WOOLLEY 1934, pp. 231 and 486 – Type 3.

³⁴ See WOOLLEY 1934, pp. 231 and 486 for comparison.



With the aim of exploiting in the best possible way the scientific technologies supporting the excavation itself, the Mission at Abu Tbeirah is member of the Consortium CoIRICH, which gathers some of the most important scientific institutions of our Country and abroad, whose scientific goals are devoted to the technological analysis of the archaeological remains, and more in general the application of advanced technologies to the Cultural Heritage³⁵.

At the same time there is a project of cooperation with the company IDS³⁶ for testing the possibility of acquiring data on the structures under the surface of Abu Tbeirah through the use of a geo-radar device. This experiment, which will be carried on in Fall 2013, is challenging from many points of view.

From one side the structures are built with the same material surrounding them, that is, clay, so that it will be necessary to develop a sensible machine able to distinguish differences in density of the soil. From the other side, the salty crust which characterizes the surface of Southern Mesopotamia poses a big challenge to the radar, because it can reflect its signal³⁷. In order to store, manage, and protect the data coming from the

excavation and to share them with our Iraqi colleagues, we also developed an on-line database in collaboration with Dipartimento di Informatica e Sistemistica (Sapienza) and Consortium for Research in Automation and Telecommunication. This tool will allow a better and quicker analysis of the many data which come out from an excavation and give the possibility to work on them also with collaborators all over the world.

4. The Didactical Frame

Since the very first moment, the scientific activities of our Mission have been devoted not only to the technical digging of the site of Abu Tbeirah, but also to the fundamental task of sharing our competences and knowledge with our local colleagues of the State Board and collaborators of the Iraqi Universities (*fig. 9*). The Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs is very sensitive in this regard and has helped our Mission from the beginning to build up a series of training courses on the most important topics related to the modern excavation techniques (such as stratigraphy, pottery analysis, taphonomy, restoration, philology and history). This cooperation with the Italian Ministry and the Italian Embas-



Fig. 9 - Students of the College of Art (University of Dhi-Qar) during a lesson on the site of Abu Tbeirah – October 2012.

³⁵ Web-site <http://www.coirich.it>.

³⁶ See <https://www.idscorporation.com/>.

³⁷ It is worthwhile stressing that this experiment can help IDS to find a way to detect the so-called 'dirty mines'.

sy in Baghdad is very fruitful and will continue hopefully in the next years. A very ambitious project is the possibility of creating a school of archaeology in Dhi-Qar at the Master level, where young Iraqi archaeologists will be trained on all the main topics of the contemporary archaeological work, from the surveying of wide areas to the publication of the reports of the diggings. In this regard the part of the teaching concerning the Training-on-the-job will be made using Abu Tbeirah as a field-school, so that the students will have the possibility to put into practice the theoretical information acquired during the lessons.

This project has been welcomed with enthusiasm by the local Authorities (Provincial Council and University of Dhi-Qar) and has found the active interest of Italian businessmen active in Southern Iraq.

5. Conclusions

It is our firm conviction that whoever wants to cooperate with a country like Iraq in the field of archaeology and Cultural Heritage must have in mind a kind of cooperation in which the didactical and training aspects must be added to the scientific and technical ones. This will help not only to create local experts who can enhance the activities of the State Board, but also to build up a link between the cultures on the two sides of the Mediterranean Sea. This link is, indeed, the real purpose which has guided our activity in Iraq in the last five years.

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