



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Abu Tbeirah and the Marshland: Dreaming Everyday Life in the Ahwar of the 3rd Millennium BCE

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## ABSTRACT

As already highlighted by archaeologists and ethnographers, there is a strong connection between the life in 3rd millennium BCE Sumer and the ethnographic traditions of the Marsh Arabs, still inhabiting the Ahwar of southern Iraq. This unique continuity is at the base of the admission in the UNESCO WHL of Ur, Uruk and Eridu, together with the Marshland as a mixed property.

Recent excavations at the archaeological site of Abu Tbeirah, located near Nasiriyah, are enriching our knowledge on these aspects of long continuity with novel data, obtained with an up-to-date methodology. The paper will thus describe the ancient environmental setting of the site, the water management inside the Tell, the fauna, the flora and their exploitation, and the material culture.

**Keywords:** *Marshland; Sumer; Storytelling; Water Management; Irrigation*

## 1. Dreaming of Abdulameer at Abu Tbeirah<sup>1</sup>

This contribution is devoted to our dear friend Abdulameer, man from the Marshes, expert archaeologist and anthropologist and pivotal actor of the new floruit of excavations in Iraq. Our project at Abu Tbeirah started in 2012 only thanks to His intuition and suggestions. Abu Tbeirah was one of the medium size settlement near Nasiriyah mapped and monitored by Abdulameer, who was well aware of its importance for the reconstruction of the historical, geo-morphological and economic history of western Sumer<sup>2</sup>. He made immediately clear to us that the site was a quite a central one but was however in danger due to the interests of gas and petrol companies and above all due to the expansion of the city in that direction (D'Agostino Franco et al., 2014). Our activities started in the south-eastern part of the site where we discovered a

<sup>1</sup> §§ 1 and 4 are common work of both the authors; L. Romano is author of §§ 2 and 3.

<sup>2</sup> See already Al-mawāqī' 'l-athāriyyah fī 'l-'Irāq, Wizārat al-'I'lām, Mudiiriyat al-athār al-'āmah, Baghdād 1970: 209 ad 360 (iṣān).

cemeterial area realised over a huge building complex, labelled Building A. The findings related to the everyday life of the inhabitants of building A led us immediately to understand the strong connection with the life of the Ma'adain. The following years of study and excavations, together with a focus on the geology and geomorphology of the area of the site gave us a clear picture of a Sumerian city emerging from the water of the marshes and strongly exploiting the local resources.

Abdulameer followed our activities at the site with great interest and every moment of precious confrontation with him remains well clear in our hearts and we will continue to thank him with our scientific activities and research. When we started to write these words in His hour, we imagined him going around Abu Tbeirah, as the Sumerian man he was, and thus decided to begin our contribution with a short narrative part, a kind of dream... At the same time, the details quoted in this fictional narrative are based on our discoveries and on the picture we are getting of the site in antiquity, a picture obviously subjected to changings on the base of the future research (Fig. 1).

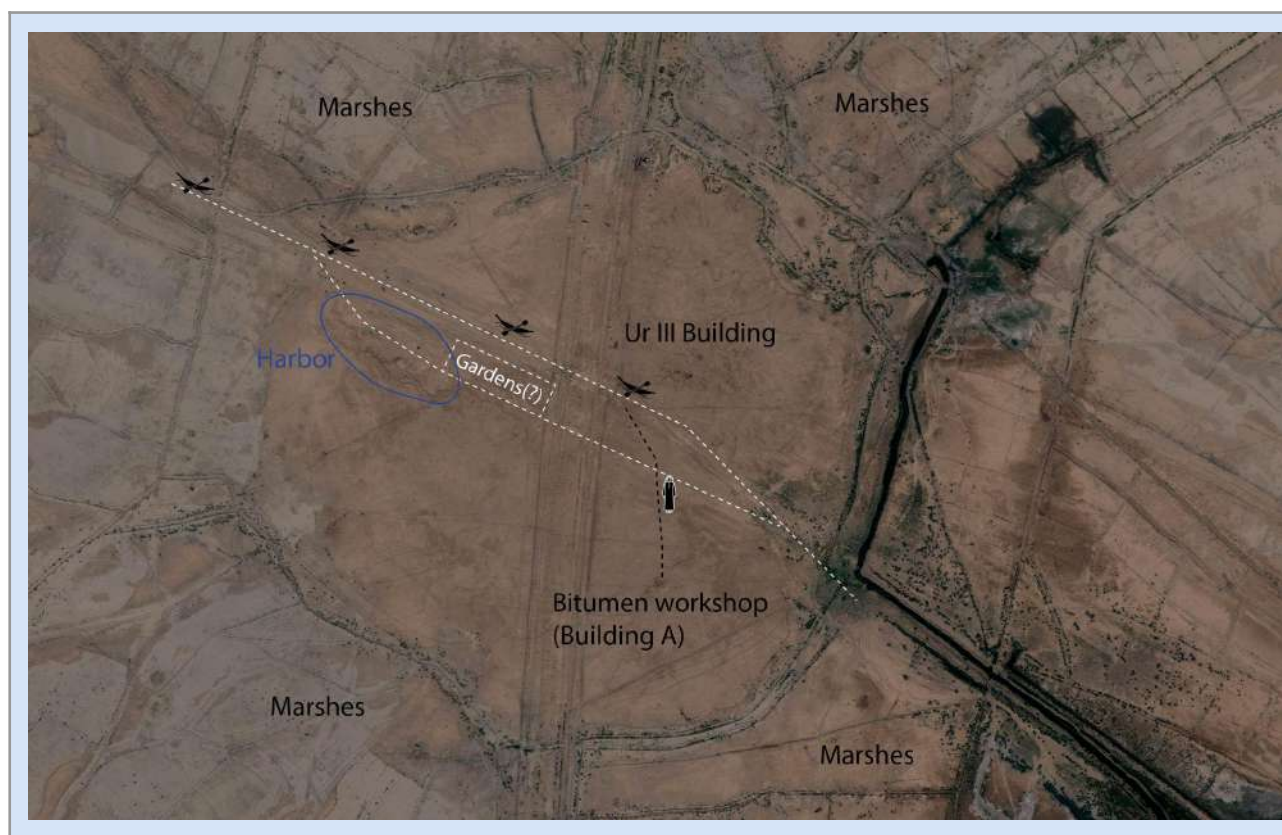


Fig. 1. The imaginative path followed by Abdulameer with his boat

“Abdulameer arrives on the boat led by Lu<sub>2</sub>-Baba few minutes before the sunset. The small hill of Abu Tbeirah appears between the high reeds framing the river surrounded by marshes. The water of the shallow canal flows slowly, and Lu<sub>2</sub>-Baba pushes rhythmically the small boat, complaining of the dull pain the movement causes in his right shoulder. The small port of Abu Tbeirah appears on the right, it is a quiet lake surrounded by the massive work of bricks and soil made by the inhabitants. The last flood, few weeks ago, eroded part of the southern rampart and five men are repairing the sloping surface of the structure: one of them, with half the legs in the water, is lifting a basket full of the dark soil covering the bottom of the artificial lake; the others, completely covered in mud, are filling the eroded section with new soil. A boat, overloaded with reed mats, precedes Abdulameer's one and turns right, entering the basin, directed to the raised dock where a team of four young guys is waiting to release the boat from its load. Two girls, with long hairs collected in a chignon, are washing some clothes, splashing water and casting each other amused glances. Lu<sub>2</sub>-Baba expertly guides the boat toward the highest and ancient part of the city, leaving the sunset

behind. Past the port, the air becomes full of scents, fruit and flowers from the orchards cultivated inside the city. Lu<sub>2</sub>-Baba's boat approaches the southern levee of the canal and Abdulameer steps from the boat, trying to avoid the trash and the fragments of once useful vessels that have been thrown there probably by the elderly, 43 years old matron of the nearby household. The crowded city, made of small houses in mud and mudbricks separated by narrow streets, is enjoying the relief of a finally ending day, with the temperature lowering together with the sun. The roofs of the houses are mainly flat, some of them with a light cover. Smokes from the tannurs rise toward the sky in correspondence of the houses inner courtyards: the smell indicates that somebody, clearly endowed with a good palate, is cooking a ray fish with dates, a recipe that Abdulameer often enjoyed in his grandma house. In a nearby block, the culinary experiment of a family is not going well: flames are coming out high in the street that is starting to be filled by a dense smoke. Shouting people are trying to put out the fire with water, in the hope of saving the newly realized entrance to the house made with reed-bundles. Walking along the street, Abdulameer arrives to a kind of square, a wider space among the buildings. Here two women are seated under the shade of a canopy, one is breastfeeding while helping the other weaving a reed basket. The woman holds the basket on her legs, intertwines the vegetal fibres using both hands and pulls them with her teeth. A fisherman accompanied by his child is selling to the passers-by the results of a day of work in the middle of the marsh: two rings of fishes are held by the child with curly hair and a heap of tasty shells is laid over a small piece of reed mat waiting for a buyer. Few meter along the street, the city becomes less dense. In the distance an area is visible, perhaps once inhabited, but now covered with the mud sediment of the last flood. A man is slowly walking towards some ruins, still standing walls in the middle of nowhere, pertaining to what was probably a house. He is carrying a bulky bag, containing pieces of broken objects in bitumen: sheltered by the walls, he will melt them again and will bring back to his house the renewed black bitumen, stored in a chipped tall clay beaker. The sun now is set, and dogs are barking in the dark: perhaps a wild boar is getting too close to the town. A group of people is mourning near a heap of soil, the remains of a funerary feast with food and drinks left near by. Abdulameer now turns toward north, towards the other side of the river, looking at the lights of the huge fabric built in bricks by the king Amar-Sin. The view is now less clear: an improvise fog is rising from the water of the river, or maybe it is the dream fading down".

## 2. Abu Tbeirah and the Marshes from the Geological and Geoarchaeological Point of View

The geoarchaeological research carried out during the last years allow us to reconstruct Abu Tbeirah as a settlement created over a crevasse splay in the marshes environment characterizing Sumer in the third millennium BCE. The presence in the area of marshes was verified through the realization of boreholes, whose stratigraphy has been recently published (Forti et al., 2022). From Corona satellite imagery it is indeed clear that the area was crossed by an ancient channel that generated several crevasse splays southwards. The inhabitant chose for settling a slightly emerging area of soil, created by the accumulation of sediment by this natural channel in the northern part, the area subjected to the accumulation of soil. This area corresponds to the NE part of the site, the highest one, reaching a maximum of 4 m over the surrounding countryside. After the first settlement was established, the city grew up enlarging also south of the channel, englobing the watercourse into the urban area. If we compare this settlement choice with that attested for bigger and long lasting sites, created over the so-called turtlebacks (Pournelle, 2003a, 2003b), the short life of Abu Tbeirah is fully justified due to its environmental vulnerability. The settlement was indeed more subjected to flooding events, especially on the part south of the canal, the area in which the crevasse splays originally developed. Abu Tbeirah's inhabitants were able to adapt and modify all the fluvial resources they had at their disposal: they maintained the channel and a secondary water course, probably also in this case a natural one, artificially modifying their levees; a relict bent of the river or an oxbow lake in the north-west part of the river was used to create an artificial basin, surrounded by a rampart (Fig. 2). The basin was probably multifunctional, used as a water reservoir, a harbour and part of a mechanism potentially useful in the management of floods (Romano – D'Agostino, 2018; Forti et al., 2022). This way of managing water was not a characteristic only of Abu Tbeirah's site. Indeed, this system of (at least) two channels and a basin can be found in other sites, testifying the hydraulic engineering abilities of Sumerians, able to exploit, modify and adapt natural resources, on the basis of the imitation of natural phenomena. The system of two canals can indeed be considered an imitation of the chute-off of a channel, producing a natural subdivision in two streams of the flowing water; reusing a natural characteristic, e.g. a river bent or an oxbow lake, or

adding ex-novo a basin, allows to redistribute and control a larger amount of water during floods. A extremely similar system, with a distinction in primary and secondary canals and multifunctional basin, is documented for the Ma'adain (Rost et al., 2011, pp. 209, 214).

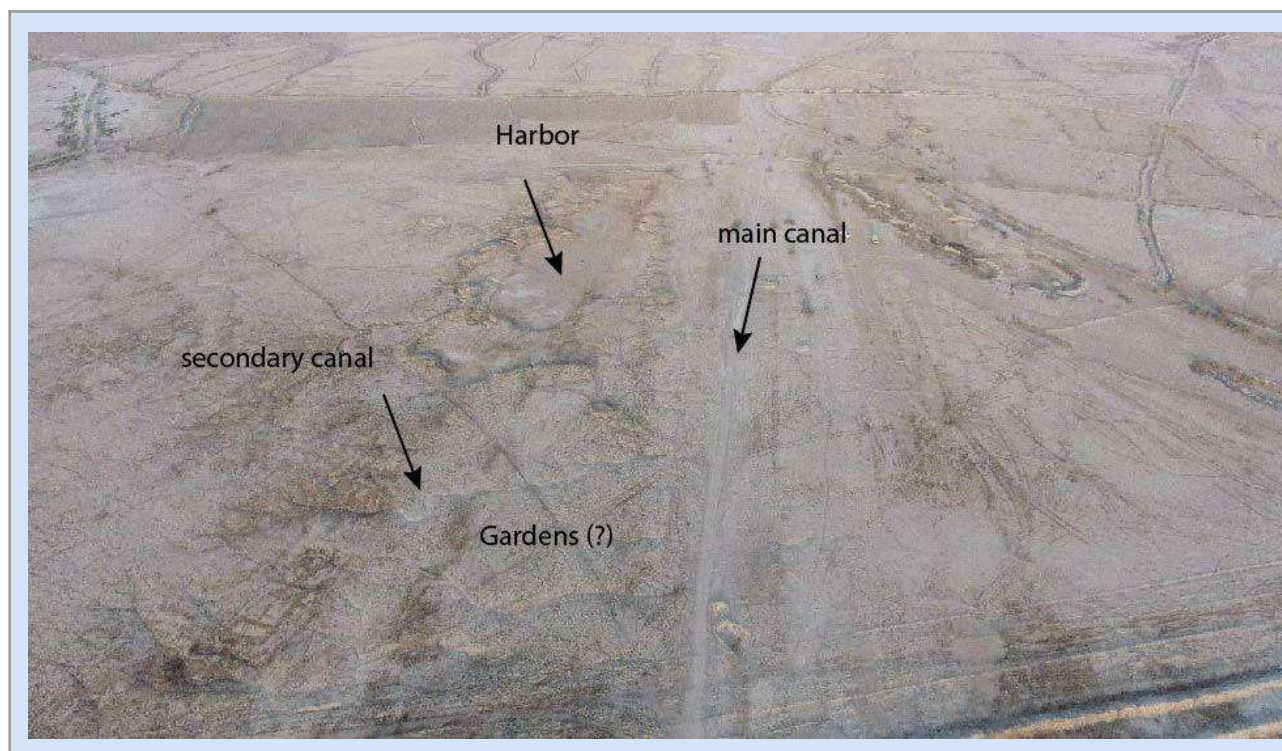


Fig. 2. Aerial view of Abu Tbeirah's port with indication of the different part

The rampart surrounding the basin was realized with oblique clay strata, deposited with a skeleton of mudbricks set in a herringbone pattern (Romano – D'Agostino, 2018). Beyond the rampart, the inhabitants realized also a sort of platform in the western part of the basin functional at overcoming the difference in elevation between this part of the area and that of the raised dock, located in the eastern part of the port. Several reparation activities were realized in order to maintain the structure, as it seems evident from the peculiar stratification highlighted, with literally patches of clay added to the main nucleus (Romano – D'Agostino, 2018). The soil used is very dark and greyish, higher in organic content, apparently extremely different from the usual colours of Abu Tbeirah's terrain. This characteristic seems to suggest that the clay for the reparation activities was gathered in place, directly from the basin, maybe during the dredging of the port. Further analyses are however necessary to confirm or dismiss this hypothesis.

The two channels inside the city, artificially modified and maintained, show clear evidence of anthropic activities. The main channel was indeed reduced and the levee probably remodelled. The secondary one has on its bottom and on its levees an accumulation of pottery fragments and organic materials, showing that the levee was used as dumps by the nearby housing area (Romano – D'Agostino, 2018).

Furthermore, the area between the two canals, immediately east of the port, is characterized by the presence instead of a continuous levee of a sort of dashed line, visible from above, that seems to indicate a kind of communication between the two watercourses. In the narration at the beginning, we imagined the presence of an orchard or a garden (Greco, 2015), tentatively hypothesizing that the interruptions of the canal levees might have been a kind of regulators for an irrigation system, similar to that used by the Ma'adain and described by Abdulameer (Rost et al., 2011, pp. 204–205). Interesting in these regards is also the recent contribution joining satellite imagery and ground survey data (Jotheri et al., 2022).

Moving from the waters inside the settlement to the surrounding area, satellite imagery reveals a reticulate of small channels, most likely formed by crevasse splay processes and potentially exploited as natural communication routes within the marshy environment, as previously suggested by Jotheri et al. (2019). Field investigations have confirmed the presence of crevasse splays in the area. However, the precise nature and chronology of these smaller channels—documented in the stratigraphic sequence of a section excavated during the 2019 campaign—remain to be fully established. At present, no clear evidence supports their artificial construction.

### 3. Archaeological Findings (Biofacts and Artefacts) Connected to the Marshes

The discoveries made through the geoarchaeological research find a clear verification also on the archaeozoological and archaeobotanical findings discovered during the excavations. Part of our research focused indeed on the frequent recovery of reeds: beyond the archaeobotanical analyses we also performed experimental replicas of objects found in the excavations (Montorfani, 2019; Romano et al., 2021b). In a land so poor of wooden resources reeds were indeed a fundamental resource for Sumerian inhabitants. At Abu Tbeirah, reeds were used to produce mats and baskets (Fig. 3), that we found both in domestic contexts and graves. Reeds were joined together forming bundles that were used as structural material in house building, in a way that clearly remembers the dwellings made by the Ma'adain. Inside Building A we discovered a room with a peculiar long oven that was covered by a reed structure sustained by reed-bundle and poles made of palm three. The impressions of this structure were found very well preserved on the soil because this room of the building was destroyed by fire (Romano, 2019, p. 85; Romano and al-Hosseini, 2019, pp. 250–252). In the narrative reported above, the episode that led to the destruction of the room is described as we imagined it.

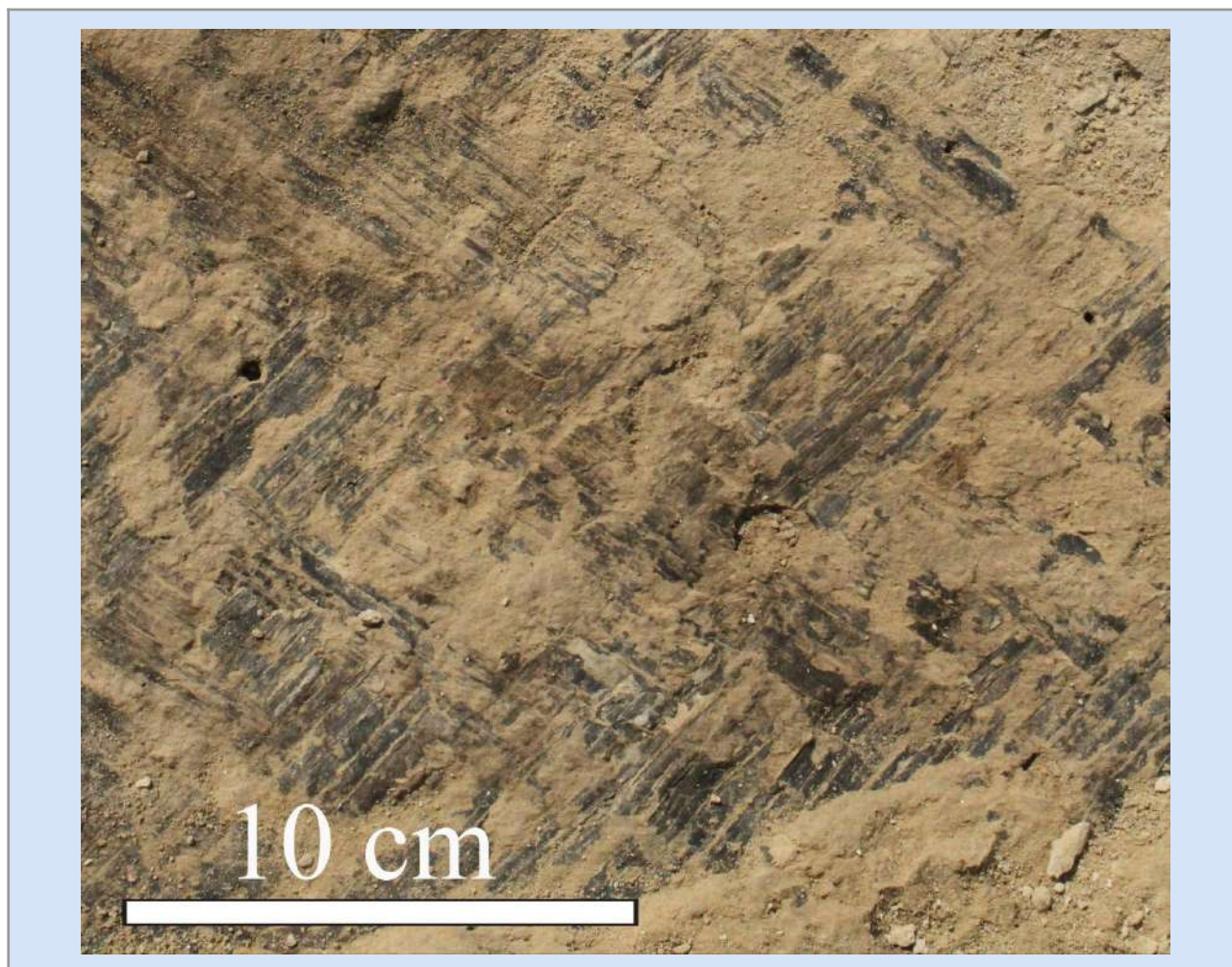


Fig. 3 Reed-mat found on the floor of Room 1, Building A.

Reeds were not considered as disposable: crushed reeds were used as temper in the realization of pottery vessels or mixed to bitumen in order to lower its melting temperature. The realization of objects in reeds was a common craft and plausibly all the households had members that were able to weave baskets, as seems also to demonstrate the use wear found on the teeth of some individuals from Abu Tbeirah's graves (Tafari, 2019, p. 402). Beyond the reed craft also other activities connected to the Marshes environment might however led to this kind of use wear: the mouth is indeed commonly used as a third hand also for the preparation of the fishing tools, such as lines and nets.

In the contemporary Marshes, reed harvesting and the production of woven artefacts are activities primarily undertaken by women living in the Ahwar; for this reason, we chose to reconstruct the two women encountered by Abdulameer in this way. Unfortunately these skills are disappearing as a results of the impact of the drainage of the marsh environment (Al-mudaffar fawzi et al., 2016)<sup>3</sup>. Further discoveries in our anthropological record might have been the results of a life in the Marshes. Two skeletons found in a multiple grave showed indeed the presence of a peculiar characteristic, the septal aperture of the olecranon "a feature that is normally considered of epigenetic nature, or associated with intense activity-related biomechanical stress" (Tafari, 2019, p. 395). In the fictional chapter at the beginning, Lu<sub>2</sub>-Baba laments for the pain at his shoulder due to the intense work as a shipman: we wonder if his activity was so intense to cause a septal aperture of the olecranon or if this is just our fantasy.

The archaeozoological record testify a huge variety of species both from sweet and salty water, a frequency well connected with the supposed marshy environment and the proximity to the coast, with the sea water mixing with the deltas and penetrating inland thanks also to tidal movements (Alhaique, 2019, p. 201; Alhaique et al., 2021, 2021a; Caleca et al., 2018). The presence of ray bones inside a tannur, combined with a suggestion by Shirin Khalatbari, archaeologist taking part to one of our campaign, and supported by ethnographic and regional culinary parallels, led us to hypothesize the preparation of a dish combining ray and dates (cf. Alhaique 2016), attested in various forms across the Gulf area. Sumerian use to carry fish hanging in circle from the hand, as visible in several votive plaques from the Early Dynastic, a practice still present in Nasiriyah, as we see everyday at the corner of a street we cross going to the excavation (Fig. 4). This is why the young curly hair guy has been described in his activity in such a way ("curly" hair being a poetical license).

Both marine and freshwater shells are frequent in our record (Alhaique et al., 2021a, 2021; Caleca et al., 2018). The diffusion in the domestic context reveals that they were part of the everyday diet. At the same time the recovery of heaps of shells in correspondence of one grave indicates they were also consumed in relation to the funerary practices (Alhaique et al., 2021a; Romano and al-Hosseini, 2019, pp. 277–280), as the group mourning after a banquet in our short tale suggests. Banqueting was indeed part of the funerary practices of Early Dynastic Mesopotamia as evident from cuneiform sources and from archaeological data (Romano, 2015). The use of shells as cosmetic containers is also attested, as demonstrated by Grave 12, a female sub-pavimental burial discovered under the pavement of Abu Tbeirah phase 1 (Romano and al-Hosseini, 2019, pp. 206–207).

Wild boar, quite widespread in the Marshes, are instead almost absent from our record. The only finds are connected to a burial (Grave 16) from Area 1, where some bones of a 30 months old boar were recovered, and to a dump pit cut by the same graves. According to Francesca Alhaique: "The discovery of *Sus scrofa* in Grave 16 may be related to the characteristics of the deceased who was an adult robust male, possibly hinting at its hunting abilities" (Alhaique, 2019, p. 435). This apparent discrepancy between the environmental availability of wild boar and its minimal archaeological representation may be related to a combination of factors, including selective hunting practices, cultural or dietary preferences, or taphonomic biases affecting the preservation and recovery of remains.

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth citing here ther activity of the NGOs Mashufna and Un Ponte Per, which have realized a workshop inside the frame of a project in the Museum of Nasiriyah for the development of women entrepreneurship, where groups of women from the Marshes weave reed objects to be sold to the visitors of the museum.

The last aspect related to the life in the Marshes is surely the widespread use of bitumen, imported from the nearby sources by boat, one of the few natural resources largely available in Sumer and in the contemporary Marshes and used in a variety of way (Stol, 2012). The discovery at Abu Tbeirah of a bitumen workshop inside an abandoned building (Cereda, 2019; Romano, 2019, pp. 85–86) inspired a part of the tale. The available evidence suggests that bitumen processing in this context was carried out on a small scale, likely connected to local, household-level activities such as waterproofing and maintenance (see Festa et al. 2025; Caruso et al. 2026; Greco et al. in prep.).

#### 4. Conclusions

Offering a contribution in memory and honour of a great friend is always a strong emotion and we tried to pay tribute to him with something different from the usual, something which should hint to his family tradition and at the same time to his profound knowledge of the world that became his field of study. Abdulameer opened a new path in the archaeological research of Southern Mesopotamia and all the foreign archaeologists digging in Iraq are in deep debt with him. This debt can be only partially repaired continuing our work, shedding light on the peculiar and inventive way, that the Mesopotamians developed in the long millennia of their historical parabola and is still used today by the contemporary inhabitants, of coping with, and exploiting, the natural environment.

#### Captions

Fig. 1. The imaginative path followed by Abdulameer with his boat

Fig. 2. Aerial view of Abu Tbeirah's port with indication of the different part

Fig. 3 Reed-mat found on the floor of Room 1, Building A.

Fig. 4. a. Detail of a Sumerian votive plaque; b. people selling fishes at Nasiriyah

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# أبو طيرة والأهوار: تخیل الحياة اليومية في الأهوار خلال الألف الثالث قبل الميلاد

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## الملخص

كما أكد علماء الآثار والإثنوغرافيا سابقاً، هناك ارتباط وثيق بين طبيعة الحياة في بلاد سومر خلال الألف الثالث قبل الميلاد، وبين التقاليد الإثنوغرافية لـ "الأهواريين" الذين لا يزالون يقطنون منطقة الأحوار في جنوب العراق. ويشكل هذا الاستمرار الفريد والترابط التاريخي الأساس الذي اعتمدت عليه منظمة اليونسكو لإدراج مدن أور، والوركاء، وإريدو، إلى جانب مناطق الأهوار، كإرث مختلط (ثقافي وطبيعي) ضمن قائمة التراث العالمي.

تساهم التنقيبات الأخيرة في موقع "أبو طيرة" الأثري، الواقع بالقرب من مدينة الناصرية، في إثراء معرفتنا وتعميق فهمنا لجوانب هذا الامتداد التاريخي الطويل. وتأتي هذه الإضافات مدعومة ببيانات ومكتشفات حديثة تم التوصل إليها وفق منهجية علمية متطورة. وبناءً على ذلك، يستعرض هذا البحث البيئة الطبيعية القديمة للموقع، ونظام إدارة المياه داخل الموقع، بالإضافة إلى دراسة الحياة الحيوانية والنباتية وطرق استغلالها، وصولاً إلى تحليل الثقافة المادية للموقع.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الأراضي الرطبة؛ سومر؛ رواية القصص؛ إدارة المياه؛ الري



The Isin journal dedicated a special issue to honour Abdulmir Al-Hamdani (1967–2022), recognising his significant contributions to preserving and promoting Iraqi heritage.

Dr. Abdulmir Al-Hamdani, who died on April 29, 2022, in Nasiriyah, Iraq, at age 55, was among the most influential Iraqi archaeologists of his generation. His life's work was deeply intertwined with Iraqi archaeology—so much so that he named one of his sons 'Uruk'. His commitment to the field ultimately led to his role as Minister of Culture. His passion for Iraqi art and culture, together with his accomplishments, motivated many Iraqi archaeologists and local communities to actively protect Iraq's vulnerable cultural heritage. More about his life and work can be found here: Jotheri, J., & Lawrence, D. (2022). OBITUARY ABDULMIR AL-HAMDANI (1967–2022). *Iraq*, 84, 3–5. <https://doi.org/10.1017/irq.2022.14>

تم تخصيص هذا العدد من مجلة ايسن للآثار والتاريخ واللغات القديمة احياء لذكرى الدكتور عبد الأمير الحمداني (1967–2022)، تقديرًا لمساهمته البارزة في التعرف بالتراث العراقي والحفاظ عليه.

كان الدكتور عبد الأمير الحمداني، الذي توفي في 29 نيسان/أبريل 2022 في مدينة الناصرية بالعراق عن عمر ناهز 55 عاماً، من بين أكثر علماء الآثار العراقيين تأثيراً في جيله. وكان مولعاً وشغوفاً بآثار العراق وتراثه لدرجة أنه سمى أحد أبنائه "أوروك" مما أدى في نهاية المطاف إلى توليه منصب وزير الثقافة والسياحة والآثار. يمكن قراءة المزيد حول حياته وعمله في هذا التعزية المنشورة في مجلة عراق التي تصدر عن دار نشر جامعة كامبردج:

Jotheri, J., & Lawrence, D. (2022). OBITUARY ABDULMIR AL-HAMDANI (1967–2022). *Iraq*, 84, 3–5. <https://doi.org/10.1017/irq.2022.14>