
**ABU TBEIRAH, NASIRIYAH (SOUTHERN IRAQ).
PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE 2013 EXCAVATION CAMPAIGN**

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ABSTRACT

In this paper the results of the third excavation campaign in Fall 2013 at Abu Tbeirah, Nasiriyah (Southern Iraq), a site whose remains can be chronologically ascribed so far to the second half of 3rd Millennium BC, are presented. The archeological activities in the South-Eastern and North-Eastern sectors of the tell are shown, with the aim of shedding a new light on the life of a big Sumerian city located only 16 km East from the great ancient site of Ur.

RIASSUNTO

In questo lavoro sono presentati i risultati della terza campagna di scavo dell'autunno 2013 ad Abu Tbeirah, Nasiriyah (Iraq meridionale), un sito i cui ritrovamenti possono essere attribuiti cronologicamente alla seconda metà del 3° millennio a.C. Sono presentate le attività archeologiche nel settore sud-orientale e nord-orientale del tell, che possono gettare una nuova luce sulla vita di una grande città sumera situata a soli 16 km a est del grande sito di Ur (Tell al-Muqayyar).

KEYWORDS

Southern Iraq, Southern Mesopotamia, Abu Tbeirah, Early Dynastic, Akkad.

PAROLE CHIAVE

Iraq meridionale, Mesopotamia meridionale, Abu Tbeirah, Proto-dinastico, Accadico.

0. Foreword

Since five years now we are active, with our archaeological mission at Abu Tbeirah, in southern Iraq, in an area that has not seen for many decades archaeological and scientific activities; we proudly recall here that we were the first to come back and resume these activities in the south after the fall of the former regime. Participate in the rebirth, complex and contradictory, yet unstoppable and certain, of this wonderful country is a historical task that we experience in all its complexity and importance and which we consider at the same time an exceptional honor. Being an archaeologist working in the Middle East today, in the post-colonial period, is a unique and extraordinary adventure: share the road, rather than showing it, and co-participate in the work more than directing it are our political, ideological and moral tenets, operating in our daily activity and deeply felt by us. We dedicate these pages to Mario Liverani, who has instead lived the era of the colonial archaeology and orientalism, as he himself often recalls, certain that he will appreciate what we are doing in the Middle East today. We hope that he will consider our activity as an ideal continuation of his own scientific work, in different ways, but with his own purposes and –but maybe it's too much to hope– his own exceptional results.

1. Introduction

Abu Tbeirah is an Early Dynastic site located 16 km NE from Ur and 6 km south of Nasiriyah.² Since now three excavation campaigns have been carried out and three are the areas so far excavated.³ Most of the activities of the Mission have been focused on the

¹ §1 and §4 are common work of the three authors; D'Agostino is the author of §2.1 and §3.1, Romano of §2, §2.2 and §3.2.

² On the premises of the project see D'Agostino - Romano 2014.

³ The results of the first and the second campaigns have been published in *Rivista di Studi Orientali*, s. D'Agostino - Romano *et alii* 2011; 2013; 2014.

south-eastern area (Area 1), where through the satellite imagery it was possible to highlight a huge building under the surface.⁴ Here, the salty crust has been removed for an area of 750 sqm, highlighting also in this case several graves immediately under the surface, belonging to the last phase of occupation of the area. The walls of the big building detected through the satellite images were probably only partially visible when the graves were excavated as demonstrated by the fact that some of them cut the preexisting structure. The second area (Area 2) excavated is located in the NE and has been chosen, in agreement with the local SBAH authorities, because of the discovery of equipment of several graves eroding out from the surface. The excavations revealed a complex system of pits and drainages and at least three graves belonging to the last phase of occupation of this part of the site and dated to the Akkadian period on the basis of the pottery. A stratigraphic trench (Trench 3) has been excavated using one of the old army pits of the Saddam Hussein period: the pottery since now discovered spans from the Akkadian (perhaps Ur III) period to the ED III.

The following paper covers the activities of the last excavation campaign at Abu Tbeirah during the Autumn 2013, focused in particular on the Areas 1 and 2.

2. Area 1 – Results of the 2013 Campaign

2.1. The Cemetery (Fig. 1)

The three inhumations brought to light during the third campaign of this year rise the total number of graves so far discovered to seven.

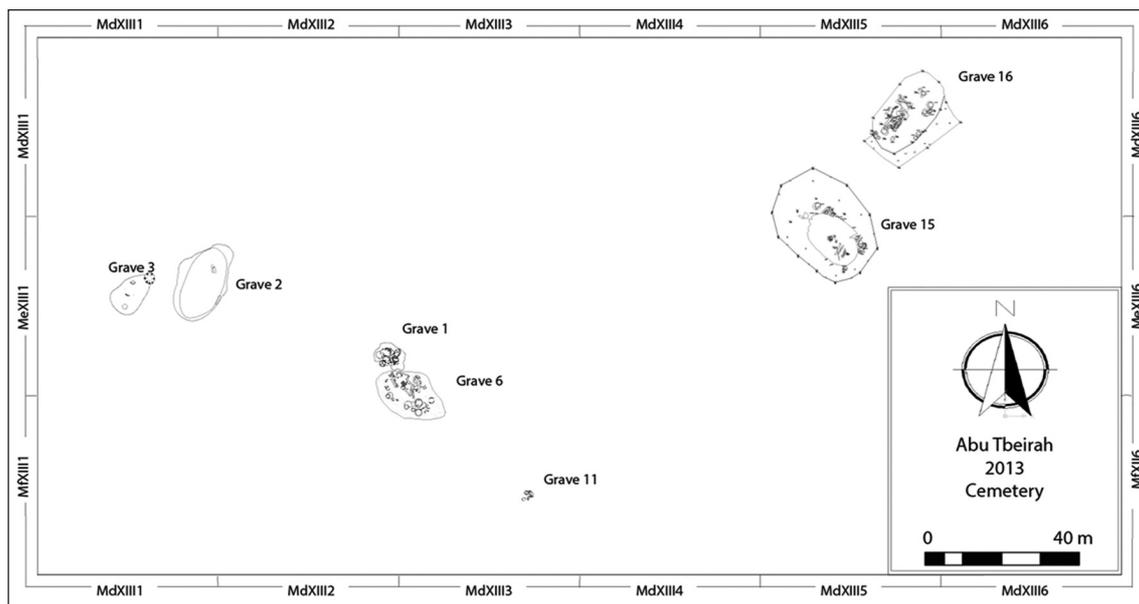


Fig. 1. Area 1. Cemetery.

A simple pit (Grave 11) hosts the body of an infant of perinatal age. The child was deposited in fetal position with the head towards west and looking south. No grave goods were buried with the body (Fig. 2).

⁴ We are pleased to acknowledge here the generosity of our Colleague E. Stone, Stony Brook University, who with great liberality made us available the satellite imagery of the area in her possession.



Fig. 2. Area 1. Cemetery. Grave 11.

Grave 15 (Fig. 3) is an inhumation in a pottery sarcophagus, robbed and partially destroyed in antiquity, but preserving part of the lid still in place. Only the bent legs of an adult individual (of whom it was impossible to determine the sex) were preserved, though in extremely bad conditions, probably due to the weight of the collapsed sarcophagus lid itself on the bones. The coffin was positioned north-west to south-east, partially destroyed by ancient looters on its northwest half, as said above, where the lid is missing and lost. The pottery equipment surrounding the sarcophagus was preserved only on its north-east and south-east sides: it consisted of 8 bowls, 3 beakers and 7 jars (Fig. 4). The faunal sample includes a total of 48 items, but it is poorly preserved and very fragmented so that over 58% of the bones resulted to be completely unidentifiable. This is not the only sarcophagus of the cemetery: another one (Grave 2) was completely destroyed by ancient looters while other two have been identified in the same area but not yet excavated.⁵



Fig. 3. Area 1. Cemetery. Grave 15.



Fig. 4. Area 1. Cemetery. Equipment of Grave 15.

⁵ See D'Agostino - Romano *et alii* 2011: 27-28.

Grave 16 (Fig. 5) has been only partially excavated during the last season due to the bad weather conditions that did forced us to stop the excavation. The adult male found inside the burial was accompanied by a rich pottery equipment, though apparently partially destroyed by subsequent anthropic activities. The body of the man was deposited with the head towards south-west and looking north-west; the right arm was bent over the chest with the hand over the left arm laying along the body; the legs were bent towards north. The pottery equipment has been found in part destroyed inside the pit cutting the grave, and partially preserved around the body (but at a lower elevation) (Fig. 6). The next excavation campaign will clarify better the context and will allow us to understand the post-depositional activities that surely affected the grave.



Fig. 5. Area 1. Cemetery. Grave 16.



Fig. 6. Area 1. Cemetery. Equipment of Grave 16.

2.2. Building A (Fig. 7)

Most of the graves of the cemetery cut the pre-existing structure briefly described in § 1 (see above) or are oriented following its walls. The building (Building A) is a mud-brick structure made up by several rooms arranged around a big court of ca. 80 sqm. A row of rooms runs parallel to the court on the south-west and at least other four perpendicular rooms lay on the east side. Deep rainfall gullies run on the N-E corner of the building, eroding the upper part of the structure that is now hardly visible immediately under the salt crust. The excavation of the building led to the identification of two phases of use, distinguished by a different internal circulation pattern and by the use of two distinguishable pavements.



Fig. 7. Area 1. Building A (general view).

The first phase of Building A has been investigated in 6 rooms (Fig. 8). Only one line of mud-bricks was preserved, though heavily eroded: just 30 cm of soil separated the upper part of the wall from the superficial salt crust. The dimensions of the dark yellowish brown mud-brick seem to have been of 30/35 cm × 15/17 cm, although the measuring were not accurate due to the bad state of preservation of the bricks themselves. The walls were erected over pre-existing structures, using a strata of clay to uniform and stabilize the base of the new walls.

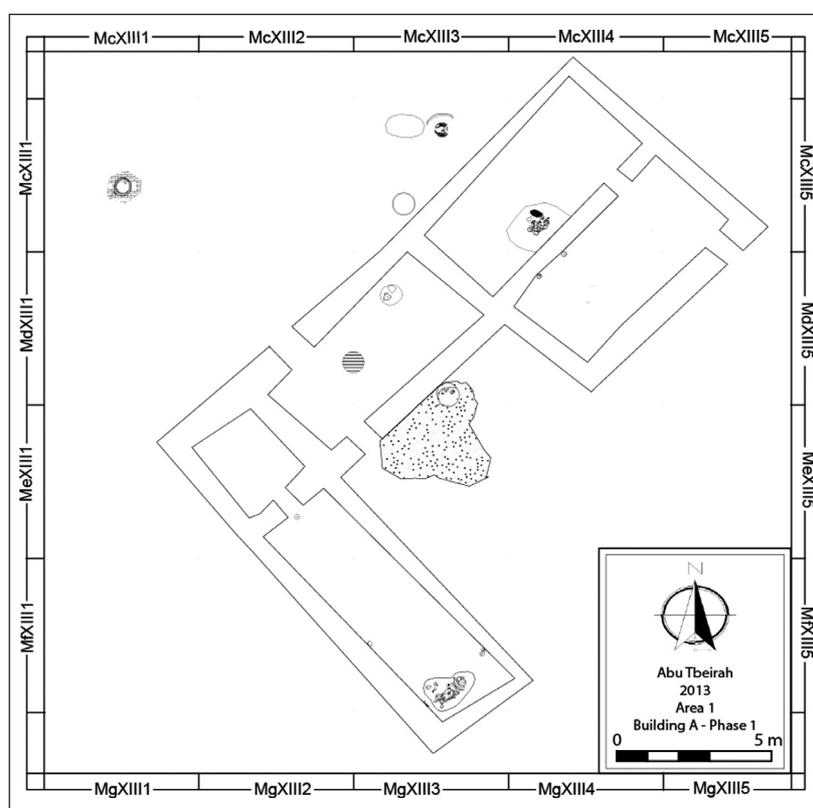


Fig. 8. Area 1. Building A (first phase).

The second phase of the building (Fig. 9) has been, instead, investigated in Room 1, Room 3 and Room 4. 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 was present. The construction technique foresaw the utilization of dark yellowish brown mud-bricks, of ca. 30×15×15 cm (the dimensions of the mud-bricks were, however, irregular also in the same wall). The adobes were put in rows, with alternation of two stretchers and one header, while clay was used as mortar.

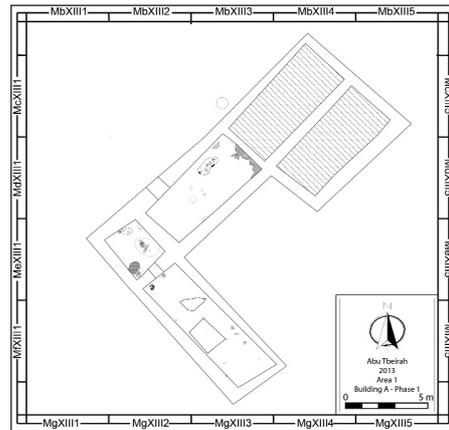


Fig. 9. Area 1. Building A (second phase).

The activities of this year have been focused on three rooms surrounding the central court, one on the S-W (Room 4) and other two on the N-E, and in the area immediately outside the building on the N-W, where during the first season a big grave has been partially excavated.

Inside room 4 the first phase was signaled by the presence of 5 so-called “Foundation Bowls”⁶ (Fig. 10). Under the pavement a grave (Grave 12) of a female adult of 20-30 years has been discovered (Fig. 11). Its equipment was made up of several stone pestles⁷, a fragment of an alabaster vessel⁸ and a bivalve shell⁹ with cosmetic paste inside a small reed basket near the left hip of the woman. The pottery assemblage deposited near the body consisted of 3 beakers, 8 conical bowls, fragments of a stemmed dish, a small jar with globular body and a spouted jar.



Fig. 10. Area 1. Building A. Room 4, phase 1, foundation bowls and beakers.

⁶ The beakers and bowls were located along the SW wall (in the central part and southern part), along the NE wall (in its southern part) and the NW wall.

⁷ AbT.13.19, 36, 38, 44.

⁸ AbT.13.37.

⁹ AbT.13.39 - UnioTigridis.



Fig. 11. Area 1. Building A. Room 4, phase 1, Sub-pavimental Grave 12.

In the second phase of Room 4 the pavement was realized with clay and fragments of mud-bricks. Also in this case some conical bowls have been discovered along the walls. Near the door towards room 3 two reed baskets have been found still in place (Fig. 12): the westernmost was rectangular and the easternmost circular with a superimposed horizontal band toward east (probably the flattened handle).



Fig. 12. Area 1. Building A. Room 4, phase 2, two reed corbs near the door towards room 2.

The pavement was partially dismantled in the middle of the room, showing pre-existing structures under it, apparently delimiting at least two rooms filled by pure sand. Fragments of plano-convex mud-bricks have been found in the debris of the building.

Room 5 was probably exposed for a longer period to water erosion or was damaged in a worse way due to the passage over it of a gully created by the rainfall. Over the pavement an alabaster vase and a limestone one¹⁰ have been discovered in pieces spread

¹⁰ AbT.13.74 and 75.

all over the room (Fig. 13). Under the pavement a grave of a child of ca. 6 years old has been discovered (Grave 14 - Fig. 14), completely covered by pure clay. His equipment consisted of a jar, two beakers and two conical bowls. Remains of a reed-mat have been discovered near the body.



Fig. 13. Area 1. Building A. Room 5, phase 1, limestone and alabaster vessels (AbT.13.74-75).



Fig. 14. Area 1. Building A. Room 5, phase 1, Sub-pavimental Grave 14.

Room 6 first phase ground-surface was in bad condition like the one in Room 5 and only two foundation bowls have been found along the N-W wall.

Outside the building, a big jar decorated with wavy incisions has been recovered in association with a Tannur. In its vicinity, a big pit (containing Grave 4-5-13) (Fig. 15) has been found¹¹ with three different inhumation of one subadult and two children. At least 261 drinking vessels in fragments have been discovered in the three graves (more than 200 only in Grave 5) and clearly related to the funerary banquet. The grave, a deep rectangular cut, was probably reopened at least for the deposition of the body of Grave 13. The body of the child inside Grave 13 was preserved only in its lower part¹² and was accompanied by a bowl and a big jar as equipment, while other vessels in fragments were discarded in the filling over the body. The body of Grave 5 instead was deposited (perhaps seated?) in a strange unnatural position and then the weight of the soil deformed and displaced part of the bones. The anthropological study of child's body during the next campaign will give

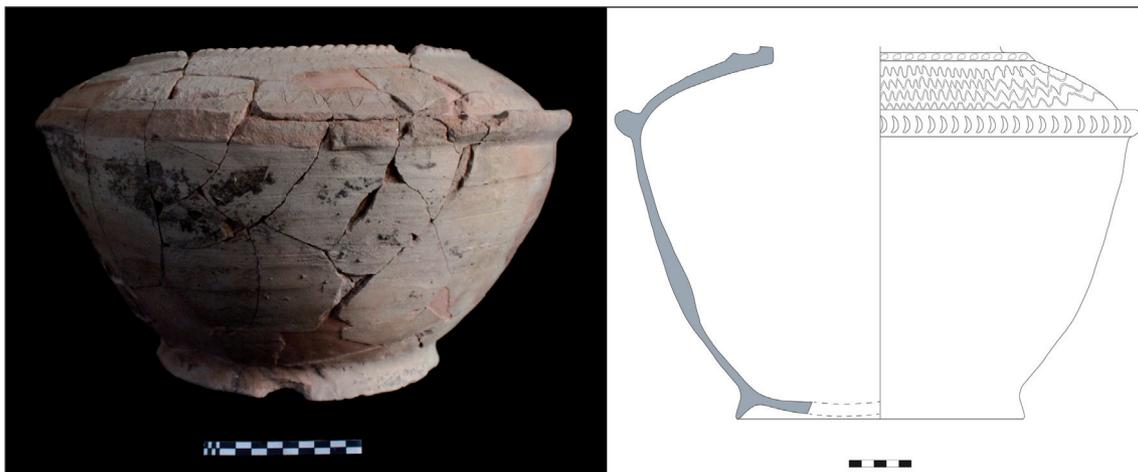


Fig. 15. Area 1. Building A. Courtyard, phase 1, jar.

¹¹ This burial has been partially excavated during the first excavation season (in Winter 2012 - see D'Agostino - Romano *et alii* 2011: 29-30).

¹² No trace of later pit that could have destroyed the grave have been detected on the spot. we wonder if it is another case of secondary inhumation like in grave 3 (D'Agostino - Romano *et alii* 2011: 28).

us more detailed information. Nevertheless it is worth noting the difference in the quantity of the grave goods of the young deceased deposited in the same grave.

Another interesting characteristic of this multiple burial is the presence of a heap of soil over it covered by numerous shells and drinking vessels fragments.

3. Area 2. Results of the 2013 Excavation Campaign

During the 2013 campaign we decided to continue the excavation in Area 2 in order to better clarify the context of Grave 100¹³ and to confirm the dating of the last phases of the area documented by the survey made in 2012 by M. Vidale.¹⁴ An L shaped area of 250 sqm has been scraped revealing also in this cases several anthropic activities of the last phase of life of Abu Tbeirah settlement. This part of the site suffered moreover of strong erosion: two quite deep gullies covered by salt incrustations and filled by seasonal deposits run in the Northern and Southern part of the excavated area, going toward East and South-East in direction of the canal now running along the East border of the site.

3.1. Last Activities on the Area (Fig. 16)

Also in Area 2 the last activities were mainly connected to the burials of the latter Abu Tbeirah inhabitants. Among the other anthropic activities identified in Area 2, a drain pipe has been discovered in the middle of the excavated area. The drainage was cut by other subsequent activities and among them a pit clearly distinguishes itself not only for the pottery recovered inside (in particular a boat clay model¹⁵ and a jar with a stylized bull-head depicted on it) but also for the discovery of a complete skeleton of a dog. Probably the pit represents a grave destroyed by later activities on the spot or by the flowing of the water through the near drainpipe.

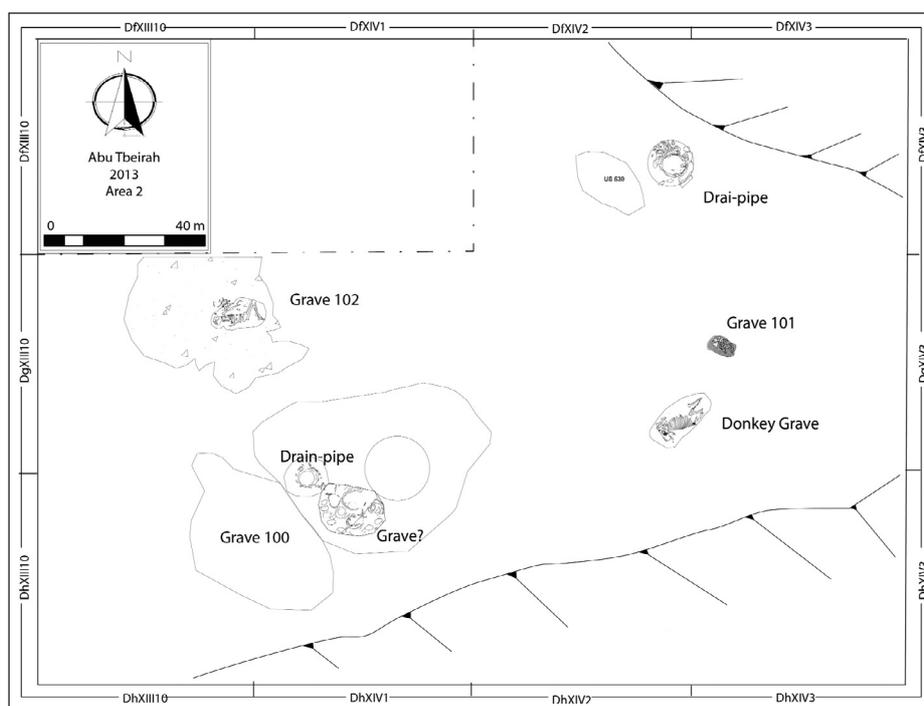


Fig. 16. Area 2. Cemetery.

¹³ Previously named Grave 1 N-E. Graves coming from Area 1 will be numbered from 1 to 99, while grave from Area 2 from 100 to 199.

¹⁴ A specific report on the 2012 survey is in preparation by L. Romano.

¹⁵ AbT.13.18.

Grave 101 contains the inhumation of a ca. 2 years old child, buried inside a reed cradle with a unique jar (Fig. 17). This procedure of burying a child in his cradle is still in use among the Ma'dan of the Marshes, as our friend Jasim Al-Asadi (Nature Iraq Association) informed us.



Fig. 17. Area 2. Cemetery. Grave 101.

Inside Grave 102 the body of an adult, whose sex could not be determined, has been found with few pottery vessels and a shell with cosmetic paste inside as his/her equipment (Fig. 18). Among the pottery vessels a dark gray burnished jar with four vertical handles has been found, which can be dated to the Akkadian period.¹⁶



Fig. 18. Area 2. Cemetery. Grave 102.

¹⁶ Gibson 1972: 271.

Immediately under the salt crust that characterizes Abu Tbeirah surface, a complete skeleton of a donkey (Fig. 19), in poor state of preservation, was recovered from a pit. The animal was resting on its left side with tightly flexed limbs (especially the front ones), but the head was positioned in an unnatural position on the right shoulder as if the neck had been forcedly broken or cut. A similar situation is to be found in Abu Salabikh.¹⁷ The morphology of the teeth indicates asinine features rather than hemione or horse ones. The animal was probably a male of about 5-5.5 years old.



Fig. 19. Area 2. Cemetery. Donkey Grave.

3.2. The Housing Quarter (Fig. 20-21)

The graves and the drainage system insisted on a house quarter: two buildings and a narrow street between them have been found and only partially excavated.

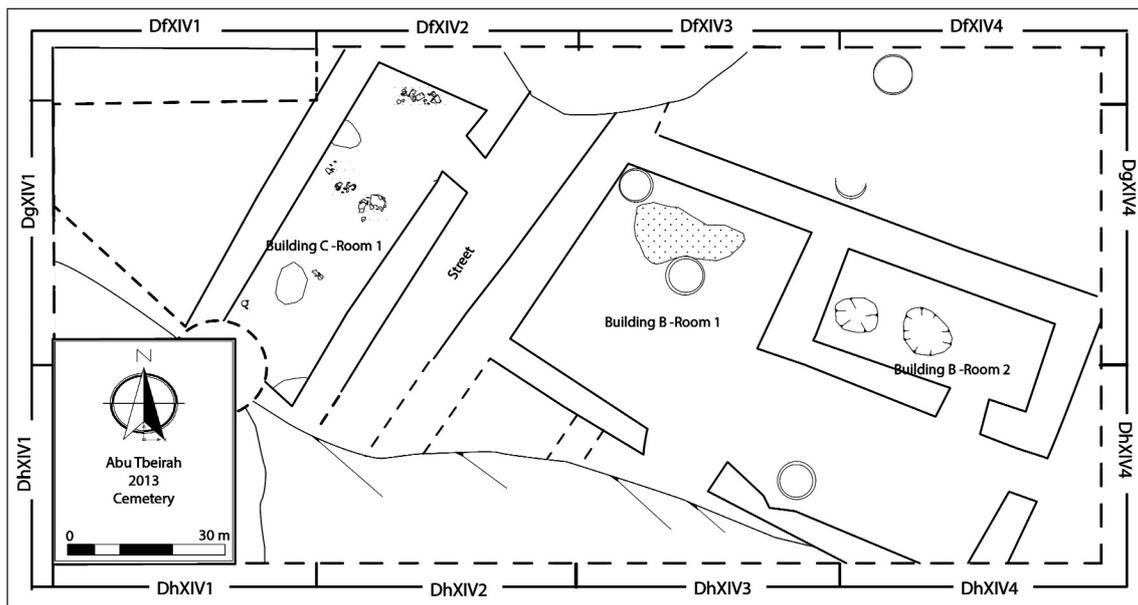


Fig. 20. Area 2. Buildings B and C.

¹⁷ Postgate - Moorey 1976: 156, Pl. XXIVa.

Of Building B so far a courtyard and a small room have been highlighted. In the courtyard there was a row of three Tannur; the walls surrounding it were literally “melted” and the pavement was completely cleared by the flowing of water. This part of the NE area is in fact crossed by several gullies excavated by seasonal rainfalls. Among the few objects and pottery found, a diorite door-socket and fragments of a stone vessel have been discovered. Apparently the building lies on a previous structure.



Fig. 21. Area 2. Buildings B and C (general view).

Only one room of Building C has been excavated in this campaign: the building located in the highest part of the area was not affected by the flowing of waters and some pottery was found *in situ* on the pavement of the room. Also in this case, lower structures are visible under the building.¹⁸

The settlement in this phase seems to have been shifted in the NE part that shows a longer continuity of life, as demonstrated by the pottery discovered belonging to the Akkadian period.

4. Conclusions

In its last phases Abu Tbeirah seems to have witnessed a reduction and an impoverishment of the settlement. The buildings so far discovered were poor and edified with walls made up by badly shaped bricks and covered with reed roofing, as it is the case in the contemporary buildings of the Ma’adan of the Iraqi marshes. This has been proved also by the discoveries inside Room 1 of Building A:¹⁹ here the second phase was signaled by a reed mat covering the pavement and preserved especially along the walls. The reed-mat was pierced by a hole whose walls were covered by the same vegetal weave: this clearly indicates that the hole was made after the reed-mat was placed over the pavement and, as some picture from the marshes can show, it hosted probably one of the pole used for holding the reed cover of the building. It is worth noting that the poles used in the Marshland constructions have the bottom tapered: a similar situation can be supposed for the Abu Tbeirah evidence. In the middle of the room there was a fireplace with some postholes around it, probably belonging to a structure which has a parallel from Abu Salabikh.²⁰ The strong connection between Abu Tbeirah and the Marshland is evident also from the point of view of the paleodiet: the Abu Tbeirah inhabitants and the Ma’adan share an alimentation based mainly on the consumption of fishery products.

Abu Tbeirah evidence has been used inside the proposal made by Iraqi authorities for the admission in the UNESCO Heritage List of the Marshland and of Ur, Uruk and Eridu as a unique system showing the survival nowadays of an exceptional way of life.

¹⁸ C14 datings of a piece of reed-mat discovered in the room gave a date to 2350 BC.

¹⁹ D’Agostino - Romano et alii 2012: 79-82.

²⁰ Postgate – Moorey 1976: 143.

Aknowledgments

Our work in Southern Iraq is possible thanks to the invaluable help of many friends that enthusiastically support us from the very beginning. Beyond our good friend Abdulmir Al-Hamdani, who was the first to introduce us to Abu Tbeirah, Ali Kadhem, Wusal Jasim, Wasan Isa, and all the members of the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage of Dhi Qar sustained us in every possible way, and the same is true of the authorities of Baghdad, both Ministry of Tourism and Archaeology and the State Board of Anquities and Heritage. Both Amir Doshi, Journalist and man of culture of Nasiriyah, and Jasim Al-Asadi, Director of Nature Iraq, are close friends whose knowledge of the cultural and natural heritage of the area is a true inspiration for us. Daher Al-Bakka', who is in charge of our security, is the friend who makes our everyday life easy and comfortable. Finally, we want to mention here Amir, Haider, Nghamesh, Takleef and all the wonderful workers who dig with us in Abu Tbeirah. Our Iraqi-Italian team is composed by several specialists and colleagues and this paper has been realized only thanks to their help: the specialists Francesca Alhaique (Archaeozoologist), Giulia Barella (Restorer), Alessandra Celant (Paleobotanist), Mary Anne Tafury (Anthropologist); the Iraqi and Italian archaeologists Samer Abdelghafour, Ludovica Bertolini, Desirè Bragalone, Maddalena Diaco, Martina Faro, Wasan 'Isa, Wusal Jasim, Shirin Khalatbari, Flavia Pacelli, Michele Renna, Hussein Sadoon, Valeria Tappeti, Edoardo Zanetti.

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