

City of Culture 2600 BC:
Early Mesopotamian history and archaeology at Abu Salabikh



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Abu Salabikh

John Nicholas Postgate

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إهداء

أقدم بإمتنان هذا الكتاب إلى أهل مدينة قرية العاصفة
وذكرى بدر عباس المرحوم وإبن أخيه وخلفه كحارس الموقع
سلمان وضح الذي يحكم يقظته ووعيه تمكن من حماية الموقع
خلال السنين الصعبة منذ سنة ١٩٩٠

Dedication

This book is gratefully dedicated to the people of Qariyet al-Asife,
to the memory of Bedr Abbas and to his nephew Salman Wadhah
who succeeded him as guard, and whose vigilance has protected
the site throughout the difficult decades since 1990.

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Team members

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The dig team, 1976.

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Representatives

Abd al-Hamid Abd al-Majid (1986)
Abd al-Mejid Muhammad (1975; 1976; 1977)
Abd ar-Rahman Muhammad Ali (1981)
Abd-as-Salaam Sim'an (1981)
Ahmed Khidhr al-Beyati (1986)
Ali Hashim (1975; 1978)
Ghassan Azzawi (1975)
Ghiyath Jihad (1985)
Hassan Khdheyr Hashim (1983)
Kamil Alwan Shehab (1983; 1988; 1989)
Muhammad Yahya (1977; 1979; 1981; 1983; 1985)
Nadhira Ar-Rawi (1978)
Nahidh Abd ar-Razzaq (1973)
Sabah Abboud (1976)
Sabih Ali Alwan (1979)

If two junior members of my family are included, a total of 100 staff members from outside Iraq took part in the excavations between 1975 and 1989, we have refrained from presenting a full list here (all adults are mentioned in the preliminary reports on the relevant seasons in *Iraq*). I owe a great debt to the Assistant Directors who were Jane Moon in 1985, and in 1986 Roger Matthews, who then acted as Field Director in 1988 and 1989.

Donors

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British Academy 1975, 1976, 1977, 1978-9, 1981, 1983, 1985-6, 1988-89
British Museum 1975, 1976, 1977, 1978-9, 1983, 1985-6, 1988-89
National Geographic Society, Washington DC 1978-9, 1981, 1983, 1985-6, 1988-89
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Advice to the Reader

Transcription and translation

The translation of Sumerian is still often provisional, and unlike Akkadian there is no definitive Sumerian dictionary (though some on-line resources). Knowing how frustrating it is to see an English word without its Sumerian original, I have often encumbered the text or the footnotes with the Sumerian of a quotation for the benefit of those yearning for it.

Bold font is used for Sumerian words, either precise transliterations from a text, or the normalized version of a word conventionally used by modern scribes, e.g. **ukkin**. Between slashes (as /eme.gir/) is what we believe may have been the real form of the word. (For typographical reasons the word *ensi*, and the Sumerian terms of metrological units, such as *gur*, *silá*, *bur* and *iku* (see below) are treated as though English and left in normal font.) Akkadian words are generally italicized (as are modern titles of literary compositions and a few unique artefacts such as the *Stele of the Vultures*).

Some ancient names have been rendered in various ways by modern scholars. Here I have used Akkade (and not Agade or Akkad, see Westenholz 1999: 31), Inana (not Innana or Inanna), Kiš (not Kish), Mesalim (not Mesilim, see Steinkeller 2013 151⁸⁵), Ur-Nammu (not Ur-Namma), Urukagina (and not Uruinimgina or Irikagina). For the philologically accurate but inconvenient transcription of the site name Abu Salabikh see p. 2⁵.

Metrological terms

See in general Krebernik 1998:304-5. The capacity unit *gur* at Fara, and so presumably, though not demonstrably, at Abu Salabikh, held 240 *silá*, and for convenience we may treat 1 *silá* as = 1 litre. Hence 1 *gur* = 240 litres. However, the *gur* at Pre-Sargonic Lagaš held only 144 *silá* and this equivalence is used when quoting data from there (see Powell 1989-90, 494-7). For area measures see p. 94 fn. 14 (1 *bur* = 6.48 ha.).

Elevations

Heights expressed as +9.99 are heights above an arbitrary site datum of +0.00 defined as 10 m below the highest point, and 14.74 m above sea level (ASE 2:18); approximate heights not surveyed in accurately are indicated by ~9.99.

The site grid

As shown in Figs. 1.3, 2.1, 2.5 etc. the site grid is oriented to True North and divided into 100 m squares (e.g. 6G). These are further subdivided into 10 m squares numbered 00-99 from NW to SE as shown e.g. in Fig. 2.7. For 'quadrants' (a.b.c.d) see ASE 2, p. 2 Fig. 2.

Note on the location of finds

Artefacts catalogued received an AbS number, and were sent to the Iraq Museum in Baghdad. We believe some of them (in particular the cylinder seals) were stolen during the USA invasion in 2003. Artefacts not catalogued were registered in a card index using their numbers assigned on site, in the format 6G66:66 where 6G66 is the 10 m square. These remained in the excavation house on site, but many of them were lost when the house was ransacked in 1991. Finds remaining in 2017 (predominantly potsherds and animal bones) were transferred to storage in the Diwanayah Inspectorate with the invaluable assistance of the Inspectorate staff and Prof. Abbas al-Hussainy.

Abbreviations

For bibliographical abbreviations see p. 211. Note also these:

ASE	<i>Abu Salabikh Excavations</i> (Vols. 1-5)
FI	Fire installation
ED	Early Dynastic (I-III)

Chronology

4000-3200	Uruk	Proto-literate
3200-3000	Jemdet Nasr/ Uruk III	
3000-2750	Early Dynastic I	Pre-Sargonic
2750-2600	Early Dynastic II	
2600-2350	Early Dynastic III	
2350-2150	Dynasty of Akkade	Old Akkadian
2150-2000	Third Dynasty of Ur	Ur III
2000-1800	Isin-Larsa Dynasties	Old Babylonian
1800-1600	1 st Dynasty of Babylon	

Note: as will be obvious, these are round figures, but probably not more than a century inaccurate. In the light of our work at Abu Salabikh there seems no good reason to abolish 'ED II' as is currently in fashion. For our best current estimates for the date of the ED II-III levels at the site, see ASE 5: 8-15.

Introduction

The aim of this book is to convey how fieldwork at the site has generated knowledge which helps us to resurrect the nature of one of the world's earliest cities in its maturity, and hence of the literate urban civilization to which it belongs. It starts, therefore, from the material record, with an inductive reconstruction of human activity at the site working towards generalities, rather than deploying our varied excavated results in response to a deductive approach driven by theoretical enquiry – though of course both processes are always at work consciously or subconsciously.

Mesopotamia and Egypt witnessed the emergence of literate urban societies at about the same time. With the invention of cuneiform and hieroglyphs, they share the great advantage for us that the material trappings of their innovative culture, as recovered by archaeologists, are given an extra dimension by the evidence of the written sources. As we see them today, it is fair to say that because in Mesopotamia they wrote on clay, far more early written sources have survived there than in Egypt, and when it comes to urbanism, the plethora of cities in south Mesopotamia especially outstrips what is currently known of contemporary Egypt.

Any description of life in south Mesopotamia before the Dynasty of Akkade has to take place in the shadow of two great cities: of Ur, as revealed in the archaeological work of Sir Leonard Woolley, and of Girsu, from where the greatest wealth of written sources derive. If archaeology is perceived as the 'past tense of anthropology' it becomes imperative to use both bodies of evidence to complement and enhance each other. This book is constructed round our single site, with its geographical and chronological parameters, but to give its evidence its full value, it needs to be placed in its wider context, and accordingly I have not hesitated to use what is known of south Mesopotamia in earlier, and especially later (including ED IIIb, Ur III and Old Babylonian) eras, and at other cities across the alluvium. The cultural continuity in both time and space is sufficient to offer reasonable, though not of course compelling parallels.

Hence this book aims to advance our understanding of Early Dynastic Mesopotamia in three main ways. In the first place, it is an account of excavations carried out in the 1970s and 1980s at one, small but perfectly formed, Mesopotamian city. The initial chapters offer a general description of the city and its architecture as we uncovered it. Throughout the aim is to match the excavated results with the textual evidence from early Mesopotamia, not only the administrative documents, some of which come from the site itself, but also where appropriate from the Sumerian literary canon with its mythological and historical-philosophical compositions. This integration of the written with the excavated evidence is the second main thread of the book. The third component builds on the first two, and seeks to reconstruct the role of this city, and of cities in general, in the wider world of 3rd millennium Mesopotamia.

Awkwardly known by its modern local name, Abu Salabikh, it may have been, and we believe probably was, the city of Ereš, whose patron deity was the goddess of writing, Nisaba. Given the size of its library, it must have been in the premier league of the cities in the south, but there are significant questions about its gradual demise, and its relationship with the politically dominant dynasty up north at Kiš. Since the first season carried out by Vaughn Crawford and Donald Hansen in 1963, it has become increasingly clear that south Mesopotamia in the first half the 3rd millennium was culturally and linguistically divided in two parts, and that Abu Salabikh itself falls just north of the dividing line. Hence, although the library currently constitutes the principal source for Sumerian literature and scholarship around 2600 BC, the first language of some, if not a majority, of the population was an early form of Akkadian, with close ties to Kiš and cultural links up the Euphrates to Ebla in northern Syria. 'Sumer' begins with Nippur

and stretches further south, and tempting though it is, it would not be accurate to refer to our site as a 'Sumerian city', even if, as we suspect, its patron deity was a Sumerian goddess. These linguistic and cultural issues intersect with what is known of the political scene, and are discussed in the concluding chapters.

Abu Salabikh – and Ereš – was only one tessera in the south Mesopotamian mosaic, and concentrating attention on a single place and time necessarily restricts the general validity of much that is here. The chances of discovery mean that there is a range of topics which simply do not arise because of the limitations of our excavated record. One will hunt in vain for information about armies, astronomy, beer, birds, boats, medicine, turtles, weights, or family life, to name but a few. On the other hand, the restrictions have left freedom to address issues which are previously unresolved, or surface here for the first time, at greater length and in more detail than a more usual general work would permit, issues which may have significance beyond our specific time and place. As far as possible, 'facts' or at least statements of what I believe to be facts, are based on the primary evidence, that is, the excavated record at the site and the verbatim text of inscriptions, and as far as reasonable these sources are cited. In this way the readers can better assess the validity of my deductions. Reference is regularly made to the published excavation reports (see p. 209), and given our still imperfect mastery of Sumerian, translations are often less than certain and hence are often accompanied by the verbatim transcription.

This is essentially an interim account of work in progress – or perhaps rather of work in suspense. The fieldwork on which it draws came to an abrupt halt in 1990, and as of now it has not been possible to restart. An attempt to resume the process of surface clearance in 2022 had to be aborted for a variety of reasons, and at the time of writing there is no immediate prospect of a resumption. Nevertheless, the cost effective retrieval of the city plan, on both the Main Mound and the South Mound, is a prospect well worth pursuing, perhaps in advance of further excavation.