

3. INTRODUCTION TO HISTORICAL SERIES

BY SUBJECT

July 2003/November 2006

IRAQ

3.1 Historical sites North Iraq 215-266

3.1.1. Amadia 215-227

Trip to Amadia North Kurdistan July 1968 with my colleagues/counterpart Hamid and friends Petrus and Paulus. Amadia is 150 km North of Mosul, located at about 1 000 above sea level on a steep rock. Amadia is a small market town for the local Kurdish farmers selling their produce. It has a nice cool climate with maximum summer temperatures of 30 C, while during winter Amadia is snow covered. In spring the valleys are covered with millions of bulb flowers, like tulips, crocus and narcissi. The valleys with all the spring flowers are like a beautiful Persian carpet. Kurdistan is actually the genetic centre for these bulb flowers. It is from here that a Dutch ambassador in the 17th Century took some tulip bulbs to Holland, which started the Dutch spring flower industry. Note that Kurdistan during the Turkish area 1650 1918 was located in the Mosul province of Turkey.

Life is simple and beautiful in Amadia. As elsewhere in Iraq in summer people sleep in the open air. Here are pictures of the simple Amadia guesthouse with open air rooms and dining area, in which I stayed with my Iraqi friends.

Unfortunately already during the 1960s there were serious frictions and uprisings of the Kurds against the Iraqi government. Later the Kurdish uprising was continued during the Baath period under Saddam Husein. Kurds felt badly discriminated in the Sunni Arab led country. The Iraqi army already in the 1960s terrorized Kurdistan regularly. On image shows the ruins of a farm house destroyed by the Iraqi army.

Near Amadia is the famous Shanidar cave, in which in 1951 Dr Solecki, University of Michigan, discovered remains of four Neanderthal man, from approx. 120 000 BC.

3.1.2. Duhok 228-236

Duhok is a small Assyrian village 50 km North of Mosul, located at 800 m above sea level. My servant Daniel was also an Assyrian. Assyrians are Christians. Their main occupation is in agriculture and rice is the staple food. The rice is grown on rain fed bonded fields – comparable to rain fed sawahs

3.1.3. Makhmur 237-250

During June 1968 I made a trip to Makhmur the home town of my colleague Hamid a Kurd. Makhmur is located 50 km due east of Shirgat/Tel Assur. To reach Makhmur one has to cross the river Tigris with a small ferry.

Hamid's father owned a large farm, growing barley and wheat, raising livestock: sheep and poultry and growing fruits. For pulling his ploughs and threshers he used pairs of donkeys. The farm complex was huge with many family rooms, storages and stables. All rooms were centered around a main inner courtyard. In addition there were outer courtyards to receive guests and where family meals were taken. The roofs of the rooms were used as open air bed rooms. I also slept on one of these and found it a pleasure to sleep in the very refreshing night temperature, watching thousands of stars.

Walls and roofs of the farm buildings were all made from mud plaster, a mixture of soil and straw. Construction of the buildings was simple, but effective. Due to nature of the material walls and roofs crumble easily and need regularly to be re plastered with a fresh coat of the mud mixture.

The Kurdish minority in Iraq, which consists of about 20% of the population, is often seriously discriminated by the Sunni authorities, who claim that the Kurds are undisciplined trouble makers. During my stay my Kurdish hosts made serious efforts to explain the Kurdish position. Actually they hoped one day for an independent Kurdish country. Actually since the end of the 1st Gulf war in 1991 Kurdistan has practically been independent, ruled by Kurds.

On the Sunday we also visited a nearby tell, one of the many hundreds of tells in Iraq. A tell looks like a small hill. Actually each tell in Iraq is a man made hill and covers the ruins of one or more old cities. Of these hundreds of tells, so far only a hundred or so have been excavated, mainly those tells, which covered former capitals or major cities. The Makhmur tell has not been excavated as it was probably only a minor Assyrian town from the 1st or 2nd millennium before Christ.

3.1.4. Zakho 251-254

Zakho is the main town of the Armenian minority in Iraq. Armenians are also Christians. In Zakho one can visit a famous bridge from the Abbasid period 700- 1258 AD.

3.1.5. Sassanian Castles 255-260

Ruins of two castles from the Sassanian period 100-200 AD are located North of Tikrit. To date I have not been able to identify much information on this period.

3.1.6. Samarra 261-266

Samarra is located about 100 km North of Baghdad, along the river Tigris. Samarra was established in 836 AD by caliph Mutasim, who moved the capital from Baghdad to Samarra.

Samarra was probably the most magnificent city ever built by Muslims. Travelers reported that there were many beautiful large palaces and mosques in Samarra during the Abbasid period. All these palaces were constructed with unfired bricks. During the Mongol invasion in 1258, Samarra was destroyed and today practically nothing remains of these glorious buildings. To day only the famous Friday mosque, Al Mutawakkil remains, as it was built from fired bricks and stone blocs. The Friday mosque is famous for its spiral minaret. One ascends this by an external spiral staircase that gave the structure its name: Al Malawiya – the winding tower. The Friday mosque is one of the largest mosques ever built, 200 m by 130 meter with walls of over 10 m high. Its plan follows the Umayyad period and was organized around a large open courtyard.

Apart from the Friday mosque one can visit in Samarra the tombs of the apostolic Imams Al Ah Hadi and Hasan Ashari from the 12th century and the mausoleum of the 12th and last apostolic Imam Al Mahdi built during the 13th century .

3.2. Historical sites Central Iraq 267-307

3.2.1 Baghdad 267-287

Baghdad, the capital of Iraq was established by the Abbasid caliph El Mansur in August 762 AD, on the West bank of the river Tigris. Baghdad became one of the main centers of learning during the Abbasid period from 750-1258. The most famous period was under caliph Harun Al Rashid 786-809, during whose reign the story of Thousand and One Nights was written and the concept of the “Arabian Nights“ was established. Baghdad was destroyed in 1258 by the Mongols under Hulagu, a grandson of Genghis Khan and again in 1401 by Timurlane, another Mongol king. Baghdad was in 1506 conquered by the Persians and in 1534 by the Ottomans who occupied Baghdad and the three Mesopotamian provinces: Mosul, Baghdad and Basra till 1917. In 1917 during the 1st world war the British conquered the 3 Ottoman provinces in Mesopotamia and created Iraq. The British made Iraq a kingdom and gave it independence in 1934.

In the 1960s Baghdad was still the capital of Iraq, with some 3 million inhabitants and the centre of power, learning, trade and industry.

In the 1960s remains of the 300 year Turkish occupation was still very visible. The old quarters of Baghdad consisted of Turkish style houses. The souks and other traditional markets in Baghdad were very colorful and remained in the Turkish style.

Only a few pre Turkish area buildings remained, under which the Mustansariyah College, established in 1232 by caliph Mustansir and the Marjan mosque established in 1356 AD. From the Turkish period is the 19th century Haiderkhana mosque. The Mother of the Drums mosque was built during the 1960s.

I lived in Baghdad from 1966-1969 during which period I hired a “mustamel” which is a small apartment/pavilion, on the grounds of a larger villa. My mustamel was located in the Mansur area of Baghdad, near Mansur club.

3.2.2. Haditha 288-300

In July 1967 and again in July 1968 I visited Haditha, the home town of Mawfak, my friend, colleague cum counterpart. Haditha is located along the Euphrates River some 250 km North West of Baghdad. Haditha is a traditional river town of the Sunna Arabs. In the 1930s with the opening of the famous Kirkuk oilfield, a pump station was established in Haditha in the centre of the oil pipe line from Kirkuk to the ports of Sidon in Lebanon and Haifa in Israel.

The first 100 km of the road to Haditha one follows the main road to Damascus, Syria, but in Hit one turns right and follows the sand track along the river Euphrates for a distance of some 150 km.

Along the road one passed Hit, 100 km n- west from Baghdad. Hit has been famous since over 5 000 years for its bitumen sources. This Hit bitumen or asphalt has a particular mixture of hydrocarbon, which makes it very suitable as a water proofing material. Since at least 5000 year bitumen from Hit was used to make boots, drains and houses water proof. The photos show one of the Hit bitumen sources.

Traditional Hidatsa is located in a narrow strip of land along the river Euphrates, which strip is only at most a few hundred meters wide and is only 6-10 meters above the level of the Euphrates. This area is traditionally irrigated by age old "Persian waterwheels" see photos. This lower lying strip of land is occupied by irrigated gardens with an intensive cultivation of three vegetation levels. On the lowest level vegetables and fruits are grown: cucumber, tomato, water melon, egg plant and other vegetables and berseem, a leguminous fodder crop. The second vegetation level consists of fruit trees such as oranges, plums, almonds, peaches, grapes and pomegranate. The third or highest vegetation level consists of date and eucalyptus trees.

The photos show Mawfak's family and their house, including the open air bedroom on the terrace. Also pictures are shown of swimming and canoeing in the river Euphrates near the old water wheels.

3.2.3. Desert landscapes central Iraq 301-307b

Apart from the mountain area in North East Iraq and the marshes in the South of the country most of the land of Iraq is desert, due to a lack of water. Rainfall is only around 100mm per year and falls mainly during the short winter period in January and February. The Iraqi soil however is fertile and when water is available can produce good crops.

This section of my introduction however shows different desert landscapes, with some very dramatic rock forms these forms were mainly formed by wind erosion over thousands of years. Sand storms occur frequently during the spring period from March to May. Suddenly the sky becomes grey and a strong wind starts to blow. After a few moments visibility is reduced to zero and one should stop driving, whether in town or in the desert. A dust laden wind is blowing, which hurts eyes and skin, while fine sand is penetrating everything. Sand storms usually do not last more than an hour.

3.3. Historical sites South Iraq 308-367

3.3.1. Trip to Basra 308-321

In April 1969 I made a trip by car from Baghdad to Basra and back, with my brother Rien, who visited me in April 1969.

We first took the east road via Kut, Amara and Qurna this road was already paved in the 1960s. We visited the Marshes from Majjer El Kabir, which trip is described under 3.3.2: Trip to the Marsh Arabs. Returning from Basrah we took the west road via Suq al Suyukh, Naseriya, Samawa, Diwaniya, and Baghdad. In the 1960s only the leg Diwaniya- Baghdad was already paved. From Basrah to Diwaniya the road was still a desert sand track. In Naseriya we visited the ziggurat of Ur and the other Sumerian ruins around it, which is described in the archeological sites under 2.3. The trip Baghdad – Basra one way is about 550 km.

Basra was created in 635 by Caliph Omar and became in the late 1550s the capital of the Turkish province of Basra. Today Basra is the main port of Iraq for all non oil commodities. Note that the oil from the South Iraqi field of Rumaiitha is shipped via FAO located at the mouth of the Shatt Al Arab. The main commodities exported from Basra in the 1960s were dates, barley and hard-wheat. The Turkish influence is still strongly visible in the many old Turkish houses.

The date industry

Basra is the centre of the Iraqi date industry. Based on survey data from the early 1960s there are in Basra Province about 10 million date trees, covering an area of some 100 000 ha of date trees. (Plant stand 9 /10 m by 9/10 m = 100 trees per ha)
Optimal conditions for date cultivation-Phoenix Dactylifera include a hot and dry climate, with a high water table. A local saying states that “The date tree likes to stand in the hot sun but have its feet wet” These conditions are available in Basra. The climate is hot and dry with temperatures up to 50 C in the shade during the period April-September. To irrigate the date gardens and for local transport thousands of kilometers of canal have been constructed, all connected to the Shatt Al Arab. The Shatt al Arab is a tidal river that means there is every day high and low tide as the sea is closely. This daily movement of water caused by to the differences between high and low tide, provides a natural circulation in the date gardens irrigation system in the Basra province. The Shatt al Arab water in Basra is however still sweet. Most of the Basra dates are exported. Most of the dates, particularly the lower qualities are exported to Pakistan and India, while the higher quality dates are exported all over the world, in particular to Europe and the USA.

The images of the road shown were all taken along the section Basra- Diwaniya. Pictures include samples of the empty desert landscape; an encounter with a friendly Bedouin, who invited us in his tent for coffee in the true Arab style; a waterwheel to be pulled by donkeys for irrigation; and some irrigation ditches.

In Basra we made a trip by a launch and made following pictures:
Sailing boats in the canals, used to ship dates and grains from the date gardens to Basra and beyond to other ports around the Arabian Gulf, in the South. Other images show the beautiful date gardens and the canals.

In Basra town we walked through the market streets admiring the many old Turkish houses.

3.3.2. A trip to the Marshes 322-367 April 67, 68 & 69

During my stay in Iraq from Nov 1966 to Nov 1969 each year in April I made a trip with my friend Sadoon to his home town Salam, a village in the Central Marshes of Iraq. We went by car from Baghdad to Majjer al Kabir, 30 KM south of Amara, about 300 km south of Baghdad. To enter the marsh area one needed a permit which was difficult to obtain in the 1960s and most foreigners in Iraq never made it in spite of their eagerness to visit the mysterious marshes. Fortunately for me, one of Sadoon's uncles in Majjer al Kabir, was responsible for issuing these permits and so every time we came to Majjer al Kabir, his uncle arranged a permit for me and my guests.

In addition, his uncle each trip sent some of his soldiers as an armed escort for us. In Majjer al Kabir we hired a motor launch to travel to Salam, a trip of about three hours, an estimated distance of 35-40 km from Majjer al Kabir.

The marshes are located in the delta formed by the Euphrates and the Tigris rivers. This delta covers an area of about 15 000 square kilometers or approximately half the size of the Netherlands. Most of the central parts of the marshes are permanently under water, while large strips at the edges are only flooded during springtime when the Tigris and Euphrates overflow with water from the snow melting in the Turkish mountains.

Within the marshes one has to travel by flat bottom boat, using the main natural canals available, while occasionally crossing a reed field. For this purpose each family has a mushhuf or small canoe and the richer people a tarada- a larger canoe. Both boats have flat bottoms. Taradas and mushhufs are made from Iraqi mulberry wood for the plates, while the beams are hardwood imported from Malaysia or Indonesia. The simple tools needed for boat making consist of saws, drills and knives for cutting curves. The boats are made waterproof with a layer of bitumen /asphalt taken from Hit or Ramada, which layer has to be replaced once per year. See Images 333& 334. During the Sumerian times, 5 000 years ago boats were made in the same way as today which can be seen on the seal stones and other images which were preserved from those days. In addition several miniature mushhufs and taradas from silver were found in Sumerian king graves. Both tarada and mushhuf are flat bottomed. Narrow, at most a meter wide but very long, some taradas measure up to 15 meters. Today people also use barges, called ballem and motor launches to transport cattle; grain and qasab reed mats (See image 341), from the marshes to the markets in Amara, Qurna and Basra, using the main marsh canals.

The Madan or Marsh Arabs

The marshes are inhabited by the Madan or marsh Arabs. The Madan are Shia Muslims, followers of Hassan and Hussein. Discussing the past with them they all believe that their forefathers were Bedouins, who for one reason or the other settled in the marshes, say 10 to 15 generations ago or less. My friend Sadoon also considered himself as a Marsh Arab. See image 326. Comparing his facial features with those of Sumerian statues, we see that Sadoon has the typical round face with deep lying eyes and the short mops nose of the Sumerian. Very different from the long faced Arab features with the

large sharp noise. Though Sadoon assured me that his forefathers were Arab Bedouins he may have more Sumerian blood in his veins than he is prepared to acknowledge. Furthermore if we study the Sumerian sources of 3000 BC we find that the conditions in the area in those days were very similar to the situation today. There were in those days already the much extended marshes with huge fields of qasab-*Phragmites*, bulrushes-*Typha angostura*, sedges –*Scirpus brachyeras* and other reeds-(See image 336 & 337). In those days people made the same type of flat bottom boats such as the tarada -images 332, 334 and the mushhuf- image 338; the same type of reed houses: Saridas - image 328 and Mudhifs-images 329&330; Sumerian pictures show water buffaloes and fish catching with the five pronged spear- images 355 & 340. It is therefore very likely that many of today's madan are direct descendants of the Sumerians of 5000 years ago.

The reed buildings

The reed buildings consist of 2 types: the sarida- image 328 used as family quarter and more elaborate and larger mudhif as guestroom-images 329& 330. Some of the mudhifs of the sheiks were huge, measuring 25 meters length, 8 meters wide and 3 meters high. The construction is simple: First pillars made from tidily bundled qasab reeds are erected as a frame – image 335. This frame is subsequently closed with mats from qasab reed. If the reed house is on the edge of the marshes, the reed pillars are fixed directly in the firm soil. In the case of houses in the middle of the permanent marshes, first the madan has to make an artificial island. Using bunches of sedges he pegs off a part of the water and subsequently fills this pegged area with mud and cut grass, till the level is 30-40 cm above the water level of the marshes,- a kibasha. To erect his house he then follows the same system as the farmer living at the edges of the marshes living on firm land.

Food in the marshes

Food in the marshes is simple but delicious. First there is the fermented buffalo milk, rather similar to yogurt. We were further served with masgouf- grilled river carp. After being caught the fish is split in two halves, cleaned and salted and spit on a reed splinter. The reed splinter is then put near the dung fire to be grilled. Image 352, 353, & 354. Masgouf has a very delicate soft taste. Sometimes also grilled chicken were served. The fish or chicken with the yogurt were served together with unleavened bread from rice flour “ gubus”. See 356. For more details of the gubus oven see images 052, 053 & 054 of my agricultural series. Within the marshes the gubus is made from rice flour. Outside the marshes gubus in Iraq is made from wheat flour (*Triticum Durum* or hard wheat.) Personally I find the taste of the wheat gubus crispier, but find both types of gubus to have a good taste. Note that the rice used by the Madan is grown in zone at the edge of the Marshes, which is only flooded part of the year. Rice is grown here as a floating rice variety.

The water buffaloes.

Water buffaloes form the base of the madans economy. The buffalo provides milk and dung, but are seldom slaughtered for their meat. The milk is made into butter –ghee and into a sour milk drink the dung is dried into cakes and used cooking fuel. Water buffaloes need enormous quantities of hashish/ green reed cuttings. The owners therefore have to cut every day a lot of hashish in the reed fields. In addition the water buffaloes are allowed to swim in the reed fields for “grazing”

Sand storms

As in the rest of Iraq, the marshes also suffer from sand storms, especially during spring time in April. On my last trip we encountered a sand storm on our return to Majjer Al Caber. The usual blue sky rapidly turned milky yellow and a strong wind started to blow, covering us all with a thin layer of fine sand.

Concluding remarks:

My trips to marshes formed a most exiting experience allowing me to study a traditional society, in which customs and surroundings have probably not much changed since 5000 years ago in the Sumerian period. My trips formed a unique change to go back in history and allowed me to visualize to some extent the situation in the days of the Sumerians and Babylonians some 5000 years ago. I am therefore grateful to my friend Saadoon, who made this possible.

Probably since the early 1950s only a few foreigners ever have had the privilege to visit the Marshes in Iraq. The famous traveler Wilfred Thesinger visited the Marshes during the 1950s. Another well know traveler Gavin Young visited the Marshes during the 1970s. Both wrote travel books about their experiences. Apart from these publications I have read a few articles in the National Geographic Journal.

During the period I was working for the United Nations in Iraq from 1966-1969, me and my invitees were probably the only foreigners, who were allowed to visit the Marshes. None of the other foreign community members, mainly UN & embassy staff succeeded to enter the Marshes in those days. Also no tourists were allowed in Iraq in that period, a situation which has continued till today due to the war situation in Iraq.

My other trips to Kurdistan, Haditha and through the desert to the various archeological sites were also rather exclusive as very few persons managed to obtain the required travel permits,

March 2005 The situation in the marshes since the 1990s.

Recently I read that in the early 1990s Saddam Hussein drained most of the marshes through construction of dams in the Tigris and Euphrates above streams of the marshes. This to use the water for large mechanized crash irrigation projects to grow cereals to feed the Iraqi population after foreign currency had been cut off after the 1st Gulf war in 1991. The majority of the Madan population, some several hundred thousand persons, had fled to Iran, where they now suffer in refugee camps. However the main reason for Saddam Hussein to drain the marshes must have been his inability to control the Madan Arabs, who as long as they lived in the marshes had been inaccessible to his army. By draining the area Saddam Hussein could chase the Madan out of the country. In particular after the 1992 revolt of the Madan against Saddam Hussein's regime. Saddam must have hated the Madan and wished to destroy them. The article also mentioned that at present it is studied how the water can be again diverted back to the former Marsh area and how the original flora and fauna could be restored.

Bogor, July 2003, revised March 2005

Charles van Santen

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