

Abu Salabikh, Iraq 1988: the diary of an archaeological excavation
By Jerry Youle

By 1988 I had been a field archaeologist for a couple of years, working in London and abroad.

It seemed to me at the time that the Sumerians did not get the credit they deserved for inventing writing, monumental architecture, cities, bricks and so on, with everyone being overly focused on the Egyptians and Romans, just because they left some big buildings behind. So, I was very pleased to be offered the chance to work on a ground-breaking (pun possibly intended) field project focused on revealing the entire plan of a small Sumerian city. This magnificent enterprise was run by Nicholas Postgate of the University of Cambridge, under the auspices of the British Archaeological Expedition to Iraq.

Unfortunately, Iraq was a repressive dictatorship at war with its neighbour. But how could I possibly refuse? I was only 24 years old and on the edge of adventure.

What follows is based on the diary I wrote at the time. It is most definitely not an attempt to explain what was discovered; it is merely the story of what it was like to be there. Let's start at the beginning with the letter offering me the job:

'The British Archaeological Expedition to Iraq draws the attention of all those visiting under its auspices to the fact that Iraq is currently a war zone. All persons visit Iraq at their own risk'.

The 'Notes for Dig Staff' included some further encouraging advice:

To apply for a visa you will need a baptismal certificate or a letter from a reverend of some kind (to establish non-Jewishness).

Iraq is at war, and although it does not affect us much, security is tighter, and policemen and soldiers are emphatically to be obeyed. Also, you must expect letters and phone calls to be censored, so avoid political comment.

The newest problem is AIDS. Government regulations require an AIDS test though it is not clear how this is to be administered so, if you can persuade a doctor to certify your freedom from AIDS (which is unlikely), do.

Medical treatment in Bagdad is good, (though perhaps rather stretched at present).

The latest embarrassment is that loo paper is unobtainable. Please stock up with as much as you can carry.

Welcome to the world of Mesopotamian archaeology.



The author – shamelessly hamming it up on the site

29 February 1988, Baghdad, Expedition House, Mansour

I have arrived. The expedition house is built in the Corbusier style of architecture, all curves and white plaster. It is located in Mansour, a leafy palm tree suburb of embassies and big cars.

Iran and Iraq are at war. Yesterday evening, while sitting around in the front room of the expedition house drinking tea, there was a loud double bang followed by a longer rumble. The windows shook and Tigger the cat fled under the coffee table. During the night there were apparently two more bangs, although I slept through both. The War of the Cities had started up again and Iranian missiles were being targeted on Baghdad. The news was on the World Service and my Mum phoned sounding worried, having made contact through the Foreign Office (I was most impressed by her persistence on this). We are waiting for the expedition Toyota pick-up to be registered so we can set off for Abu Salabikh, far away in the comparative safety of the desert.

Do I detect slight undercurrents of tension here? I can't tell if this is because Mesopotamian archaeology is a very closely restricted field or because working in Iraq leads to paranoia. Or both, perhaps. Apparently, it is the British *Expedition* to Iraq because the Iraqis consider that the term 'School' would sound too permanent.



Expedition house, Baghdad - time for tea (Jane in the chair)

Baghdad

Despite its exotic name Baghdad is a disappointing city – large, flat and modern with concrete framed buildings and wide multi-lane highways. Nearly all the cars are Toyotas or Brazilian-made VW Passats known as ‘Brazilis’. The driving is fast and erratic and the drivers only ever seem to look ahead. There are frequent near misses and lots of horn blasting. Old men waddle across lanes of fast-moving vehicles. The city feels quite prosperous, but the centre is dusty and the escalators under the roads no longer work. There are a lot of Egyptian migrant workers.

To fill our time we took a trip to the ruined city of Ctesiphon. The bus out of Baghdad was very old and battered and the journey took ages due to a flat tyre. On the way we passed the impressive earthworks that marked the site of Iraq’s nuclear power reactor, largely destroyed by an Israeli air strike in 1981 (‘Operation Babylon’).

Ctesiphon itself lies in a decayed park of singed grass and old picnic tables. The monumental arch of the Taq Kasra palace looked to me as though it might collapse at any moment. In the local town we ate chicken. The bread bowl was covered in bird dirt and the water tasted unwholesome.

Wednesday 2 March

Iraqi bureaucracy is now complete and we can leave Bagdad. We’ve loaded the Toyota and the Land Rover with rice, arak, tomato sauce, oranges, new quilts, old pillows, books, excavation records, a generator, kettles and all the other things needed to run an archaeological excavation in a faraway place.

We drove down the Baghdad to Basra highway for three hours. It is a new six-lane road with very little traffic. I was told it is under-used because there are no roadside kebab vendors (I have no idea if this is true). The occasional cars that do travel along it tend to be driving in the wrong direction on the wrong side of the road. Very fast.

Arrival at Abu Salabikh

It took some time to find the local village, the promisingly named 'village of the whirlwind', which sits alongside the archaeological site. The site itself is just a slightly raised mound of silt. Our base is a collection of low mud brick buildings. There is a cockerel's head in the courtyard, along with the skull of a water buffalo.

The surrounding landscape is flat and empty; a thick, even alluvial deposit of moist clayey silt. It is treeless, muddy and criss-crossed by drainage channels fed by the Euphrates. The horizon is broken only by a far-off radio mast and an ancient ruined Islamic tower. Apart from bright green patches of irrigated grass and the reeds in the canals, all else is bare soil, often almost white with salt. It seems a wild and desolate place.

We are accompanied by an Iraqi guard. I'm not sure if he is here to help us or to keep any eye us. Both probably.

Our sleeping accommodation was to be in large two-person tents which had been stored on site since the previous year – and which looked like they might have seen service in WWII. Unfortunately, a family of rats had used them to make a home. The guard bludgeoned the first rat with a grid peg. He then picked it up by its tail and whacked it twice more on the head before hurling it towards a group of local children who ran off screaming. The second rat ran for the kitchen pursued by George smacking blows in its vague direction. Eventually three rats were dumped bloody-nosed and lifeless in the old toilet pit. They looked healthy, perhaps because they'd enjoyed a diet of vitamin pills. Most of the tents were covered in rat urine and faeces with large, chewed holes.



Arrival at the dig site - surveying the remains of the bedding

The people

Archaeology attracts some interesting people. They are often highly focused on things that can, to be frank, seem rather detailed and eccentric. But at the same time these people can be amazingly practical when in pursuit of their interests (changing wheel bearings on Land Rovers and that sort of thing).

Donald is an amiable academic with a dry sense of humour. He is a leading authority in Mesopotamian cylinder seals and tells me stories about Sumerian mythology. Wendy is an expert

in the interface between different soil horizons. That is quite a specialism. Our director Nicholas is the cousin of Oliver Postgate, who created *The Clangers*. Abu Salabikh and the Clanger planet don't look very different.



Donald in a typical landscape (it makes it look greener than it was)

Thursday 3 March

After a breakfast of eggs, I finished digging the toilet pit with Donald, recording the archaeology as we went. We discovered nothing of interest. After much discussion we rigged up a canvas screen around the toilet pit. Donald says it is designed to stay up in the wind. We shall see.



The author attending to the toilet - the canvas screening doesn't look very effective

We then struggled to erect a tent in a high wind. Half up, it looks like a giant wobbly mushroom. The cooks' tent came close to collapse and the Iraqi guard helpfully advised that our tent pegs were too short.



The tent – billowing in the wind like a giant wobbly mushroom (in the background – a fairly typical landscape)

At the moment the flies aren't too bad, but we get lots of vicious-looking hornets in the dining room. George squashes them onto the dining table with other people's water glasses.

Friday 4 March

It rained in the night, leaving everything muddy and slimy. The pick-up trip to Sumer was abandoned due to the risk of sliding into a drainage canal. The mud stops us putting up tents or working on site and so we drink tea, read and play endless games of backgammon.



Endless games of backgammon in the dig house - note the number plate on the wall. The curtains are a nice touch.

Saturday 5 March

We drove down the perilous mud track to Diwaniya, a large bustling town with rows of lock-up shops selling plastic things and meat. The streets are alive with rubbish.

Iran and Iraq are continuing to launch missiles at each other's capitals. The British Embassy has advised against travel to Iraq and that people in Iraq should leave if possible. The Director tells me that if it becomes difficult, we can drive over the desert to Jordan. It looks like a hell of a long way to me.

At night the sky is clear and the stars are very bright, especially in the Milky Way. We can hear the jackals howling in the empty land beyond the canal.

Monday 7 March

Workmen from the local village started to gather at 7 am, hunkered down behind the tool house waiting for the dawn to break, features hidden by kafiyas. Me and Donald dug a second toilet pit, now our specialism. We then tried to measure out a grid square in order to start excavating the ancient city gate. But we have surveying discrepancies.

Tuesday 8 March

Heavy rain fell through the night and everything turned to mud. Streams began to run off the mound and after breakfast the wind grew strong. Tent pegs and stakes slipped through the sodden ground. Rotten canvas tore. Tents billowed wildly and gyrating tent material splattered our mosquito nets and possessions with mud. We floundered through puddles, hammering stakes into the ground and attaching new bits of rope to the tents. The guard's tent started to drag its anchor through the mud and took off. A stream ran through Heather and Sue's tent. And the rain keeps on coming.



Battling with the tents again

We endure another day of chocolate, tired games of backgammon, reading books and letter writing. An atmosphere of jovial gloom. Grey mud is everywhere. The screen round the toilet pit fell down. Going to the toilet is unpleasant, squatting over a hole in the ground, exposed to the open sky and the rain and surrounded by wet billowing canvas. The workmen say this is the worst weather they can remember at this time of year. I can see where the biblical flood myths come from and why the Sumerians built ziggurats to raise themselves out of the mud and the surrounding flatness.



Tents - abandoned to save themselves

Wednesday 9 March

After much messing around with the theodolite, tapes and bits of string, we finally realised we were in completely the wrong place. It's not helped by a shortage of grid pegs and 6-inch nails. After a preliminary scrape we came across a mud brick wall and some human remains. Everything is drying out after the rain and the flies, mosquitoes, hornets and jackals have returned.

I feel sorry for our Iraqi guard. He seems jovial but does he worry about his family in Baghdad? I'm sorry too for Mohammed our Egyptian cook, his eyes looking moist, reading a letter from home. Stuck out here with a load of British archaeologists while the War of the Cities continues. Several countries are pulling their diplomats out of Tehran.

Thursday 10 March

I feel like I'm settling in. I've almost begun to enjoy life at Abu Salabikh. The atmosphere in the trench was almost jolly. The sun was out and after work I sat at the top of the mound on a green plastic chair watching the sunset. It is very surreal sitting in the middle of what seems like nowhere, but which was once a thriving ancient town.

On a less good note, the gas and petrol has run out. So, we have no hot water and no lights at night. Yesterday, when the tracks were too slippery to drive over, we almost ran out of drinking water. 300 people have been killed in Tehran by Iraqi missiles.



The return of drinking water

Friday 11 March

On a trip out, we were turned away from Nippur by the police. Instead, we ate kebabs in a palm grove. Donald nearly drove into a canal on the way home.

To occupy ourselves we walked to an abandoned house in a small palm grove. Its mud brick walls seemed to be eroding back into the earth. To be honest, it looks very much like what we are digging up. There were lots of large orange-yellow hornets and the mosquitoes are getting worse.



Ruined house with hornets

Saturday 12 March

It's getting warmer. A truce has been declared in the War of the Cities, but Iraq has attacked a Cypriot tanker in the Gulf. The guard talked about the war. He was anxious for news and borrowed my radio. I told him what I'd heard. 'Who wants war?' he said, 'Eight years'.

Sunday 13 March

I've now moved to work in a Sumerian house (the '6H house' – the site was divided into large grid squares, as you might guess).

The gas nozzle has broken so we've had no hot water to wash in for four days. Instead, we have to use a bucket and soap by the canal. There are more flies every day.



Some of the team – something amusing seems to be happening stage right

Monday 14 March

The digging conditions are difficult. All the walls and floors are made out of the same silt. Once you've cleared something, it gets covered in dust. And after a few hours the salinisation encrusts everything in white. On top of this the local workmen aren't always that keen on working, preferring to sleep in their wheelbarrows. Any request to move earth is seen as a personal affront. Apparently the most capable workmen have been rounded up and taken to the war. They have been replaced by unmotivated teens and the frankly ancient.

Iraq and Iran have both started hurling missiles again. A hospital in Basra was hit. There was no petrol in Sumer village, so the generator isn't working. The wind is howling, the canvas is billowing, and my stomach is starting to play up. Earlier on in the day, Donald did drive the Toyota into a canal. It was pulled out by a tractor.

Tuesday 15 March

The gas nozzle has been replaced and we can now wash in hot water. This is a complicated procedure and involves using jugs of water and a small tin tray that works as a very small bath. While squatting in a very small dark room.

My stomach has now been malfunctioning for 24 hours. Wendy says she's found her first pedological horizon. Yesterday we could hear distant bangs from the eastern front some 80km away. Every so often we hear a loud bang as a jet fighter breaks the sound barrier.

Wednesday 16 March

I'm being bitten to bits by flies. The workmen found a hibernating hedgehog in the old shower. It rolled into a ball. Donald's work-boy Hamid wanted to prise it open with a trowel and skewer it on a grid peg. He was stopped.

Thursday 17 March

I've retired with stomach failure and a headache. This means I face 12 hours of oral rehydration fluid and no food.

Friday 18 March

Last night a wild dog came into the tent. It barked and left. Scary. Earlier in the night the jackals were howling more loudly than normal.

Today we went on a trip to three ancient Sumerian sites, Jemdet Nasr, Kufa and another one whose name I've forgotten. Each was just a low silty mound covered in broken pottery. The Land Rover broke down.



A low silty mound covered in pottery (and archaeologists) - the last remnants of a Sumerian city



The Land Rover has broken down

The Baghdad to Basra highway provides some excitement. Traffic moves both ways on both carriageways. Black-cloaked women herd donkeys loaded with camel thorn down the fast lane. There are heaps of sand in the slow lane, one of which had ended the journey of a large juggernaut. At night the highway is like a bad dream. Going south beyond Kish there are no road markings and fast-moving traffic looms up out of nowhere.

I am mentally compiling a set of portraits of Saddam Hussein (I didn't want to write anything like this down at the time, in case I got accused of sedition or whatever). There are posters of him everywhere in different clothes and styles, businessman, man of religion, military leader and so on. We ate kebabs in a cafe where the ceiling seemed close to collapse. The typical cafe meal is kebab or chicken with coriander, tomato and khubuz (flat bread). We ate chicken in a motorway picnic area on the way home, so fulfilling a personal ambition (the picnic area, not the chicken).

My headache has now gone and my digestive system is settling down. I've had the worst headache I can remember. Could it have been heatstroke or mosquito bites to the head?

Saturday 19 March

During the day a strong wind blew up thick clouds of brown dust. When the wind dropped, we played volleyball. While playing I was plagued by swarms of small black midges which followed me, and me alone. And now I'm being eaten by mosquitoes. They have bitten through my socks.

Sunday 20 March

I have bite upon swollen bite around my ankles. There exists here a delicate balance, a small window in which living and working conditions become just about tolerable. If there is no wind, out come swarms of black midges and mosquitoes. The wind removes the flies, but if it is too strong it lifts the dust. Sun and wind dry the soil, making excavation difficult. A little rain makes things clear for a while, but too much turns it all to mud. And then the tents fall down. And the sun can be deceptively hot, leading to sun-burn and heat exhaustion.

Monday 21 March

My bites flare up in the evening. My stomach gets queasy during the day. During the daylight hours, the toilet pit is an orbiting zone for black midges, where you are a static target. Kasim and Hakim were particularly noisy today.

24 and 25 March

We went to Zibliyat, an enigmatic Islamic ziggurat-type structure. Around 1,200 years old? Was it a tower? It is made of mud bricks and surrounded by the remnants of a city and beautiful esker-like sand dunes.

And then to Nippur, another large dead Sumerian city. The ziggurat was a big amorphous mud brick mass. Apparently an American built a dig house on top of the mound in the 19th century and worked on his own for three years. The local tribe attacked and he fought them off with fireworks imported to celebrate Thanksgiving Day (I have no idea if any of this is true). Back at base I hear that one local family has lost three men in the war.

26 March

There was a very large dust storm today, saturating the air. The horizon came in, the sun became a disc, the sky went brown and the land turned grey. I tried to take photos, but you can't take really take pictures of poor visibility.



Boys in landscape – the sky looks brown so it may have been the remnants of the dust storm

27 March

At 9 am a taxi arrived containing team members. They had been driving down from Baghdad in a dig car when they had a puncture. So, they took a lift to Diwaniya with a passing motorist. He failed to see a big pile of sand in the half-finished highway and tipped the car over fracturing his skull, breaking the guard's arm and injuring someone else's back (turned out it was a broken vertebrae – not ideal). They had left Baghdad in a hurry after a missile landed 600 metres away from the Expedition house. The workmen say Khomeini is evil and that Iraq will win the war.

28 March

The midges get worse. I've tried covering my head in mosquito net gauze. But it makes it hard to see the archaeology. The village was full of people for the funeral of the headman's nephew who had been martyred in the war. Mirage jets flew over today. The guard seems depressed.

31 March

The last two days have been quite good archaeologically. The flies have dispersed due to a strong breeze and four ancient rooms have emerged with three doorways, an oven and an in-situ storage jar.

10 April (I have no idea why there is a gap between 31 March and 10 April. Perhaps nothing happened, although this seems unlikely.)

There is considerable aerial activity over the site, with regular sonic booms. Two Mirage jets flew low and slow over the site. As they passed away into the distance, something slipped from one of them – a parachute or a wisp of smoke? It rained today, a thin hot drizzle.

In the evening the jackals howl, Roger is playing guitar and Tony is playing the mouth organ. It feels like the 1960s. Shooting stars and a rising moon. A team member is back on the kaolin and morphine again.



A local boy happy in his work

Food - a typical day

6.30 first breakfast – a slightly warm bowl of porridge drowned in milk and sugar. One glass of tea with milk.

9.30 tea break – two medium-sized bun/biscuit/cake things that have a vague taste of a dusty middle eastern grocer's shop – essence of what? Two glasses of tea with milk.

11.30 second breakfast – two scrambled eggs, one flap of khubuz, the village-made flat bread, unsalted butter (intermittent supply), tomato ketchup (Iraqi), another dusty cake with marmalade, fizzy 'State Enterprise' yoghurt, two glasses of tea with milk.

3.30 lunch – usually rice with orange potato 'glok' (not sure where this term came from), salad, purple fruit juice called 'Nadir' (yes, really), oranges and occasionally strong peppers, pickles and tahini. Lots of salt. The name on the fridge is 'Arcelik' (possibly not the finest choice of brand name).

8.00 dinner – sometimes the same as lunch, sometimes chicken or pasta with orange 'glok'. Custard with marrow or just custard. Occasionally cake and jelly.

I should stress here that I wrote home to say I was enjoying the food.

16 April

Abu Jassim, one of the older workmen from the local village, had a heart attack this morning and was rushed away to Diwaniya. The old American sounding on the site is now used as the workmen's toilet.

Around midday the clouds started to mass to the west. The wind kept changing direction. We could see horizontal and vertical lightning flashes through the grey black clouds. In the mid-afternoon the rain came, then thunder, lightning and giant hail stones. Little rivers of water flowed off the site. Tents leaked and mattresses and quilts got soaked. The mice sought refuge up on the ridge poles. The tombs and rooms in the 6H house have filled with water. It would be possible to swim in Caroline's grave complex.

Yesterday we met some German archaeologists at their site. They had a well-organised fort-like dig house with running water, solar panels and working toilets. I know this may look as if I am perpetuating a national stereotype, but the contrast with our camp was quite stark. The house was surrounded by a makeshift camp occupied by local workmen and barefoot boys playing football. It made me think of Housesteads on Hadrian's Wall and the civilian settlement surrounding the Roman fort.



Railway lines - left behind from an ancient archaeological dig

We drove to Fara, another Sumerian site, dissected by huge trenches and covered in potsherds. There is no vegetation at all. Down by the canal sheep and goats were being herded in a biblical scene by black-cloaked girls and women. Their dogs snapped angrily at us until beaten back.

On the way back we drove through Diwaniya's suq and main street. It smells of overflowing sewers and meat shops. The suburbs have no pavements, just mud tracks, and they are strewn with tin cans and yellow and red plastic bags. Dispersed houses stand in this ruined landscape. Back home the MCC and Nottinghamshire are playing cricket.

20 April

The days are long and hot. The young swallows in the storeroom have been eaten by a large lithe snake. It is now coiled above the door, shiny light grey-brown and dangerous-looking. Yesterday,

I swam in the canal amidst water reeds, lying on my back watching pied kingfishers dive for fish. As I dived in, a light brown water snake had glided away from the bank side. Someone told me later that this was likely to have been extremely venomous

21 April

It is the last day of Ramadan. Mehdi ripped his trousers and was very embarrassed, especially when Marcus tried to repair the hole with masking tape.

The snake is dead. There is a hornets' nest in the buffalo's skull. A faint smell of bleach and stagnant water heavy with discarded rice drifts from over by the kitchen. Frogs are croaking in the marsh by the canal. The sky is clear but dimming. Swallows dip in and out of the storeroom.

22 April Babylon and Hillah

Ruined Sumerian cities are not natural tourist attractions. Most of the buildings were made from mud bricks. Unexcavated they are little more than mounds of silty-brown mud rising gently above the flood plain. If excavated they look like large holes in the mud. Within years any exposed buildings crumble, become salinised and wash away.

The Iraqi answer to this problem at Babylon has been to reconstruct the site using concrete blocks. Teams of heavy Mercedes lorries thunder past as we visit. There are piles of blocks and chippings, concrete mixers and portacabins. It's all new and unreal – large, dead monumental architecture with a strangely decayed and underused modernity. Saddam Airport is the same, massively oversized for its limited traffic. Hillah has half-built and half-used large, modern, western-style shopping arcades. And so, at Babylon, there is a vast restaurant on a holiday Friday, empty. The picnic areas are unused and the souvenir shop abandoned, with just a pile of old guide-books. The museum is locked up and the site itself is largely deserted except for a few Bulgarian motorway construction workers and the occasional love-struck Iraqi couple.



A lorry on the way to rebuild Babylon



Rebuilding Babylon - work in progress



Rebuilding Babylon - spare bricks

We called in at Hillah on the way home. It seemed less depressing than Diwaniya and Afaq. I bought a dish-dasha (long shirt) for 10 dinars.

A team member has been diagnosed with dysentery and has to take various State Chemical compounds and a diet confined to a rice and yoghurt.

24 April

After a painful, hot and feverish night, I'm recovering from my worst ever attack of food poisoning. Yesterday at 10am just before breakfast I retired ill to my tent, feeling generally well but suffering from strong stomach cramps. Over the day my temperature rose and my pulse beat went up from 60 to 95. I had strange feverish dreams, my heartbeat pounded in my head and an electric pylon-like buzz filled my ears. Every muscle in my body felt stiff. The day and night passed awfully slowly. The walk to the toilet was horrendous. Going to the toilet is not good at the best of times. You sit perched on a board over a half-filled hole in the ground, surrounded by a swarm of flies trying to settle on your most intimate parts.

36 hours on I'm eating mashed potato, and how wonderful it is. My pulse beat is down to 75 but my body is weak, my head is still pumping and during the night I woke up in a cold sweat from having a dream about a skeleton.

25 April

The nausea and vomiting have gone. My headache is continuous, but no longer actually audible. Muscles are ache-free, the stomach cramps have gone, but my body is weak. Pulse back to 58. I managed to keep down a poached egg with khubuz and Marmite. As I lie on my bed watching the wind flap the tent, I can see a long line of small ants climbing up the tent pole to ravage the contents of Nigel's secret chocolate store.

26 April

Hour 81. The symptoms have nearly gone. My strength is returning, food has been eaten carefully and some work undertaken. But every two or three hours I get stomach cramps and have to rush to the toilet.

A cold wind blows, the sky greys, thunder rumbles and down come large blobs of vertical rain. The mound wadis fill and flow, the camp turns to mud, canvas gets soaked and people get flooded out of their tents. However, it does improve visibility on the site.

Abu Khamila seems remarkably cheerful considering his broken arm, the rain, a lack of tasks and his isolation from family and Baghdad. At least he can talk to Mohammed and Said, the cooks. He's now got a chicken and a cock in his tent which are tethered by their feet and are fed rice. He was very proud when the chicken produced its first egg. The cock goes off randomly day and night. Poor Donald, lying on his bed with heat exhaustion, thought he was aurally hallucinating. Abu Khamila caught some small fish which the cooks are gutting. They are very bony.



The Iraqi government guard and our cooks outside the dig house

27 April

Hour 97. My last symptom of illness, the headache, is waning. There are now only 13 days of work left.

1 May

For the last few days, I've been excavating a burial. There are at least two children, but having counted all the bones, there appears to be an extra leg. The arms, torsos and upper thighs were draped in all sizes and colours of strung beads. At their feet were stone vessels and cosmetic shells full of make-up and about 20 pots. All of this was covered with a palm leaf shroud and lots of Mesopotamian silt and then left for 4,000 years. The pots survived well but the bones were a little pulverised and looked as though they might have been messed about by passing rodents. The beads were dislodged and scattered. It took a long time to dig and record.

This was known as Grave 246 and ended up being described as 'exceptional' in *Excavations at Abu Salabikh 1988-89* by JN Postgate (published in *Iraq* by the British School of Archaeology in Iraq). The grave apparently included a small pottery vessel which 'has no parallels known to us'. My place in the footnotes of archaeological discovery has been secured.

Now I've finished this task I feel as though my work here is nearly done. Soon I'll be getting an exit visa ready for the Turkish Airlines flight out of Saddam International Airport. However, there are still 11 days to go, and a long list of hearths, bread ovens, floors, walls and graves to sort out. But today it is very hot and my heart is not quite in it.



The 6H house – silty walls and floors you can't see, cut by later graves (ie the holes)

Last week two Land Cruisers arrived full of British Council workers. In a burst of activity, they produced Tupperware containers full of sandwiches, sausage rolls, cold beer, coffee, cake and apple pie. A standard list of UK food but not what we see here. In return we showed them our site. They were very nice, long-standing expatriates. One lady had been in Iraq since the monarchy was toppled in a bloody revolution in 1958.

Over the last few weeks the days have settled into a steady routine. What at first seemed so foreign and different has now become normality. Tonight we will play volleyball after work, we will eat the same food and drink arak. The stars will come out and people will drift away to the sanctuary of their mosquito nets.



The camp on a fine day

2 May

Marcus and I cleaned out the drainage ditch leading from the kitchen. The cooks have been steadily filling it with left-over rice and orange glok and this has turned into a black organic slime. A rather horrible smell tainted post-lunch alcohol in the courtyard.

Donald is in a quandary. Archaeology or accountancy? He came to escape. But his escape has been turned into a kind of living hell because of persistent swarms of black midges and the repeated flooding of his tent during thunderstorms. Only the occasional cylinder seal seems to cheer him up.

It's 10 o'clock. The moon is up and the croaking of frogs from the marsh is drowning out the humming of mosquitos. Everyone has gone to bed.

3 May

I awoke in the night to a frantic scrabbling. The tent mouse had fallen from the central pole into Nigel's hanging bag of Mars Bars and chewing gum. Nigel placed the bag on the floor and smacked it repeatedly with his trainer. Somehow the mouse escaped.

5 May

Nicholas won't be back now. A shame. The Director is away at the end of his excavation. A slightly anticlimactic finale.

6 May

We are now in the final week of the season. I spent part of the day lifting a crushed storage jar from the secondary courtyard and removing a final fill from the long reception area. Then I joined a trip to Sumer to fill the water containers at the Police Station and to buy cucumbers, onions and tomato ketchup. In the evening we drove to Zibliyat and sat drinking white Portuguese wine and gin and tonic as the sun set bright orange over the desert.



The view from Zibliyat



Archaeologists enjoying the view from Zibliyat

10 May

Things are drawing to a close. People are writing their end of season reports, drawing sections and working away at outstanding problems. This morning I finished my final report, the stratigraphic sequence of all that I have dug and my notes to whoever will take over next year. Sadly, the 1989 season turned out to be the last. In 1990 Iraq invaded Kuwait and fieldwork never re-started.

After breakfast, a few of us spent a gruelling four hours scraping and cleaning the floors and walls in 6H house for an end of season photo. We had some half-hearted help from Abu Ali and Mehide. As soon as you clean one area it dries out. Then dust blows all over and it gets encrusted with salt. So, the result was not as good as I had hoped.



The end of season photo - the Toyota looked better than the archaeology

14 May

At Saddam International Airport, in my final brush with Iraqi bureaucracy, my camera and alarm clock batteries were confiscated, for reasons which were not made clear. Baghdad looked flat and bright in the desert night as we took off. Back home in Sheffield, everything seems green, wealthy and efficient. But the people look pale.



Reeds - not shaken by the wind