

## Resilient Landscapes: The Evolution of Riparian Landscape Studies in Southern Iraq

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### Landscape histories

This chapter explores the history of studies and reconstructions of the Tigris-Euphrates river systems in Southern Mesopotamia, and draws a disruptive conclusion: that the Akkad-dominated and static view of the Lower Mesopotamian plain must end. No representation of river courses as single black lines on white maps is ever fully representative of contemporary riparian dynamics anywhere, but in regions (like Babylonia) where understanding coupled anthropogenic and natural systems is essential to understanding the *longue durée* of enduring human settlement and civilisation, such representations fundamentally obscure both critical mechanisms, and the critical importance, of watershed transformations across space and through time.

### Landscape and archaeology

Landscape studies have a long history in Middle Eastern archaeology, even if use of the term 'landscape archaeology' to describe these activities is relatively recent. Thousands of years of continuous settlement there has left us a documentary palimpsest – a contemporary landscape comprising many partial, superimposed layers of relict features capped by a spatially continuous, but temporally discontinuous, blanket of archaeological material visible on the surface (Cherry 1983; Wilkinson 2003: 5). Tony Wilkinson's innovative contributions to that body of work, and ongoing efforts by his former cadre of graduate students, grew from his pioneering introduction of advances in multi-scalar analysis to that region. These synthetic examinations of natural and cultural processes, conducted both on the ground and via remote sensing, have resulted in significant breakthroughs toward understanding complex phenomena of human-environment interactions.

From the mid-19th through the early-20th centuries, travellers and tourists, amateur archaeologists, and colonial government employees made initial forays toward understanding the abiding history of human-environment relations in the Middle East. They recorded general descriptions of various aspects of the

territories through which they passed, as well as life ways of those who inhabited them. These antiquarians and sojourners marvelled at the density and variety of ancient remains visible on the modern surface. They lamented their ongoing destruction and inaccessibility. They wondered how once-great civilisations arose in areas that now, in their absolute desiccation, seemed most forbidding and unforgiving. They set about recording standing monuments and features using photographs, measurements, sketches, and maps (e.g. Ainsworth 1842; Bell 1907; 1910; Chesney 1868; Layard 1882; Loftus 1856; Rich 1818; Taylor 1865), sinking the roots of later scholarly interest in the landscape context of ancient civilisations.

These early practitioners understood that the deeply layered archaeological record contains evidence for crucial transformations in human history, such as the emergence of the first cities, states, and empires; the spread of long-distance trade networks; the evolution of populations and their demographic changes, and the development of specialised and diversified agropastoral economies. What they could not yet realise (or, if they did realise, did not yet have the tools or techniques to address) was that understanding the mechanisms underpinning these evolving institutions and practices requires multi-scalar comparison of human-environment interactions, including interactions within individual sites, the spaces between sites, site networks, and across entire regions – informed by evidentiary data and analyses from other disciplines.

Subsequent historical and archaeological investigations in Mesopotamia attempted to address some of these lacunae. With the addition of palaeobotany, zooarchaeology, and settlement survey to the archaeological cannon, archaeologists of Mesopotamia began to integrate landscape-oriented studies into broader themes of why and how: why the first complex societies arose here, and how the once (presumably) lush and verdant landscape became the depopulated and harsh environment visible today. Among the many historical, ethnographic and archaeological observations of that time, irrigation agriculture – indeed, any harnessing of the power of water and