

# Field Photography

## The Marsh Arabs of Iraq, 1934

In 1934, physical anthropologist Henry Field (1902–1986) led an expedition to conduct an anthropometric survey of the Near East. Sponsored by Field's uncle, a scion of Chicago department store magnate Marshall Field, the expedition spent four and a half months among Iraqi tribes in the upper and lower Tigris-Euphrates region. Based on photographs given to the Peabody Museum by Henry Field in 1953, this exhibit is a narrative of the expedition to the Marsh Arab lands as seen through the lenses of cameras and excerpts from Field's memoir and publications.

### *In the Garden of Eden*

Considered by some to be the biblical Garden of Eden, the marshes of southern Iraq form a unique ecosystem that has existed for more than 7,000 years. Until recently, the Marsh Arabs, or Ma'dan, inhabited some 12,000 square miles of these wetlands around the meeting of the Tigris and Euphrates in southern Iraq. The Ma'dan, like the majority of the population in southern Iraq, are Shia Muslims. Dwelling in clusters of mud huts that floated on water, the Ma'dan used canoes (*mashhūfs*) for transportation through waterways. Besides fishing, they domesticated water buffaloes; cultivated rice, dates, and sugarcane; and used papyrus for weaving reed mats.

Beginning in the early 1950s, ruling Iraqi governments, with the aid of British engineers, introduced a plan—never fully implemented—to drain the marshlands in order to extend arable land and to control endemic diseases. In 1992, after quelling a major rebellion involving the Marsh Arabs, Saddam Hussein ordered construction of a large canal and several dams that sealed the wetlands from the rivers. As a

result, the marshes were drained, converting the land into a desert and forcing the Marsh Arabs to abandon their homes for refugee camps in Iran or neighboring cities in Iraq.

After the fall of Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime, returning Marsh Arabs tore down the dams that had been built a decade earlier, and the marshes began to fill once more. Several national and international assistance projects are currently committed to restoring the marsh ecosystem and economy and to providing infrastructure, including health care, education, and electricity. The future of the Marsh Arabs, however, remains unclear.

### *Field at Work*

To conduct the anthropometric survey, Henry Field and his colleagues required permissions from the Iraqi authorities but also from Sheikh Fāliḥ al-Ṣaiḥūd, the Paramount Sheikh of Āl bu Moḥammad, a large coalition of tribes in the southeastern part of al-Ḥawiza Marsh. One of the most respected tribal leaders



in the region, Sheikh Fālih accepted the expedition members as his guests. The 85-year-old, six-foot-tall, 300-pound sheikh left a very strong impression on the expedition members. In addition to the anthropometric and landscape photographs, the team also photographed Sheikh Fālih and his family.

Field embarked on a comparative anthropometric study in the marshes to determine whether the basic population of Mesopotamia, now Iraq, had remained unchanged during the past six thousand years. He collected 221 profiles of men, describing their physical characteristics. Although the female members of the expedition anticipated similar research among the Marsh Arab women, only a handful granted permission. Instead, they collected data about the dialect and Ma'dan culture and customs, women's tattooing in particular.

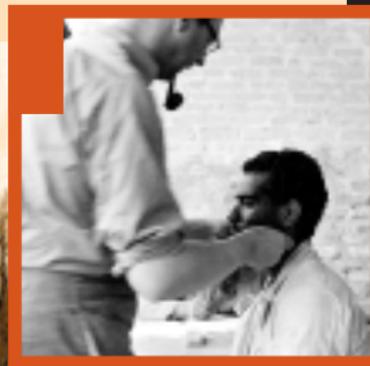
Based on his research, Field concluded that there was little difference between Ma'dan and non-Ma'dan peoples; his findings were in line with the work of Franz Boas who was already revolutionizing American anthropology by arguing that race is not determined by biology but rather by environment and culture.



## Anthropometry

Anthropometry is the systematic measurement of the human body. In the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries, anthropometry was primarily concerned with the classification of races and identification of potential criminals according to various physical, especially facial, characteristics. Its practitioners measured the dimensions of the body, including stature, trunk length, and facial and skull ratios (craniometry), and they took blood and hair samples as well.

The dangers of this type of racial classification and stereotyping became clear by the mid-twentieth century, especially after the tragedies of the Holocaust. Today, anthropometry has limited applications in physical anthropology, where it is used in paleoanthropology, the study through fossil remains of human origins and evolution. It has practical applications as well, including the assessment of nutritional status, the monitoring of child development, and the industrial design of furniture and clothing.



## Bibliography

Eden Again Project. "Eden Again," a Web site developed to provide information about the Iraq Foundation's Eden Again Project and to educate about the marshlands and their significance to the world, <http://www.edenagain.org> (accessed August 30, 2004).

Field, Henry. *The Anthropology of Iraq*, Part 1, no. 1, *The Upper Euphrates*, and no. 2, *The Lower Euphrates-Tigris Region*. Chicago: Field Museum, 1949, 1940.

Thesiger, Wilfred. *The Marsh Arabs*. New York: Dutton, 1964.

### Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology

11 Divinity Ave., Cambridge MA 02138  
617-496-1027 [www.peabody.harvard.edu](http://www.peabody.harvard.edu)

©2004 Peabody Museum  
Design: Wm.R.Brinkley & Associates, Inc.