Marsh Arab thimbles

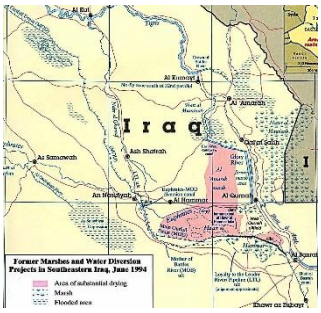
I handled this thimble below whilst researching thimbles with an Australian connection. It had been purchased in the Middle East by an Australian soldier. The thimble had been handed down thru the family of a soldier who served in the Middle East during World War 1. He had bought it as a gift for his mother. This was a quite common practise by soldiers, whilst visiting the bazaars, to buy souvenirs to be sent back to a mother, wife, sweetheart or sister. I later learnt that it wasn't a thimble made by the Marsh Arabs as I'd naively expected.



thimble sent home during WW1 - with Arabic lettering

Who are the Marsh Arabs? They are a group of people who live on small islands in the vast area (7700 square miles) of marshes or wetlands in what was known as Mesopotamia – modern Iraq. The Tigris and Euphrates bind the marshes area. The inhabitants live on the riverbanks which were surrounded by reeds, which can reach up to 3-4 times the height of a human.
In 1991 Saddam Hussein had the marshes drained, which severely interrupted a 5000 year way of life. The marshes were later reflooded and some of the people have returned to live their traditional way of life.





What are these thimbles made of? They are composed of 800 silver (a low grade: so they do scratch and dent easily). There are usually no marks indicating the grade of silver. A couple of examples have emerged where 800 is stamped on the thimble.
With age the surface can have a greyish hue. Being made of a lightweight silver the joining site may split at the rim.
Thimble height is approximately 25mm.

Marsh Arab thimbles are engraved with small scenes, which wrap around the thimble. The method used is where the silversmith makes a black metal alloy and affixes this over the engraving. Once polished, the scene is in a black outline: the process is known as niello (or miro, the local term).
I have noticed that some of this thimble niello work has worn off over time.
Typically the thimbles are smoothly polished, with handmade indentations (which can also be small dashes) on the flat apex. A few of the Marsh Arab thimbles are slightly domed. You may encounter examples of indentations on the upper half of the thimble body.
Most often there is no pronounced rim or less often, there is a rolled rim, or a flat rim.

The scenes depicted are from their everyday life – some are finely engraved with lovely detail – others are quite simple or even a tad crudely done – but that naivety adds to their charm.
There are usually several images showing this unique way of life – usually a date palm or two – often a felucca (dhow), one method of river transport – reed house, sometimes arched, known as raba or mudhif - camels - long, flat boats, which are poled along - known as mashoof. Camels are often a theme, tho they are desert animals. Only a few thimbles depict water buffalo, which were the mainstay of the Marsh Arab way of life. The water or marshes will always feature, as it was integral to their lives. This is usually depicted by small horizontal dash-type lines. Skilled artists were able to depict river reflections.

Some scenes show figures – like a camel rider or a figure poling a boat thru the reeds.

I have read descriptions by eBay sellers that the camels are in the desert – the Marsh Arab camel thimbles are only depicted alongside water.
Nor were there oases.
The Nile description of the scene is also incorrect.


naïve camel engraving


example where niello has worn off one scene

You will notice that some of the objects engraved have added lines, tho this is not common.



The area of traditional silversmithing, according to Holmes, is around Amara. He describes the Marsh Arabs as Sabaeans (Sabeans), a small sect who were craftsmen and boatbuilders. Holmes erroneously used British terms like coracles for the small boats and punting. They refer to themselves as the Ma'dan people.

The most famous of these silversmiths was **Zahroon** (Zahrun).
Occasionally there is a maker's mark in Arabic inscribed alongside the continuous scenes (some of these marks were described as birds in TSL).


flat craft filled with reeds

Another small section of thimbles shows the Tomb of Ezra, which is situated on the bank of the Tigris.

As Marsh Arab thimbles were mainly created for the tourist market, it won't come as a surprise to see a couple of designs with tourist hotspots in Egypt engraved around them.

The ideal way to view these special little treasures is to see the whole wraparound scene – some of the thimbles shown come from TSL catalogues where only one view can be seen – tho there is usually accompanying text. Occasionally a date is supplied, and I have included this approximate date, as this may have been given by the seller to TSL.

Being hand engraved there are no two thimbles alike. Sometimes the differences are minuscule, but each needs to be recorded.

I have chosen to feature these thimbles by the dominant scene shown. No matter what the theme is those with lettering or Arabic are shown separately – these attract a premium price.

I have noticed that sellers on eBay have described thimbles as Marsh Arab where the thimble is marked 900. They are not: rather Russian niello. Persian thimbles are out of the scope of this topic.

I will show a sample of thimbles offered for sale as Marsh Arab, which in my opinion, they are not.

In conclusion I will include some items made for soldiers or tourists.

camels


camel being led


camel rider - felucca
MHL monogram on verso


camel rider – felucca
rolled rim


camel with load – felucca with figure – grave
rolled rim

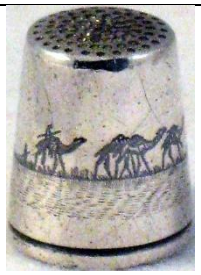

man with stick - camel with load – palms
rolled rim


camel – palm – poling craft with figure – reeds
flat rim

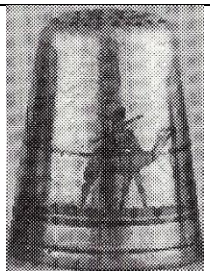

camel with pack
rolled rim
smaller size
1940s


camel rider – camel - felucca
1930s


camel – reed house – reeds – palms - felucca
striations above scene



camel rider - camels



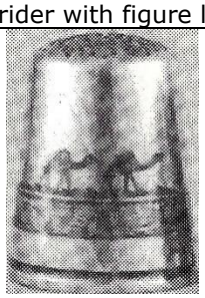
camel rider with figure leading



camel rider – feluccas - fish



camel rider - palm



camels



camel rider
flat rim



camels with saddles – palm
unusual to find traditional thimble indentations



camels – palm - reeds



camel rider – palm - camel



camels – poling craft - palms



camel - palm



camel - palm



camel with long neck and rider - felucca



camel - reed houses – dhow
rolled rim



camel riders - palms



camels – poling craft – palms
indentations on top half
rolled rim



camel – dhow - palms



camel rider – ceremonial reed house - palm



camels – figure poling craft - felucca - palms
with reflections
rolled rim



camel rider - poling craft with
figure - camel rider



camel



camel rider - poling craft



camel - figure poling craft - palms

feluccas



felucca – poling craft - palms



felucca with figure – poling craft



felucca with figure - palms



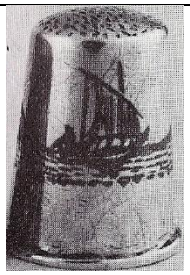
felucca with figure
1930s



felucca with figure
rolled rim
1900s



felucca with figure – poling craft - floral



felucca with figure
flat rim
1900s





felucca – reed house - palm
with reflections
striated sky
rolled rim
cross on apex



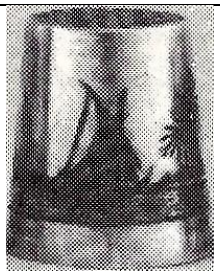
felucca – palms – reed house



felucca - palms - poling craft



felucca – palms – reed house



felucca – palms



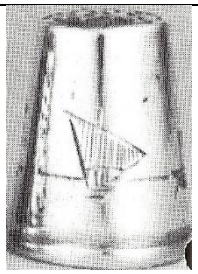
felucca – palms – reed house
miro work omitted
rolled rim



felucca – palm
rolled rim



feluccas – palms



felucca – palms
1960s



felucca – palms



feluccas
raised rim



felucca – palm



felucca - poling craft – palm – water buffalo



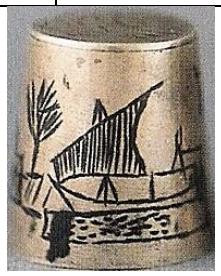
felucca – reed house – reeds
scratches' indentations on apex
child's size



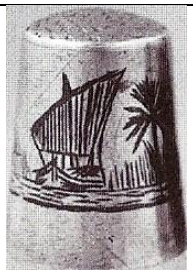
felucca – reed house – palms
rolled rim



felucca – reed house – palms



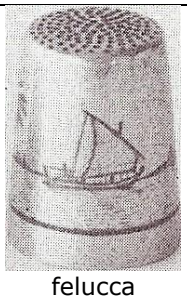
felucca – reed houses



felucca – reeds - palms



felucca with figure – poling
craft - reeds



felucca



felucca – palms
rolled rim
miro work has worn off and apex severely holed



felucca



felucca – palms
1940s



felucca – stick figure
apex damaged



felucca – reeds - poling craft - palm



felucca with figure - palms



feluccas - palms - tethered camel
rolled rim
1910s



feluccas - palms - poling craft - birds



feluccas - palms – reeds
rolled rim



feluccas – palms – poling craft
- reed houses



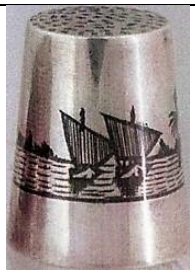
feluccas - palms



feluccas



feluccas - palms



feluccas – palms
1940s



felucca



feluccas – palms – poling craft



felucca – poling craft - palms



feluccas – palm – reeds
rolled rim



felucca – birds
indentations on top half



felucca with figures - palm



felucca with figure
rolled rim



felucca - palm – poling craft - palm
flat rim



felucca – palms
owner's initial *I*



feluccas with figures – figure poling craft



feluccas – reeds - ceremonial reed house - palm



feluccas with figure - reeds



felucca with figure – palms
rolled rim



feluccas – reeds – palms
with reflections



felucca – reeds – palms – figure poling craft





feluccas
800 stamped on outer rim



feluccas – palm - reeds



felucca – palms
with reflections



felucca – palms - reeds



felucca with figure – figures poling craft – birds – water buffalo



felucca – palm – figure poling craft
apex has no indentations
the waters are depicted by several horizontal lines
flat rim
1890s



feluccas – figure poling craft - palms



felucca - palms



felucca



felucca

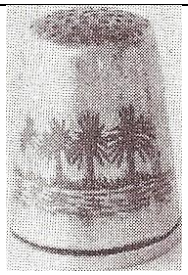
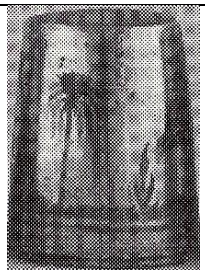
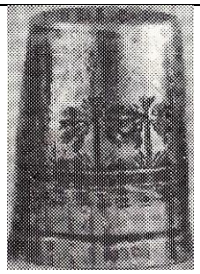


felucca – palms - lilies



feluccas

palms (where no other views available)

 palm rolled rim 1940s	 palms – felucca - birds	 palms
 palm indentations on top half 1900s	 palms rolled rim	 palms
 palms – felucca 1920s	 palms – felucca – reeds rolled rim	 palms rolled rim
 palm – reeds - birds	 palms	 palms – camel rider

poling craft (mashoof)
(where no other views available)


figure poling craft - palm


figure poling craft


figure poling craft


figures poling craft - palms


figure poling craft – felucca - palm

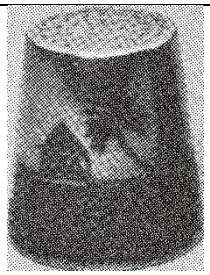
reed houses
(raba were for personal living – mudhif for ceremonial life or a guesthouse)


reed houses - birds


ceremonial reed house with clocktower


reed house - palm


ceremonial reed house – palm - poling craft
with reflections
rolled rim

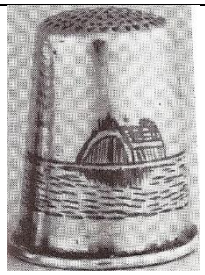

reed house - palm


ceremonial reed house – reeds - felucca


reed house – water buffalo – palm - bird



reed house
indentations on top half
child's size



ceremonial reed house
with reflection
rolled rim
1900s



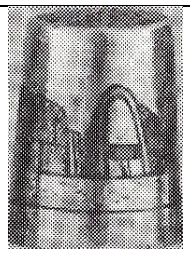
reed house
rolled rim



ceremonial reed house - palms
indented apex is divided into quarters



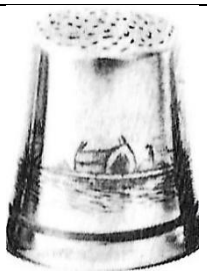
ceremonial reed house – felucca - palms
with reflections
rolled rim



ceremonial reed house
134mm



reed house - palm



ceremonial reed house



ceremonial reed house – felucca - palm



reed house – palm – ceremonial reed house – palms



ceremonial reed house – feluccas - palms



ceremonial reed house – felucca – palms
rolled rim



reed house – palms – felucca - camels



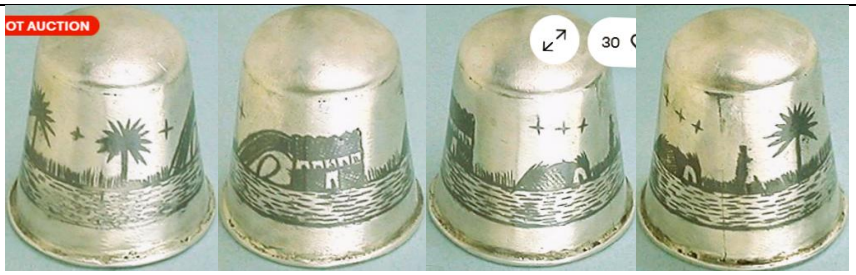
reed house – palm
reflections



felucca – ceremonial house – palms with reflections



reed house – palms – poling craft



ceremonial house – reed house – figure - palms



reed house – palms - figure poling craft – felucca



reed house – palms
rare to fine a stone apex - carnelian

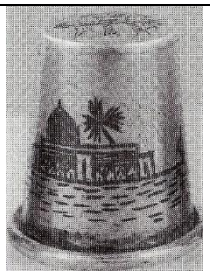
Tomb of Ezra







Tomb of Ezra – felucca



Tomb of Ezra - palm



Tomb of Ezra – palms – felucca
split at rim at join



Tomb of Ezra – palms
flat rim



Tomb of Ezra - palm



Tomb of Ezra - palms - reeds



Tomb of Ezra – palm – reeds
child's size



Tomb of Ezra – figure poling craft



Tomb of Ezra – palms
zigzag frieze



palm – camel rider – felucca – Tomb of Ezra



Tomb of Ezra - felucca - palm



Tomb of Ezra – ceremonial reed house – palms - birds



poling craft – Tomb of Ezra - palms



felucca with figure – Tomb of Ezra
1915-1918



felucca with figure – Tomb of Exra



Tomb of Ezra - felucca



Tomb of Ezra – palms - reed house



Tomb of Ezra - palms

lettering or Arabic signatures



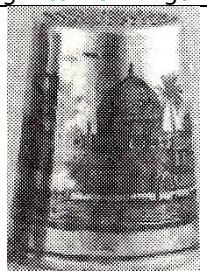
Arabic lettering - palms



Arabic lettering - camel – figures poling craft



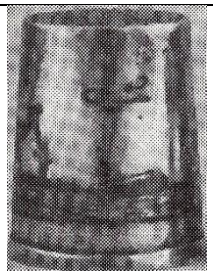
Arabic lettering - felucca



Arabic lettering **I SA'ED** - Tomb of Ezra
20mm




Arabic lettering - felucca - palms




Arabic lettering - felucca - palms – camel being led



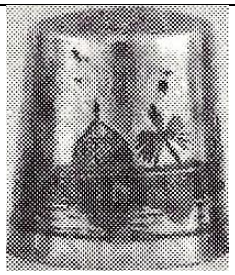
IRAQ 1943
palms - camel




Arabic lettering - feluccas



Arabic lettering - Tomb of Ezra – felucca - palm



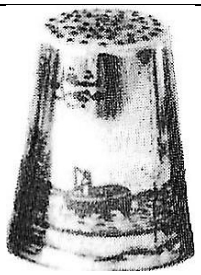
AMARA and **M in a circle** – tomb of Ezra - palm



Arabic lettering - palms - felucca



Arabic lettering – camel with load



Arabic lettering - reed house




B in a FISH shape - camel rider – pyramids – palms



Arabic lettering - reed houses - felucca



Arabic lettering – camel rider



superimposed **E** over **B** - felucca - reeds - palms



Arabic lettering – felucca - palms
unusual frieze of small flowers around scenes
MJK monogram in cartouche
flat rim



Tomb of Ezra – palms - camel



G on verso - felucca

no photo

Tomb of Ezra - palms
Arabic lettering **HANDMADE IN BASRA**



IRAQ 1943 – Tomb of Ezra – palms - camel



IRAN SYLVIA 1942
camel - palms



SHAIBAH IRAQ.1946
poling craft – ceremonial reed house



TO MOTHER IRAQ 1944
camels



FROM R 1945 around rim - reed – felucca – palm
Arabic lettering

rare themes



birds – palms – reed house



bird - palm



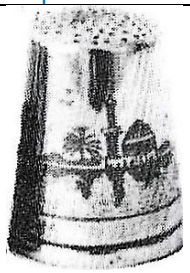
flowers - felucca – palm – poling craft – birds



mosque - feluccas



mosque - palms - figure poling craft
flat rim



mosque - palm



mosque – felucca with figures



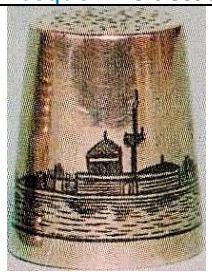
mosque – poling craft – camel
ribbed rim



mosque – feluccas



mosque – palms



mosque
reflections



pyramids – palms – felucca
indentations on upper half



pyramids – reeded house



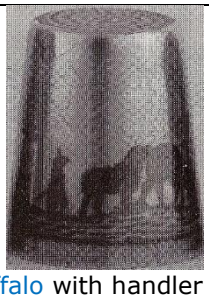
sphinx – two pyramids (half the size of the sphinx) – camel - palms



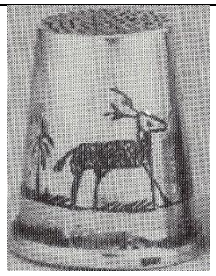
water buffalo - birds - herder – figures poling craft with shade cover



water buffalo – felucca – reeds - palms



water buffalo with handler – palms - felucca



water buffalo – reed house - pelican



water buffalo - palm - reeds – ceremonial reed house



poling craft - water buffalo - palms



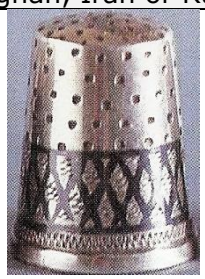
mystery building palms - felucca

incorrectly described as Marsh Arab thimbles

probably Afghan, Iran or Russian niello



band
indentations on at top
loop attached at rim



indentations on at top





rolled rim



beaded rim



beaded rim



reeds



this one is a puzzle with no niello – does anyone know more?

Other small Marsh Arab items

how much easier was the engraver's task on these larger items?



rare pincushion with thimble



IRAQ 1942
bracelet



cigarette case



Napkin ring



compact



mug



cufflinks



flat container



small container



compact



container

References

Tor Eigeland *All the lands were sea: stories of the Marsh Arabs.* 2013
Susan Jean Gowan *Thimbles of Australia*. 1998
Barbara Hluboky *Thimbles of Mesopotamia a.k.a. Marsh Arab thimbles.* TCI Bulletin summer 2003
Edwin Holmes *Thimbles from Mesopotamia*. Thimble Society of London spring 1988
Edwin Holmes *Thimbles from Mesopotamia*. Thimble Notes & Queries no 9, winter 1990 (same as above + photo)
Thimble Society of London catalogues 1985-2009

Contributors

Wendi Aguiar | Joanna Blackie-Sew Many Bits | Yolanta Bogdziewicz | Pawel Brzyski | Charlotte Goldberg
William Isbister | Simon Lloyd-Edwards | Bridget Mc Connel | Caroline Meacham-Elegant Arts | Ray Nimmo
Holly Phillips | Wolf-Dieter Scholz | Jean Taylor | Krystyna Zagajewska

This listing of Marsh Arab thimbles does not purport to be complete or accurate in all aspects.
Rather it invites comments and contributions to add to our knowledge. My thanks to the contributors.

EMAIL thimbleselect@bigpond.com TO SHARE YOUR KNOWLEDGE

© Sue Gowan

November 2023