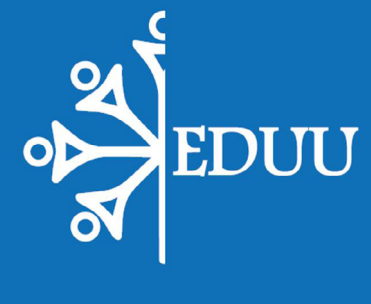


“LOCAL VOICES” ON HERITAGE: EXPLORING PERCEPTIONS OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES IN SOUTHERN IRAQ



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FRAMEWORK

This research was developed in the framework of the project “EDUU - Education and Cultural Heritage Enhancement for Social Cohesion in Iraq” financed by the European Union under the Civil Society Organisations-Local Authorities Programme in Iraq (2015-2017) and coordinated by N. Marchetti (University of Bologna). EDUU – the verb “to know” in the Akkadian language – seeks to create an EU-Iraq partnership in the area of education and cultural heritage enhancement, connecting Universities, secondary schools and museums in Iraq. This partnership is working together with the aim of enhancing the pluralism of Iraqi civil society and raising awareness on the diverse and multicultural past of Iraq.

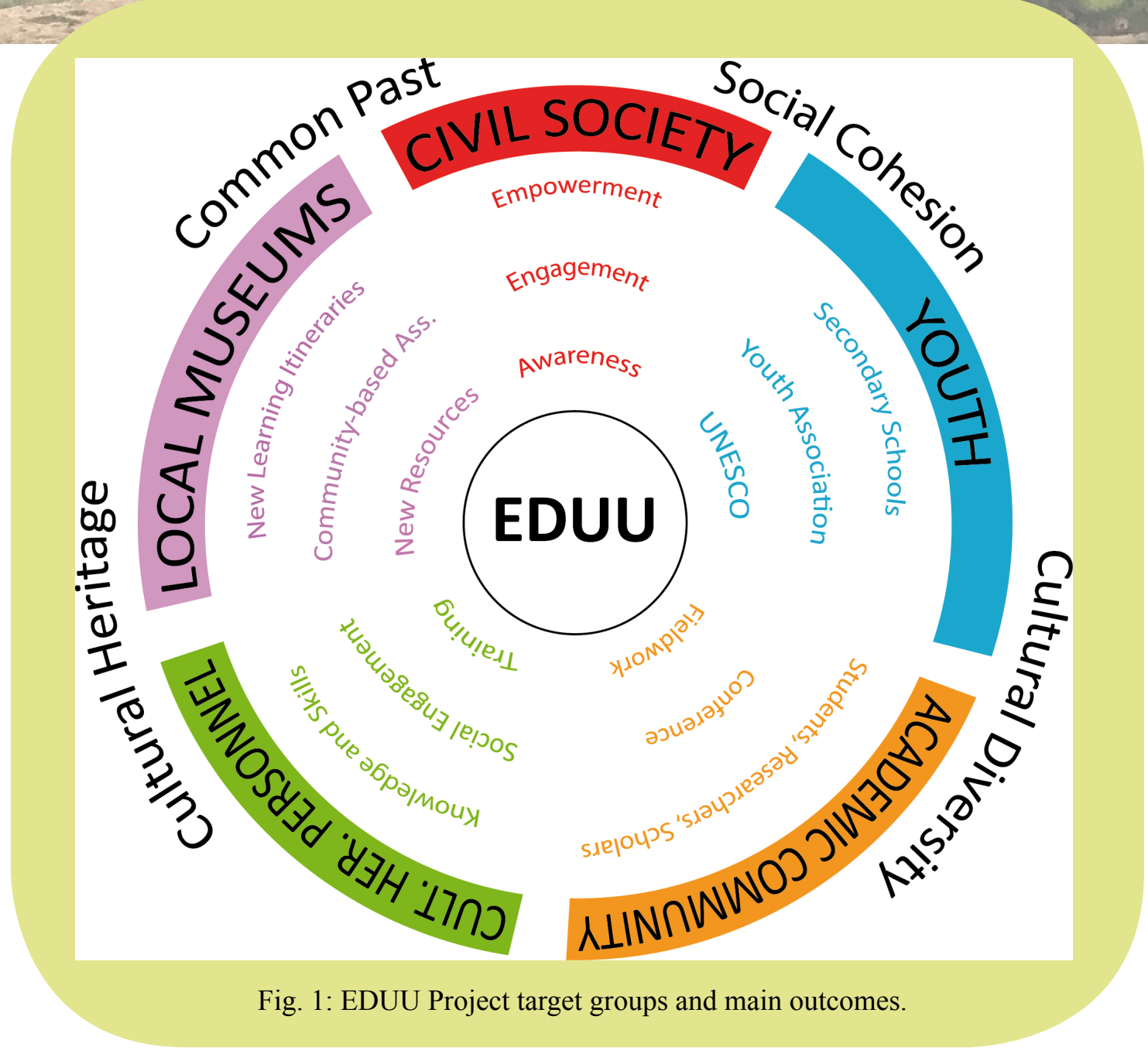


Fig. 1: EDUU Project target groups and main outcomes.

AIMS AND METHOD

The aim of this poster is to present a cross section of preliminary results of an ethno-archaeological survey carried out in the region of Najaf (southern Iraq). The research question focused on an important issue related to the preservation of archaeological sites and cultural heritage in Iraq. The survey aimed at understanding and recording “local” voices, meaning the perceptions of the local communities around archaeological sites. Are archaeological sites considered and valued as part of the tangible local cultural heritage? Are they part of the local narrative of the community’s past and present history? Which space do the archaeological sites occupy in the cognitive maps of local communities, are they placed inside or outside the community borders? The first step involved the mapping of seven concentrations of unexplored archaeological sites, by means of aerial photographs. Following this, a survey was conducted by combining immersive observation, semi-structured interviews and focus groups. The target groups included different families living near archaeological sites, SBAH operators, archaeological police and community leaders.

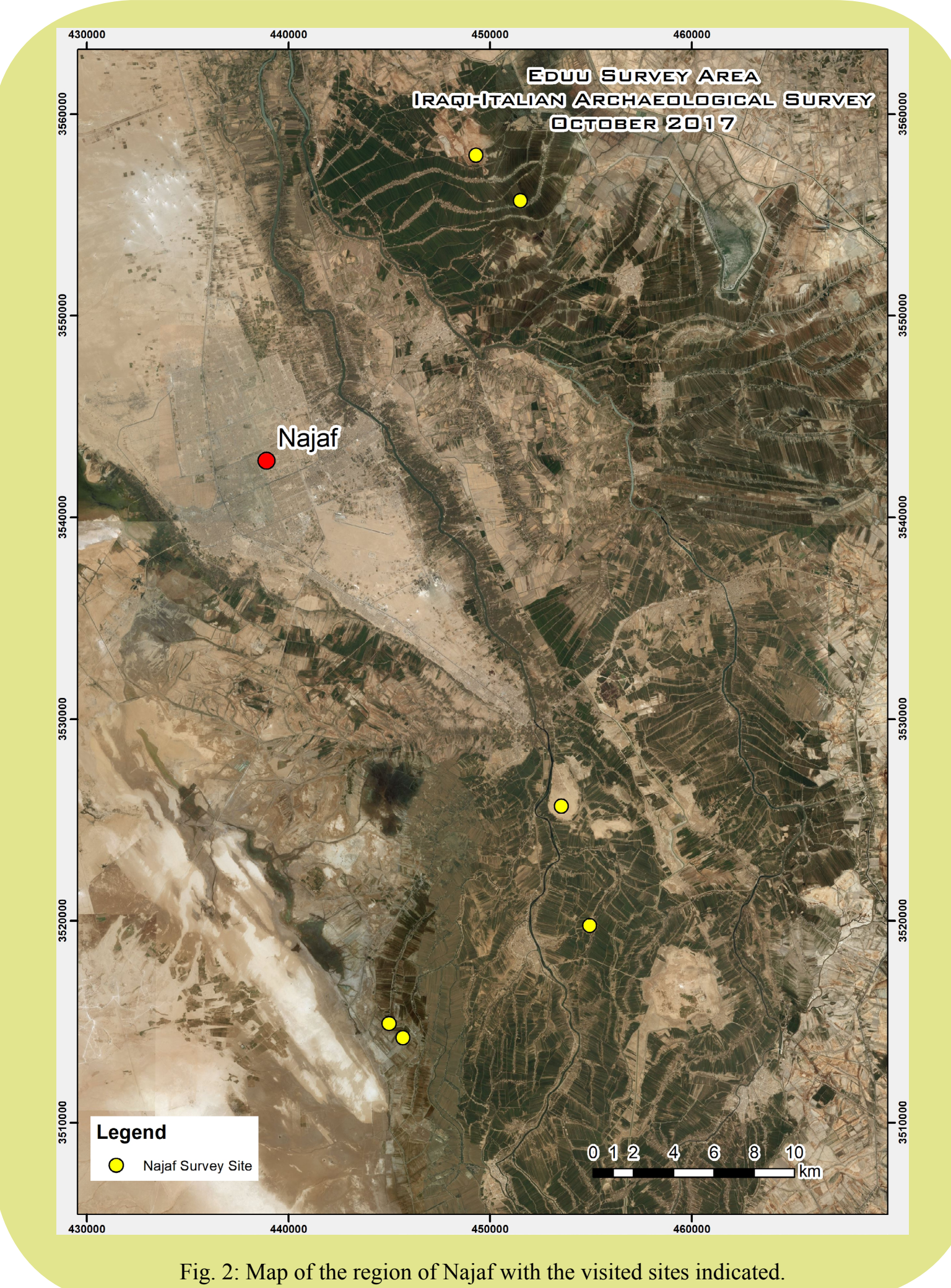


Fig. 2: Map of the region of Najaf with the visited sites indicated.

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES MANAGEMENT IN THE NAJAF REGION

The region of Najaf is located around 150 km South of Baghdad. In the whole region there are around 800 archaeological sites, often without name and in the most cases not excavated. In figure 2 the dots represent the archaeological sites involved in the preliminary survey conducted in October 2017. Looting in the area was intense and widespread in 2003 and in the years immediately following, due to the dreadful political situation. In the present years this phenomenon has considerably decreased, also thanks to a major control by the State institutions and the archaeological police special training, together with a greater awareness of the local communities. Indeed, generally speaking, looting is more intense in depopulated areas, while the archaeological sites located next to inhabited and/or cultivated areas tend to be much protected. In 1995 all the archaeological sites of the region became State property and the public institution of the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage of Iraq (SBAH) took control of them. From that moment onwards, a hierarchical division of roles for the sites management was established. The SBAH controlled all the archaeological sites and directly employed the keepers. The SBAH of the region of Najaf is one of the largest in Iraq, after the ones of Mosul, Basra and Qadisiyah regions. There is a total of 10 chief keepers and 300 keepers, which have to report directly to their reference chief keeper. Despite this clear division of tasks, the keepers do not receive a training from the SBAH on the history of the sites and on their management. The keepers are generally chosen due to their vicinity to the site and their knowledge of the community there living. Additionally, it is important to note that there are no female keepers in the whole region. The keepers are public officials, monthly paid by the SBAH. Besides the keepers, the other figures that cooperate for the protection of the sites are the archaeological policemen. They received a special training in the Police Academy on how to protect the heritage and on the history and archaeology of Iraq in general. When people living close to a site sees someone illegally excavating, it is reported to the keepers who call the archaeological police.

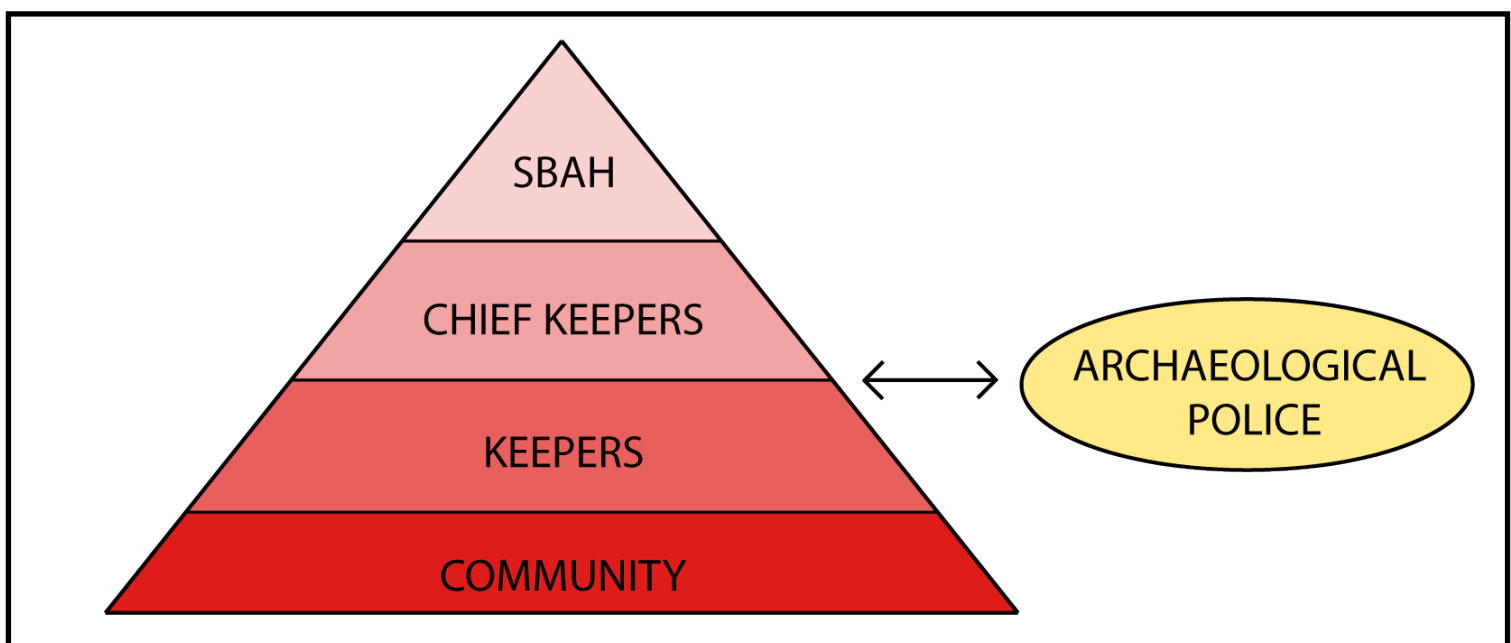
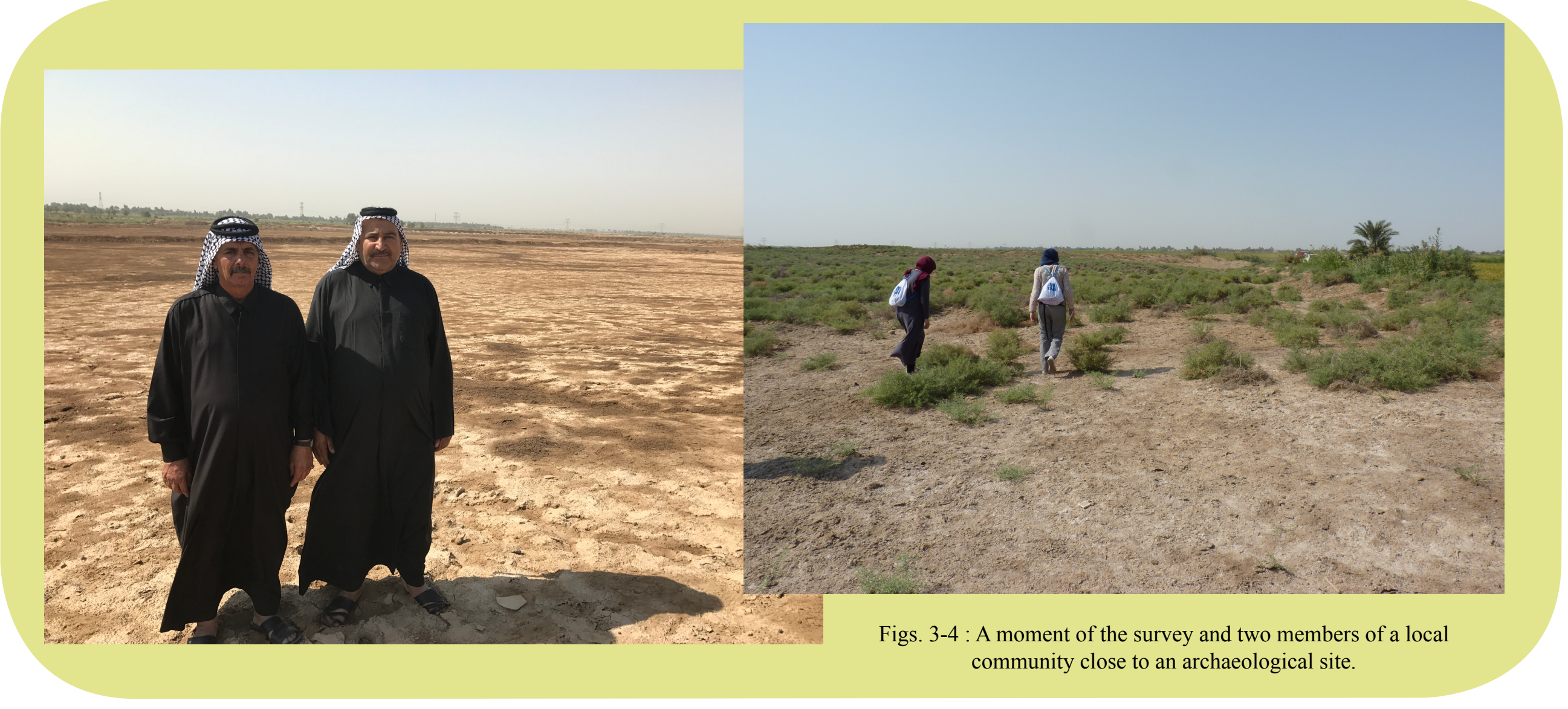


Fig. 5 : Pyramid showing the archaeological sites management



Figs. 3-4 : A moment of the survey and two members of a local community close to an archaeological site.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

The results of this preliminary study can be summarized as follows. The local community’s understanding of the archaeological sites is linked to: 1) the storytelling of local leaders; 2) the presence of the keepers; 3) the presence of international archaeologists and researchers. Local communities know if there are archaeological sites situated nearby their villages/houses (in the majority of the cases) and they have general ideas on the sites, but they do not have information on the tangible value of archaeological remains (i.e. the historical period, the material culture, the architectural structures, etc).
- *Storytelling of local leaders.* Stories may vary but there are some similarities that can be found, such as the idea of a glorious ancient past (a civilization more advanced than the present one) or the belief that the ancient populations were their direct ancestors.
- *The presence of the keepers.* The keepers and the chief keepers play an essential role in connecting local communities and archaeological sites. This is underlined by the fact that the local communities already link the archaeological sites with their keepers: people may not know the exact location and name of the site, but they always know the name of the keeper (and his personal information). The archaeological sites are alive and have a place in the community thanks to the keepers. At the same time keepers do not help the community in shaping a local understanding of the archaeological sites, past identities and heritage. This is due to the fact that also keepers have a limited knowledge of the sites and they are not asked by the SBAH to have an archaeological awareness of the history of the area.
- *The presence of international archaeologists and researchers.* In the interviews people have often underlined that the archaeological sites can boost the local economy, by attracting international tourists. This idea is given by the fact that, at the present, archaeologists and researchers are a big part of the international community in Iraq and a source of income for the national economy. This fact is spreading the hope that also in rural areas of southern Iraq, the economy can be supported by the presence of archaeological sites. This idea is also linked to the belief that in all the archaeological sites a wide range of treasures can be found.



Fig. 6 : Focus group with local community leaders.

CONCLUSIVE REMARKS

In conclusion, this preliminary study aims to provide new paths of research to the international scientific community. As the archaeological excavations are gradually increasing in number in southern Iraq, it would be necessary to flank them with anthropological and ethno-archaeological investigations. International archaeologists and researchers should collaborate with local community leaders, site keepers and SBAH operators, in order to make the projects more successful both in terms of archaeological results and cultural heritage preservation. It would be of paramount importance to understand the perceptions of the local communities towards the archaeological sites and monuments and to listen to the “local voices” in order to better protect and give more value to the local cultural heritage.



Fig. 7: Group photo of the Iraqi-Italian survey team with policemen and a site keeper.

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