

# Marsh Arab thimbles

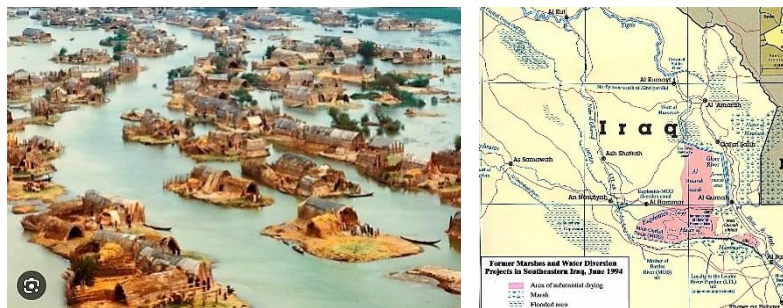
I handled this thimble below whilst researching thimbles with an Australian connection. It had been purchased in the Middle East by an Australian soldier. The thimble had been handed down thru the family of a soldier who served in the Middle East during World War 1. He had bought it as a gift for his 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 but 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** (Zahrūn).

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 show 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.

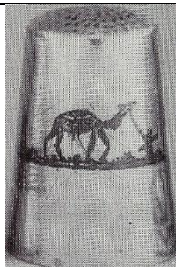
I have chosen to feature these thimbles by the dominant scene shown. No matter what the theme is those with lettering or Arabic are shown separately – these attract a premium price.

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



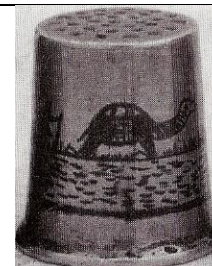
camel with load – felucca with figure – grave  
rolled rim



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

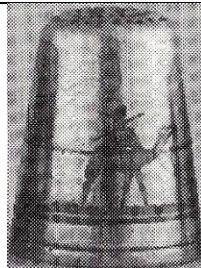


camel – reed house – reeds – palms - felucca  
striations above scene





camel rider - camels



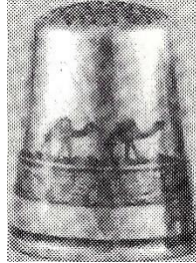
camel rider with figure leading



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

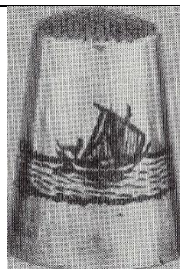


camel

### 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 - palm  
with reflections  
striated sky  
rolled rim  
cross on apex



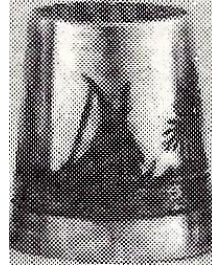
felucca - palms - reed house



felucca - palms - poling craft



felucca - palms - reed house



felucca - palms



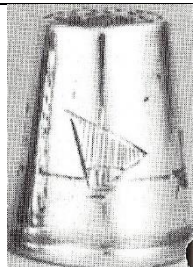
felucca - palms - reed house  
miro work omitted  
rolled rim



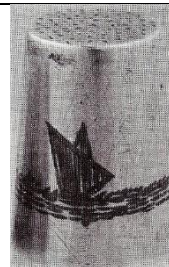
felucca - palm  
rolled rim



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



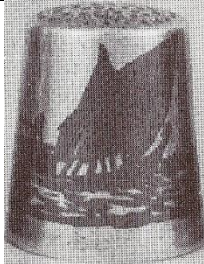
felucca with figure – poling  
craft - reeds



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



**palms** (where no other views available)



palm  
rolled rim  
1940s



palms – felucca - birds



palms



palm  
indentations on top half  
1900s



palms  
rolled rim



palms



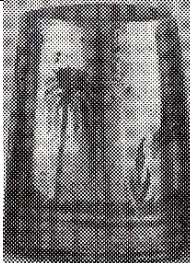
palms – felucca  
1920s



palms – felucca – reeds  
rolled rim



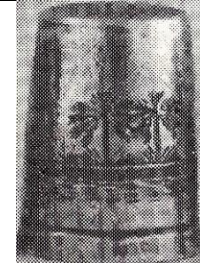
palms  
rolled rim



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

**reed houses**

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



reed houses - birds



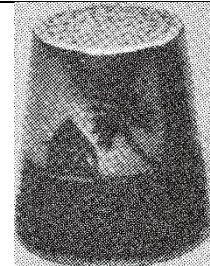
ceremonial reed house with  
clocktower



reed house - palm



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



reed house - palm



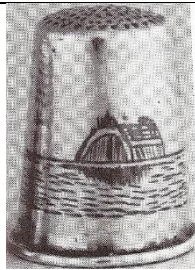
ceremonial reed house – reeds - felucca



reed house – water buffalo – palm - bird



reed house  
indentations on top half  
child's size



ceremonial reed house  
with reflection  
rolled rim  
1900s



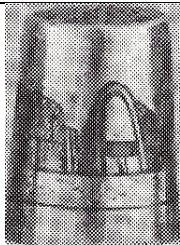
reed house  
rolled rim



ceremonial reed house - palms  
indented apex is divided into quarters



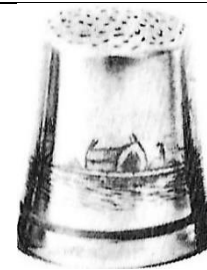
ceremonial reed house - felucca - palms  
with reflections  
rolled rim



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

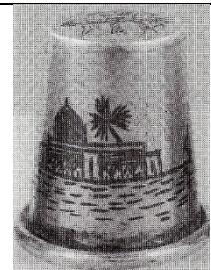


ceremonial reed house – felucca – palms  
rolled rim

### Tomb of Ezra



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



Tomb of Ezra - palm



Tomb of Ezra – palms  
flat rim



Tomb of Ezra - palm



Tomb of Ezra – palm – reeds  
child's size



Tomb of Ezra - palms - reeds



Tomb of Ezra – figure poling craft



Tomb of Ezra – palms  
zigzag frieze





palm – camel rider – felucca – Tomb of Ezra



Tomb of Ezra - felucca - palm

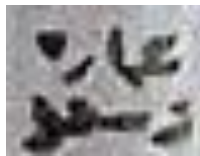


Tomb of Ezra – ceremonial reed house – palms - birds



poling craft – Tomb of Ezra - palms

### lettering or Arabic signatures



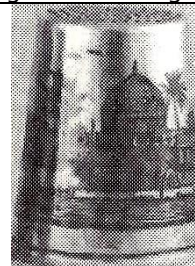
Arabic lettering - palms



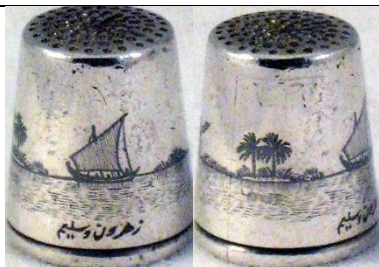
Arabic lettering - camel – figures poling craft



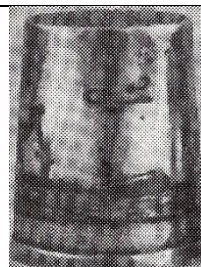
Arabic lettering - felucca



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



Arabic lettering - felucca - palms



Arabic lettering - felucca - palms – camel being led





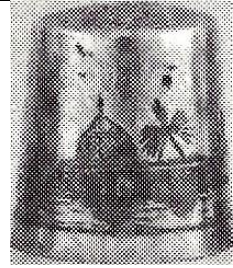
**IRAQ 1943**  
palms - camel



Arabic lettering - feluccas



Arabic lettering - Tomb of Ezra - felucca - palm



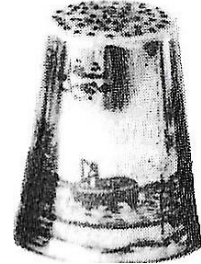
**AMARA** and **M in a circle** - tomb of Ezra - palm



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



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



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



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



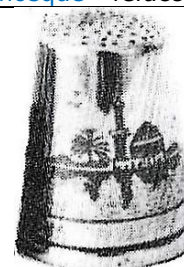
flowers - felucca - palm - poling craft - birds



mosque - feluccas



mosque - palms - figure poling craft  
flat rim



mosque - palm



mosque - felucca with figures



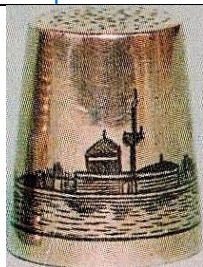
mosque - poling craft - camel  
ribbed rim



mosque - feluccas



mosque - palms



mosque  
reflections



pyramids - palms - felucca  
indentations on upper half





pyramids – reeded house



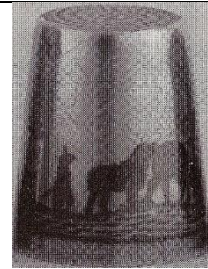
sphinx – two pyramids (half the size of the sphinx) – camel – palms



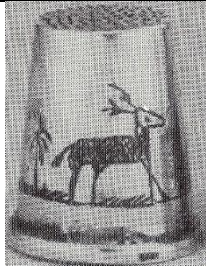
water buffalo – birds – herder – figures poling craft with shade cover



water buffalo – felucca – reeds – palms



water buffalo with herder – palms – felucca



water buffalo – reed house – pelican



water buffalo – palm – reeds – ceremonial reed house



poling craft – water buffalo – palms



**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

**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





## 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  
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 Edwin Holmes *Thimbles from Mesopotamia*. *Thimble Notes & Queries* no 9, winter 1990 (same as above + photo)  
 Thimble Society of London catalogues 1985-2009

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

EMAIL [thimbleselect@bigpond.com](mailto:thimbleselect@bigpond.com) TO SHARE YOUR KNOWLEDGE

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