Paradise Found?

The Archaeology of Bahrain
From the invention of writing at the end of the 4th MBC by the Sumerian people of southern Iraq, and down through the ages, the peoples of Mesopotamia were extremely prolific in the practice of their art. They were phenomenal story tellers and record keepers, leaving us a huge corpus of texts. Their stories and cosmological myths served to define the people, their origins and their place in the order of the world. These stories were surely deeply embedded in their culture from the earliest times, preceding their ability to write them down. The vast numbers of lists and business records attest to a rich culture of international trade, commerce and an intrepid spirit which formed the foundations of their societies. There are also Quasi-historical texts that proclaim the military prowess of kings and the names of the places they conquered and dominated.

It is in these texts that one name appears many times, that of a place called Dilmun. The commercial texts and kingly proclamations show that Dilmun is clearly a place and archaeology has shown this to be true.

Initially I would like to talk, briefly and sadly inadequately, about the mythical poems concerning Dilmun, the Sumerian 'Paradise Land' and of these 3 are particularly relevant here.
The Sumerian creation story of Enki and Ninhirsag describes the creation of Dilmun and portrays it as a Pure, Virginal and Pristine land which Enki provides with abundant fresh water from the Abzu, a primeval, sweet subsurface ocean upon which the world rested; Ninhirsag was his wife and the great earth mother, goddess of the land.
To the Sumerians, Paradise meant the place of origins, the site of the original and benevolent creation. Part of the poem describes the attributes of Dilmun.

In Dilmun the raven utters no cry,
The wild hen utters not the cry of the wild hen,
The lion kills not,
The wolf snatches not the lamb,
Unknown is the kid-devouring wild dog,
Unknown is the grain-devouring boar,
The malt which the widow spreads on the roof—
The birds of heaven do not eat up that malt,
The dove droops not the head,
The sick-eyed says not “I am sick-eyed,”
The “sick-headed” says not “I am sick-headed,”
Its old woman says not “I am an old woman,”
Its old man says not “I am an old man,”

Enki appointed Nin-Sikilla, his daughter, as guardian goddess of Dilmun who asks him to supply fresh water from the Abzu to Dilmun.

Enki's provision of fresh water is interesting too as both Bahrain, "the two seas", and the Eastern coastal provinces of Saudi Arabia, chiefly at al-Hasa and al-Qatif, have many fresh water springs both on land and under the sea.
In the poem Enki answers.
"... fresh waters shall run out of the ground for you from the earth's shore, from Nanna's radiant high temple, from the mouth of the waters running underground."
"May the waters rise up from it into your great basins. May your city drink water aplenty from them. May Dilmun drink water aplenty from them. May your pools of salt water become pools of fresh water. May your city become an emporium on the quay for the Land. May Dilmun become an emporium on the quay for the Land."
The story of the flood, the Garden of Eden and the Epic of Gilgamesh
There is a clay tablet from Eridu known as the 'Deluge Tablet' from the form 'Eridu genesis story', written in Akkadian and dated to between c2300-2100 BC, which tells a Sumerian flood story.
There are also early 17th century BC tablets of found at the religious centre of Nippur, and fragments of the same story from a temple library at Ur (from a library of over 35,000 tablets) of southern
The Sumerian story of the Flood is remarkably similar to that found in the Biblical Genesis and was reproduced down the ages. In the story, the Sumerian Noah and last antediluvian king of Sumer, Zuisudra, after a warning from Enki saves the seed of mankind, the animals and plants from the flood. As his reward, Zuisudra and his wife were granted life like the gods (immortality) and sent to live in the paradise land of Dilmun, the land of the living.
'Anu and Enlil cherished Zuisudra, life like a god they gave him, breath eternal like a god they bring down to him. Then Zuisudra the king, the preserver of the name of vegetation and of the seed of mankind, in the land of the crossing, the land of Dilmun, the place where the sun rises, they caused to dwell'
Further bearing on the sacred nature of Dilmun comes from The Epic of Gilgamesh, a real king of Uruk who ruled around 2700 BC and engendered a mythology of his own. The epic itself contains a version of the Flood story.

In a Babylonian version of the epic from around 1800 BC the story tells of Gilgamesh and his great friend Enkidu.

Late in the story Enkidu dies and following his death Gilgamesh becomes obsessed with his own mortality, he sets off on a quest to find a way to restore his youth. He is directed to find the Babylonian Zuisudra, Utu-napishtim, in his island home, which he does. Utu-napishtim tells Gilgamesh of the flower of immortality which grows where the sweet and bitter seas meet. Gilgamesh goes out into the sea and dives in the manner of a pearl diver and picks the flower. Upon his return he washes himself clean of salt and having not slept for days falls asleep. Whilst Gilgamesh sleeps a snake comes along and eats the flower, sheds its skin and leaves.

Thus, in Dilmun, man is robbed of immortality by the snake.

Bureaucratic and Campaign texts paint a different picture.

Earliest reference to Dilmun, indeed the earliest written texts yet known, comes from tablets dated to about 3200 BC found in the temple of Inanna in Uruk, the city that was later ruled Gilgamesh (c 2700 BC). They are commercial in nature, there is a mention of a Dilmun tax collector which appears in a list of the professions. There are also lists of metal objects, in which a 'Dilmun axe' is noted and Dilmun is associated with textiles.

There are also stories of military conquest.

Sargon of akkad (2334-2279 bc) claimed to have 'washed his spears' in the lower sea and conquered dilmun.
Naramsin of Akkad (c. 2254–2218 BC) made war on Makan. Captured the lord of Makan and brought diorite back to Sumer.

Gudea of Lagash (c. 2144–2124 BC) claims to have twice conquered Makan bringing back copper and diorite.

One in particular, from Sargon II of Assyria, the Biblical Sharru-ukin (722-705 BC), found in Khorsabad provides a geographical location for Dilmun.

This text gives an account of Sargon's campaign against one Merodach-Baladan of Babylon. Sargon says 'I bought under my sway Bit-lakin on the shore of the bitter sea as far as the border of Dilmun' adding that 'Uperi, King of Dilmun, whose abode is situated, like a fish, 30 double hours away in the midst of the sea of the rising sun, heard of the might of my sovereignty and sent gifts'.

Last reference is dated to 544 BC from king Nabonidus of Babylon and mentions a 'governor of Dilmun'.

Bahrain is a small, island some 32 miles long by about 11 miles wide covering an area of around 233 square miles. Most of the island is low-lying and barren desert although there is a fertile strip of land, about 1/3 of the island, in the north of Bahrain on which are located many fresh water springs.
Date, almond, fig, and pomegranate trees grow, settlements and archaeological sites are concentrated in areas of these springs as they are in Hasa province in eastern coastal Saudi Arabia.
Historical archaeological work
Some archaeological work has taken place in the past however I will only mention two investigations which are the most relevant here.
It had long been known that there are a large number of ancient burial mounds on the island of Bahrain.
In 1879 the Government of India's Foreign Dept sent Captain E.L. Durant of the 3rd Madras Light Infantry to Bahrain to report on the political situation there with the cover of conducting a survey the antiquities of the island. His was the first report on the archaeology of Bahrain and the Arabian Gulf.
Durant surveyed and opened several small mounds and one of the large mounds at the village of A'ali.
He found an interesting piece of basalt, the Durant stone, with an 18th CBC Old Babylonian inscription which when translated read, 'palace, of Rimun, servant of the god Inzak, man of (the tribe of) Agarum'

In an appendix to Durant’s report by one Henry Rawlinson, an interesting figure himself who was instrumental to the decipherment of Mesopotamian cuneiform script and who had been working on 8th CBC Assyrian texts, identified the god Inzak as patron god of Dilmun and therefore identified Dilmun with Bahrain.

Further word was carried out by Mr and Mrs Theodore Bent in 1889 who also opened a few A’ali mounds but it was Colonel F.B. Prideaux, in 1906-1908, who began archaeological investigations proper on behalf of the Archaeological Survey of India. Prideaux opened 67 small mounds and dug into 8 Aali mounds and recovered fragments of ivory statuettes and 2 gold rings.

It is interesting to note that Prideaux suggested that the etymology of name al-Bahrain is 'the two seas' and he refers to the eastern Saudi Arabian coast as Bahrain (Throwback to Dilmun?). I will return to this a little later.

In 1929 Earnest MacKay was sent to Bahrain by Flinders Petrie for the British School of Archaeology in Egypt, opened around 34 small tumulii, also near A’ali.

He reported a variety of cist types in these mounds, mostly T shaped, some double deckers containing some bone, pottery, painted ostrich egg fragments. MacKay dated them to around 1500BC.
In 1953 P.V. Glob and T. G. Bibby of the Prehistoric Museum in Aarhus, Denmark, dispatched the Danish Archeological Bahrain-Expedition, with the main purpose of looking for traces of settlements on the island of prehistoric date. This and subsequent expeditions were crucial to the understanding of Bahraini archaeology and its relevance to the Mesopotamian 'Paradise Land' of Dilmun. Geoffrey Bibby's book 'Looking for Dilmun' is a thoroughly good read and highly recommended.

Archaeological sites:
There are two Major sites on Bahrain rediscovered by the Danes which demonstrate undoubtable links with Sumer, The Qala’at al-Bahrain and the temple site at Barbar.
The largest site on Bahrain is Qala’at al-Bahrain:
It is an enormous tell on the island’s northern shoreline, some 15m high, 800m east-west and 400m north-south, over 16,000 m² in area
The site is dominated by a fort, the Qala`at built by the Portuguese following their invasion of Bahrain in AD 1521 during the Portuguese-Persian war of 1507-1622.
The Danes noted that surrounding the fort there was clear evidence of buildings visible at the surface and recognized the site as a tell. They subsequently carried out extensive excavations and did much to establish a chronology for the tell and Bahrain as a whole.
To date only around 5% of the tell has been excavated revealing, so far, a 7-'city' sequence of structures: monumental public, commercial, religious and military buildings as well as residences dating from the early 3rd MBC onwards.
The stratigraphy is complex but all main phases were visible in strategic soundages giving the a chronology for the site, and Bahrain as a whole.
There was some evidence of occupation prior to the establishment of a city on the site but there are no native Bahraini ceramics prior to c 2300 BC. There were some Fragments of 5th MBC Ubaid pottery from Mesopotamia,
(Umm an Nar pottery (2600-2000 BC) from the eastern Gulf (note Indian bull motif), and some fragments of Softstone UAN intercultural vessels Slide 23 (found in Mesopotamia, eastern Iran, Mohenjo-Daro, Afghanistan, Tarut and the Gulf).
City 1 c2750-2400 BC. Was not really a city at all rather an unwalled and modest settlement, possibly destroyed by Sargons armies, attested to by a burnt destruction layer. Slide 24 C1 shares material assemblage as pre-city 1 levels: and now the first native pottery, Barbar chain ridge pottery.

The people who built city 1 returned and rebuilt as city 2
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City 2 There is a major increase in settlement size from around c2400 reaching up to 40+ hectares by 1750 BC and the first monumental architecture on the site. This is the time of the Dilmun traders of Mesopotamian texts and represents the height of Dilmun as a trading power. Slide 25 A massive city wall is founded forming extensive ramparts; 11 feet thick.
and the city had harbour facilities attested to by stonework visible in the shallow water off the site.
Weights were found in a seaward 'customs house' outside the city wall and are of a type originated in the Indus valley. These weights are found throughout the gulf and southern Iraq.

Other foreign materials like copper (Oman, India, Persia?), ivory (India, Africa?) Steatite and carnelian (India) were found.
There is some cont. of Barbar CR pottery but there is the appearance of new Barbar plain ridge pottery. Also found were Dilmun seals and a mirror.
Distinctive circular, low bossed stamp seals were found and dated to late 3rd MBC, the Danes called them Dilmun seals.
The general type are found from Ur to the Indus. Many Ur seals depicted figures and animals whilst Indus seals with Indus script feature characteristic humped bulls however these Dilmun round seals were uncommon in both places, less than 1% of seals found, most Mesopotamian types being cylinders and Indus seals being square.
City 3
c1750-1200 BC represent levels contemporary with the Kassite dynasty of Mesopotamia.
This level features monumental architecture including a large rectangular 'palace' building and adjacent rooms. The main ceramic type in C3 is a thick yellowish straw tempered caramel ware of tall, slender roughly made pots. Several unpublished cuneiform tablets were found. Kassite rule of Mesopotamia ended with Assyrian conquest around 1200 BC. and city III was destroyed around 1190 BC +/- 60 years.
City 4 c 7th CBC are the Neo-Babylonian/Assyrian levels and were rich in finds including a hoard of silver objects. Danish excavations revealed a monumental Palace with a large pillared hall 25ft x 40ft.
The hall contained 3 bitumen coated terracotta bath shaped sarcophagi dated to c650bc buried in a pit dug through the palace floor.
Also 14 pits in the hall floor and contemporary with it were of great interest: 12 contained bowls dated to c700bc: One covered with a potsherd contained 26 beads of agate, amethyst, faience and small silver clasp (necklace): 5 were lidded with inverted bowls, one of which was sealed with a thick layer of gypsum plaster; 4 had large potsherd covers; three uncovered.
bowls contained the coiled up skeletons of snakes and 3 contained snake bones. In most bowls there was also a small bead of turquoise. Over 40 such deposits have been found in other palace rooms. No occupation layers only collapse debris.

City 5 is the last pre-Islamic level which is dated by Greek attic pottery to the Hellenistic period, around 330 BC, and associated with Alexander the Great. After this time the site seems to have been abandoned until Islamic times.

City 6: Islamic fort. City 7: Portuguese fort.
The Barbar temple site lies about 4km west of Qala’at al-Bahrain on the northern shore and shows clear Sumerian connections. It was Rediscovered by the Danes in 1954 and it comprised a 5-6m high low mound some 60m in diameter. The site seems to have been deliberately buried in sand and gravel, stabilized with layers of gypsum.
The buildings show 3 phases which conform in part to types and practices found in Sumer, for example the practice of building a new temple on the buried remains of the old. There are rectangular structures atop a central terrace with a perimeter wall and sacred well.
Temple 1 38 contemporary with QAB city 1. UAN pottery contemporary with this phase date it to between c 2600-2400 BC.
Built from local Bahraini stone. Offerings were deposited in the clay core of the temple terrace consisting of dozens of clay goblets found in separate groups of seven beakers which were broken and buried as well as copper objects in small heaps or singly. Foundation deposits were also a Sumerian practice.
In the south-western corner of the terrace steps led down to a square-built well over a natural spring, this has led to the suggestion that the temple was dedicated to Enki from the Dilmun myth. The central terrace was preserved in its full height, 2 metres, with the remains of a trapezoid shrine in the center and adjoining rooms.
Temples 2 and 3 contemporary with city 2 QAB c2400-1750 BC and was an extension and enlargement of temple I which was largely dismantled, but the central cult complex was left to stand and new altars were raised above it. The oval terrace was enlarged with limestone which must have been carried by boat from nearby Jidda island.
Temple two masonry is of high quality
The slabbed central courtyard was raised, walled off and contained two semicircular offering tables and a low altar between them of a known Mesopotamian type
a pit in front of altar produced Barbar potsherds; Lapis lazuli, marble and carnelian beads; fragments of alabaster vessels
a copper figure of supplicant
a bird and a bulls head
Fragments of twisted copper sheet with rows of nail holes and several 100 copper nails found in a square pit in the north eastern corner of the courtyard. A Long stairway now led from the central terrace to the improved subterranean shrine. Halfway down the stair was a portal, and from there the shrine was roofed. The shrine featured a well/cistern Slide 44 which may have represented the abzu (abyssal ocean upon which the whole world rests) and provided a possible link to Enki. Three conduits, qanats, provided outflow from the well to the surrounding landscape which today are date gardens. A number of 'Dilmun' seals were recovered from this well.
East of the temple lay an oval sacrificial court, connected by a paved ramp and a staircase. The floor of the court was covered with ashes and the bones of cattle and sheep and there are holed stones, like anchors, possibly used to tether sacrificial animals?
Both types of Barbar pottery were present.
Ad-Diraz (temple site).
Located in a very agricultural area there was a substantial 3rd MBC settlement including a possible temple dated to between 2400-1750 BC.
It is a mysterious site, different from Barbar, no parallels in Bahrain, Mesopotamia or Indus. The site has been greatly disturbed by agriculture and development. There is no evidence of which god was worshipped here. Finds include a snake burial, Barbar pottery, two Dilmun seals depicting animals.
1.5km west is the Mid 3rd MBC Ain Umm Sujoor ('Mother of the spring of overflowing waters') Bibby's 'holy well' It was a small well temple however the building was utterly destroyed in Islamic times.
The Moundfields.
They are between 4.5-9m in dia and 2m high.
There are estimated to be between 175-350,000 mounds on Bahrain covering an area of some 3 km2, found in distinct moundfields within the islands interior.
Earliest date to 2700 BC at Medinet Hamad, an extension of the A'ali cemetery, are of a type identified as Umm an-Nar, known from the eastern Gulf, some containing both Ubaid and UAN sherds. These possibly represent the earliest permanent settlers on Bahrain.
Most appear cont. with city 2 (2400-1750 bc).
Mounds found to contain a single burial (where present) in a stone lined central cist with various configurations of alcoves, mostly 'T' shaped. Entrances generally face West towards the setting sun.
The mounds have yielded pottery, shell, stamp seals, ivory fragments, stone vessel fragments, copper objects (weapons). Many robbed out however.
Also, contemporary moundfields are found on mainland Saudi Arabia at Jabrin, Abqaiq and Dharan and there is evidence of Dilmun settlement at Tarut island and Thaj.
The site at A'ali is a vast cemetery area with huge 'Royal' mounds and moundfields.
Some 20 large 'royal' mounds survive and are cont. with city 2 early 2 MBC.
the most impressive of which is royal mound 8. At 12m high and 50m across, and housing five separate chambers.
These mounds are enclosed with ring walls which may have originally risen to a considerable height forming low, broad towers.
The site has been very degraded by development of roads and the adjacent village of A'ali
All so far excavated have been thoroughly robbed out however luxury finds from excavations include fine pottery goblets
fragments of ostrich egg vessels and very fine copper goblet.
Saar (burial, temple site and settlement). cont. with city2 only
The settlement and possible temple at Saar is extensive. It is a late 3rd-early 2nd MBC complex of buildings connected by alleys and a main roadway. The road runs up from a dry wadi bed to a ridge where there is a building interpreted as a temple.
The columned temple, like Diraz is mysterious but different and there is no evidence of which god(s) were worshipped here either.
Interesting possible altar very like the Hut motif of softstone vessels (next slide)
Hut motif of softstone vessels
Of the houses excavated finds include typical Barbar pottery, fine chlorite vessels, copper fishhooks, bitumen nodules and bitumen coated baskets, and numerous shells from shellfish, including pearl oyster, tiny seed pearls.
nearly 100 early Dilmun seals (five seals were found in a single house).
There is a huge burial complex at Saar with many hundred connected burials of. This complex is the largest on Bahrain and contained a specific area for children.
There are also large multi-chambered tumuli with ring walls accessed by shaft. There are peripheral burials with a cist built against main ring wall. The tombs contain some human remains, CR potsherds and many seals.
Trading centre of Dilmun. 3rd to 1st MBC Records of trade and commerce. It is clear from the archaeological and textual evidence from Mesopotamia, and the archaeological evidence from the Arabian Gulf and India that a thriving trade network existed through the Gulf for a considerable time. As the Indus script is as yet undeciphered and there are very few texts from Bahrain itself we must rely on the splendid record keepers of Mesopotamia for our evidence.
From the mid 3rd MBC Mesopotamian records begin to talk of the import of goods from the east via the Arabian Gulf. EDIII texts of Urnanshe, king of Lagash (c 2550-2500 bc) records beer bread, date palm, tin, copper, Dilmun shekel and claims 'the ships of Dilmun, from foreign lands, bought me wood as tribute'

After c2500 BC the names of two further places enter the record; Makan, now identified as the eastern UAE and Oman; Meluhha, now identified as the Indus Valley civilization in India.

Sargon of Akkad (2334-2279 bc) imported copper directly from Makan, and there were Meluhhan translators in Sumer. He 'washed his spears' in the lower sea, conquered Dilmun and claimed that the 'ships from Meluhha, the ships from Magan, the ships from Dilmun, he made tie up alongside the quay of Agade'

Gudea of Lagash (c. 2144–2124 BC) imported copper, diorite, wood from Makan: rare woods, gold, tin, lapis lazuli and carnelian from Meluhha
At the end of Ur III in the reign if Ibbisin (2028-2004) Dilmun appears as an agent of transhipment and this cont. through the Old Babylonian period (2017-1712 BC). Dilmun rises as a merchant power and becomes a trading emporium and now encompasses eastern Saudi Arabia (eg Abqaiq, Thaj and Tarut island) up to Failaka island off southern Kuwait.

Imports into Mesopotamia via Dilmun include ivory, copper, gold, softstone and exotic stone, dates, textiles and wooden objects and by the time of Rim-Sin of Larsa (1822-1763 BC) there are the records of professional traders, the alik tilmun, "the seafaring merchants of Ur"

1745 BC provides the last 2nd MBC reference to copper from Dilmun, it also mentions Alasiya (Cyprus) as a source of copper.

Throughout this time throughout the Gulf from Sumer to the Indus a common standard of weights is used, the Indus valley weight system (finds at qala’at al Bahrain customs house)
Conclusion.

Firstly I should reiterate that the Dilmun culture was not confined to Bahrain. Extensive archaeological remains dating to the height Dilmun’s power have been found on the Saudi Arabian mainland and up the coast to Failaka island off southern Kuwait. Sites like a huge tell on Tarut island another at Thaj and settlement at Abqaiq show that Dilmun was an extensive place. Sites like the Tarut tell have not been excavated and promise to delight future archaeologists.

Dilmun existed as a place on both myth and fact.
Conclusion.

The Sumerians, and the later Babylonians and Assyrians wrote down stories of creation and a paradise land called Dilmun. Elements of these stories seem to have become incorporated into old testament stories like the Garden of Eden and The Flood. Although no records of these stories have been yet found dating earlier than the later 2nd MBC the stories they tell and almost certainly much older. The myths link Dilmun with Enki, lord of the abyssal sea, paradise and Zuisudra. Bahrain, with its numerous freshwater springs fits the bill. The epic of Gilgamesh links the island home of Zuisudra with the Paradise land where man is robbed of immortality by the snake. Bahraini pearl divers and the archaeological evidence is consistent with this view.

That Dilmun was a trading entrepot is borne out by considerable archaeological evidence from Mesopotamia, the Arabian Gulf, the Indus Valley and Bahrain. A common system of weights and measures and the distinctive authentification of goods by the use of seals together with the many Mesopotamian textual references locate Dilmun firmly on Bahrain and the eastern Saudi Arabian coast.

Has paradise been found? Possibly.