

Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey Project

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1994-1995 Winter Season

Occasional Newsletter

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Sir Bani Yas yields major new finds

Sponsors will, we hope, excuse us for having been so involved with the activity of the full Spring season that we haven't been able to keep the Newsletter coming over the past few weeks.

With the season now over, and all the archaeologists except for Jakub Czastka having returned home, there's at last a bit of time to explain something of what has been going on.

Those sponsors who were able, however, to accept our invitation to visit Sir Bani Yas earlier this month (our thanks to ADNOC Administration Director Ahmed Al Sayegh for leading the airborne party for the day) will know that the results of the season's work on the island have, yet again, been quite dramatic. A full announcement will be made in due course, but the summary that follows should provide some idea of what has been happening.

The work has involved examination of four separate sites.

The focus of attention, naturally, has been on the major site in the Al Khor area on the east of the island, where the discovery last year of fine plaster crosses indicated the presence of the first known pre-Islamic Christian settlement anywhere in the UAE.

During the course of the season, an extensive area was cleared in the vicinity of where the plaster crosses were found last year, aided by a magnetometer survey which identified anomalies under the surface.

The result of the work was the uncovering of the outline of a large stone building, approximately 14 metres by 11 metres, constructed, unlike other buildings found on the site last year, of an imported stone.

Inside the building were the bases of pillars, which presumably once held up the roof, since the structure is too large to have been spanned by single

mangrove poles.

Nearby, in the remains of collapsed walls, fifty more pieces of decorated plaster have been found, including fragments of crosses, geometric shapes and fleur-de-lys, which are assumed once to have formed a decorative frieze on the outside of the building.

Also found were fragments of an archway which presumably once formed an entrance into the building.

More of this area awaits excavation next year, and it is probable that we will be able to reconstruct the precise appearance of at least one of the friezes.

The building clearly had a religious purpose, and, on a rise in the ground that places it over a metre and above the surrounding land surface, would have been the dominating feature of the settlement. Together with the buildings found last year, it seems to have been enclosed by a large wall, of around 70 metres by 70 metres. We hope next year to uncover the remains of the main entrance.

In a nearby courtyard excavated this year, broken pottery was found in association with charcoal and ash, presumably dating to the last phase of occupation. This should permit us to obtain a Carbon 14 reading that will permit a more definitive dating of the site, beyond the Fifth to Eighth Century AD date permitted by the pottery.

A hundred metres to the north, a rescue excavation was undertaken on a courtyard house similar to that dug in the first excavation season, in 1993. The site had been damaged by trenching, but sufficient remained for us to expose a house with four, or possibly, five rooms, with the usual fine plastered finish to the walls, floors and niches. A broken amphora was found on the floor of the largest room.

Further north still, excavation commenced of a larger and more complex courtyard house. Clearly

A fine fragment of a wine (?) glass and an almost complete, although broken, large glass vessel indicated the sophistication of the inhabitants.

Work on the site on the ridge above Al Khor was completed during the season, (interrupted one weekend by rampaging eland, which trampled all over the most delicate part of the site). The discovery of several pieces of shrapnel also suggested that the British Royal Air Force and Royal Navy had done a little damage as well in the years they used Sir Bani Yas as a target for gunnery practice.

The site appears to be that of a large domestic structure, of a very different site plan to the courtyard houses on the plain below, although dating to the same period.

Nearby, the water channel found last year was proved to be connected to a large cistern, with well constructed stone walls and base, faced with plaster. The water source has not been found, although early maps of the island show a spring nearby, and bulldozing in recent years may have covered it up.

The overall picture is that of a large and scattered settlement from the period immediately before and after the coming of Islam to the Emirates, with a central complex of a religious nature, clearly one, judging by the style of the plaster decorations, of Nestorian Christians.

Evidence from this year's excavations tends to confirm previous hypotheses that the settlement simply fell into disuse some time not long after the coming of Islam to the UAE, suggesting, perhaps, that its inhabitants relatively swiftly became Moslem.

The Sir Bani Yas site is the largest of its type and period to be found anywhere in Eastern Arabia. Further excavation in subsequent seasons should add substantially to our knowledge of what should prove to be one of the most important archaeological sites anywhere in the Emirates.

Sponsors will be kept informed.

Pre-Islamic graveyard

Another important new site was also discovered on Sir Bani Yas during the course of the season, a collection of over 60 graves on the east of the island, north of Al Khor.

Some are probably pre-Islamic, judging by their orientation, although there is no associated pottery that would permit preliminary dating.

The graves are a considerable distance away from the main Al Khor sites, above, and may, therefore, date from a different period.

The site will receive further study in subsequent seasons, while more surveying will be required in plantations nearby to check for other evidence of occupation.

New Sites on Ghaghah, Al F'zaiyyah and Hamr

As sponsors will know, the spring season involved a continuation of surveying on other islands, as well as the excavations on Sir Bani Yas.

The survey team, using, as usual, a large dhow kindly provided by the office of His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, discovered a major new Late Stone Age site on the island of Ghaghah, which produced flint arrowheads and other tools of the same type as those found earlier on Merawah, two hundred kilometres to the east.

More work on the island of Al F'zaiyyah, at the tip of the Sila'a Peninsula, yielded another Late Stone Age site dating to around 5,000BC, where flint tools had been prepared. An extensive area of pottery scatters provisionally dated to around the beginning of the Christian era was also discovered, confirming the importance of the island. Sites from this latter period have also been found on North and South Yasat and Ghaghah, as well as the slightly later Sir Bani Yas complex, providing further evidence of what must have been substantial occupation on the Western islands in the past.

A brief survey was also made of Jazirat al Hamr, south east of Sir Bani Yas, where two extensive late Islamic sites were discovered. These fit into the broad pattern of settlement in later times that has been emerging from the preliminary surveying undertaken on islands throughout Abu Dhabi's coastal waters over the course of the last six months.

During the last five hundred years or so, there was an efflorescence of the pearling trade, as shown in Arabic, Portuguese, Dutch and British records, as well as by local tradition. Project surveying is now finding sites that confirm the oral and written data.

The Next Phase

With the archaeologists now gone, excavations cease until next winter, not least because the weather is becoming a little uncomfortable for strenuous digging. That does not mean, however, that the Project will shut up shop until the autumn.

First, there is a considerable amount of post-excavation and post-surveying work to be carried out. The newly discovered Late Stone Age sites on Ghaghah and Al Fz'aiyyah are to be fenced to protect them, while our main Sir Bani Yas sites also require further fencing, being done with the support of the Private Department staff on the island.

Some surveying is expected to continue over the next few weeks, including further examination of the Late Stone Age site found in February near Abu Dhabi International Airport, so that a report can be submitted to the Department of Civil Aviation with

a request for the site's preservation.

The archaeologists, under the direction of Dr. Geoffrey King, are now heavily involved in writing up the results of the last season, so that we can proceed with plans for publication of the results of the work so far.

Mapping on show at COMPUTEX

On show at the recent COMPUTEX exhibition in Abu Dhabi were the preliminary results of some of the computerised mapping done over the last three years by our Island Survey team.

The mapping, on display at the stall of Project sponsors ICL, was of particular interest to Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research Sheikh Nahayan bin Mubarak al Nahayan, who opened the show, and who spent several minutes looking at the results - and asking for a copy.

Our mapping team are now working hard back in London to incorporate all the new data on sites collected over the course of the last few months, and we hope to have the first archaeological map of Abu Dhabi's islands ready for display later this year.

Talks to ENHG & BBG

Project Director Dr. Geoffrey King addressed a packed meeting of the Emirates Natural History Group in mid-April, to summarise the results of the latest season, while the Co-ordinator also addressed a lunchtime meeting of the British Business Group in Abu Dhabi. Both thanked current sponsors for their invaluable assistance, and also urged more companies to consider the possibility of providing support in a variety of ways for future work.

Looking Ahead

Looking ahead after the conclusion of another successful winter and spring season for the Project, work will begin shortly on planning for the 1995-1996 season, which we hope will include further surveying and more excavations on Sir Bani Yas, as well as possible excavations on Dalma and perhaps Merawah and Balghelam.

We shall also be following up on various offers of collaboration that have been received during the course of the last few months, in particular the kind offers from ADNOC and ADCO to facilitate access to their geological and geomorphological data. This will be of very considerable use in enabling us to gain a better understanding of the fluctuation of sea

levels along the Abu Dhabi coast over the course of the last few thousand years.

As sponsors will recall from earlier *Newsletters*, there is substantial evidence of settlement along the edge of old shorelines on most of the islands we have visited. Details of shoreline and sea level changes will help in identifying areas along the coastline that are also worthy of more detailed investigation, so that the pattern of human settlement along the coast, as well as on the islands, can be better understood.

As the years pass, the Project is obtaining a massive amount of data about our archaeological sites, and also developing considerable experience about just where to look for more.

To facilitate long-term planning for the protection of this key part of the Emirate's heritage, Project staff will also be preparing over the summer an outline for a long-term policy on identification, preservation and excavation.

Sponsors' Trip to SBY

As sponsors will know, a special trip was laid on to the Sir Bani Yas excavations in mid-April, courtesy of the UAE Air Force and the Office of His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al Nahyan, to permit sponsors to see something of what they have been supporting over the last few years.

Some other sponsors were also able to make visits at other times during the season.

We hope to be able to organise another trip during the course of the next season, as a small gesture to sponsors for all of their help.

Thanks

While work will be continuing over the summer, the 1994-1995 winter season is now effectively at an end, making it an appropriate time to thank all sponsors for the help that they have so kindly, and so generously, given over the last few months.

Without that help, it simply would not have been possible to undertake the work, which, as sponsors will know, has resulted, yet again, in major discoveries about the archaeology and history of Abu Dhabi.

With sponsors' support, we have been able to show that the people of Abu Dhabi have a history stretching back several thousand years, thus helping, in the words of Project Director Dr. King 'to fill in a blank on the historical map of Arabia.'

The Project team is most grateful for all the assistance received, and hopes that sponsors will feel that our results have been sufficiently valuable to justify further support in the years ahead.