

Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey Project

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1995-1996 Season

Occasional Newsletter

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More discoveries on Sir Bani Yas. in Island survey

Another successful main season of the Project concluded earlier this month, with further work being completed on the pre-Islamic monastic site on Sir Bani Yas and adjacent settlement, while detailed survey and mapping work was also undertaken on the islands of Ghaghah, Al F'zaiyyah and Yasat al Ulya and Yasat Sufla, in the extreme west of the Emirate.

Project personnel were also engaged in analysis of finds from previous excavations undertaken on the 7,000 year old settlement site from the 'Ubaid period on Dalma and on the multi-period site at Abu Dhabi International Airport.

On Sir Bani Yas, work on the heart of the monastic site, around the church, produced a substantial amount of plaster that once decorated the eastern wall of the church. Clearance of the entrance area also revealed evidence of a possible well a few metres in front of the east door, perhaps used by the monks to perform their ablutions before prayer. As a result of the work, it has now become possible to draw a full plan of the church and the immediately adjacent area, although there is a substantial amount of the overall monastic compound yet to be investigated.

To the north, work was undertaken on a fourth of the mounds among the tree plantations, the clearance uncovering the outlines of a substantial building with at least nine rooms. As with a similar, albeit smaller, mound which was partially excavated last year, the building showed evidence of more than one phase of construction and further examination of this collection of buildings will be required in future seasons both to determine their functions and their relationship to the monastic complex, although pottery and other finds show that they are of similar date.

The carrying out of detailed survey and mapping

work was undertaken by Project Director Dr. Geoffrey King and colleagues, with the assistance of a dhow provided by the Private Department of His Highness Sheikh Zayed, on four islands to the west of Sir Bani Yas, Yasat al Ulya, Yasat Sufla, Al F'zaiyyah and Ghaghah, each of which had been visited in previous years.

On all of the islands, evidence of occupation was identified, with sites of particular interest being found on Ghaghah (Late Stone Age) and on the south end of Yasat Sufla (early First Millennium AD).

The survey and mapping work also permitted Dr. King and his colleagues to obtain a better grasp of the nature of the enigmatic sites now being found on raised shorelines on islands throughout the Emirate.

Despite excavations of features on Balghelam (in January and February this year) and on Liffiyah (in November 1994), it has still not been possible to ascribe a definite dating to all of them, although pottery found in association with features on Balghelam has now been assigned to the Seventeenth Century AD.

A major priority of further work will be the conducting of a geomorphological study, to obtain more information about changing sea levels in this part of the Arabian Gulf, and we hope to get this work under way next autumn.

A preliminary survey was also undertaken of the small island of Jazirat al Humr, north east of Ruwais, where evidence was found of extensive occupation during the Late Islamic period, including oyster shell middens, indicative of use related to the pearl-fishing industry.

Studies on environmental material and flints obtained during two seasons of excavations on Dalma were completed, permitting substantial progress to

Sponsors' Trip

As participants will already know, a number of representatives of our sponsors visited the Sir Bani Yas excavations on April 12th, to examine the results of this year's excavations on the island.

Able led by British Ambassador Anthony Harris, a keen supporter of the Project's work, the group were flown out to the island by the UAE Air Force, thanks to arrangements made by the Office of our Patron, HH Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed,.

A number of letters pledging further support for our work have already been received from participants in the trip.

Links with Municipality discussed

Following the end of the main season on Sir Bani Yas, Project Director Dr. Geoffrey King, our ceramist Dr. Cristina Tonghini, Salvatore Garfi and Jakub Czastka met in Abu Dhabi with the Assistant Under Secretary of the Abu Dhabi Municipality, Mohammed Fadhl al Hamili, to discuss the development of relations between the Project and the Municipality.

One initial step agreed was for the Municipality to help in the erections of protective fences or notices around important sites on the islands of Ghaghah, Al F'zaiyyah and Yasat Sufla in the Western Region, where survey work has identified evidence of occupation from the Late Stone Age through to recent Islamic times. Work on this begins this week.

In the long run, we hope to collaborate closely with the Municipality on surveying areas due for development prior to the commencement of construction work, so that sites can be identified and, where appropriate, protected and excavated.

Survey of Futaisi

As was the case last year, the end of the main spring season on Sir Bani Yas doesn't mean that the Project is about to close down for the summer - far from it.

Last week, our near-resident archaeologist Jakub 'Chas' Czastka carried out a preliminary survey of the island of Futaisi, immediately west of Abu Dhabi, at the invitation of HE Sheikh Hamad bin Hamdan al Nahyan.

One of the largest of Abu Dhabi's islands, Futaisi had never before been visited by archaeologists.

Among important sites recorded were two large water cisterns, up to 2 metres deep, cut into the sandstone rock, and resembling one found on the adjacent island of Bu Khushaishah early last year. The cisterns are further evidence of the presence of water on Abu Dhabi's offshore islands, and, added to other evidence from elsewhere, underlines that the

islands were never as barren as had previously been thought.

Also discovered were a number of large stone hearths, similar to those excavated on Balghelam in January and February, but circular rather than oval or rectangular in shape, and oyster middens, as well as pottery dating back to the Sixteenth or Seventeenth Centuries AD.

Further work will be done on Futaisi, but the results of the preliminary survey already add useful information to the steadily emerging picture of human occupation on Abu Dhabi's islands over the last few hundred years.

The work was supplemented by a brief survey of flora and fauna on the island undertaken by Dr. Richard Hornby, Chairman of the Emirates Natural History Group and Environmental Adviser to the Federal Environmental Agency,.

The survey of Futaisi was adopted as our first post-season project because of plans to develop a golf course and other sports facilities on the island, and Sheikh Hamad expressed the wish for us to identify any sites so that they may be recorded and protected - another good example of the way in which the Project can be of value prior to development taking place.

We are grateful to Sheikh Hamad for his interest and support.

More flint sites found

A two day survey of the desert south west of Jebel Dhanna over the first two days of the Eid holidays has led to the identification of several previously unidentified occupation sites from the Late Stone Age, around 7,000 years ago.

The survey, carried out by Jakub Czastka and British Ambassador Anthony Harris, (always keen to lend a hand where flints are involved), concentrated on an area of rolling dunes and inter-dunal plains west of Bida al Mutawa.

Though relatively few in number, the sites yielded flint tools of the Qatar-D type, produced using the same technology as the major sites on Merawah and Ghaghah, evidence of the extension of this hunter/gatherer culture away from the coast into the desert.

Also found, in association with the sites, were numerous fragments of ostrich shells, suggesting that these birds, now extinct in Arabia, had formed part of the hunters' diet.

Further surveys in the area will be planned in future.

The possible existence of archaeological sites in the area was first drawn to the Project's attention by Professor Ernie Haerinck of Ghent University, who had been shown photographs taken by a Belgian

company that had been doing seismic and geophysical work in the desert for the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company, ADNOC.

Although Czastka and Harris were unable to locate the precise location visited by the Belgian team, the newly found sites were discovered during extensive surveying of the general area.

Jebel Dhanna, pipeline route surveyed

At the request of sponsors the Abu Dhabi Company for Onshore Oil Operations, ADCO, Jakub Czastka carried out a brief survey earlier this week along the route of the new oil pipeline from Habshan to Jebel Dhanna.

ADCO expanded their environmental protection policy last year to include the identification and preservation of archaeological sites.

A preliminary survey of Jebel Dhanna was carried out in the early 1980s by a German team, which identified a number of probable tombs dating back to the Third Millennium BC.

A summary of the results will appear in a future issue of the *Newsletter*.

Environmental collaboration

As part of ADIAS plans to develop relations with other scientific institutions within the Emirates, environmental archaeologist Mark Beech and colleague Alan Pipe visited the Emirates University in Al Ain just before the Eid for discussions with the Dean of Science and the Desert and Marine Environment Research Centre on the creation of a national reference collection of fish bones.

Such a collection would be of value both to archaeologists, for the identification of the environmental finds in excavations, and also to marine biologists.

Beech and Pipe also visited the Government's fisheries research station at Umm al Qaiwain, a joint venture of the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries and the Emirates University.

Both in Al Ain and in Umm al Qaiwain, discussions were positive and constructive, with considerable interest being expressed in the possibility of future co-operation, and further discussions will be held over the course of the summer.

Beech and Pipe also visited the National Museum of Ras al Khaimah to help in the undertaking of a brief study of the environmental material recovered during the recent excavations at Qush on a site which provides a useful succession of archaeological layers from the beginning of the First Millennium AD up until around 1400 AD.

Although an understanding of environmental remains from excavations is important, the overall

topic of the UAE's marine life falls outside the main focus of the Project's work, and is being supported by a special grant from The British Council, as part of its endeavours to promote scientific collaboration between UAE and British institutions.

A welcome to Wimpeys

ADIAS is delighted to welcome to its growing list of sponsors Al Wimpey Laboratories, who have kindly offered to put their analytical expertise at our disposal, for the chemical analysis of soil and other samples taken from Balghelam and Sir Bani Yas.

The samples from Balghelam, collected during our excavations in January and February, came from a relict shoreline on the island's southern coastline which has a substantial number of large hearths, (as reported in earlier issues of the *Newsletter*). The size and density of these hearths suggests that they are not domestic fireplaces.

Al Wimpey are now undertaking chemical analysis of the residue from these pits, to identify what was burned within them.

Samples of the plaster from the monastery on Sir Bani Yas are also being analysed. These include plaster associated with walls and floors as well as plaster used for decorative designs. The analysis is being carried out with a view to establishing whether the plaster is of local origin, how and of what it was made, and whether it was applied in one or more stages.

The analysis will also be of assistance to conservators in the future, when we move to the stage of preserving material for museum display.

One of the objectives of ADIAS is to make the best possible use of the scientific expertise available here in Abu Dhabi, and we are delighted that Al Wimpey have volunteered to help the project in this way.

Project publicity

As participants on the sponsors' trip to Sir Bani Yas will know, a film is being made on the Project's work by ADCO, due for release later this year.

Filming commenced a couple of years ago, and the finished product should include material on our work on Sir Bani Yas, Dalma and Merawah over the last few years.

Texts for the first two Project publications, on the Season One survey and on the collection of important Late Islamic buildings on Dalma, have now been completed, and are expected to go to press during the course of the summer.