

Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey Project

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1994-1995 Winter Season

Occasional Newsletter

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Unexpected finds mark opening of Winter Season

Evidence of pre-Islamic settlement on Fiyya

The 1994-1995 Winter season of the Project, the fourth so far, got under way in late November with the arrival of a team of three archaeologists from London on November 19th.

The first phase of work, which lasts until shortly before Christmas, is centred on the islands of Merawah, where a Late Stone Age (Neolithic) site was discovered in the Project's first survey season in 1992, and the adjacent island of Fiyya, subject of a cursory half-day survey in 1992.

The first half of the five week mini-season concentrated on a detailed survey of Fiyya, and, as usual, unexpected and important discoveries have been made.

The usual collection of Islamic graves and the remains of a roofless mosque were found on the eastern coastline, but the most important results came from a limestone ridge on the southern part of the island, running roughly east from the 'Site Two' located in the 1992 survey.

In all, some 116 features were discovered, including 54 hearths, 21 rectangular features (probably tombs, with associated burning activity), and 41 raised circular mounds. One of the latter was excavated, and proved to be a stone-lined chamber, of roughly rhomboidal shape, about 2 metres long, 1 metre wide, and 1 metre deep. It was built of limestone blocks, of up to 70 cm, in length, and 30 cm. deep.

The structure is almost certainly a grave, and its alignment does not match the direction of the *qibla*, suggesting it is pre-Islamic.

Within the grave, the filling was mainly sand, mixed with pieces of charcoal, while on the bottom, just above the marine sand that formed the natural base of the chamber, a number of bone fragments were found, one probably a human fingerbone.

Two pieces of heavily corroded iron were also found, but no pottery or other finds.

The location of the 'grave' and fireplaces is just above an old shoreline, perhaps one metre or so above present sea levels.

Work elsewhere in the Emirates has suggested that a peak sea level about 80 cm. above present was reached around 515 AD. Iron was not known in the UAE until around the end of the Fourth Century BC, permitting a rough date of between 300 BC to 500 AD to be placed on the site.

Based on similarities with small graves found at Ad Door in Umm al Qaiwain, a tentative dating to the first few centuries of the Christian era seems likely.

Following completion of the Fiyya work, the team moved to Merawah. Initial studies there have included the excavation of two shell mounds in the eastern fishing hamlet of Merawah. They proved to have only a relatively thin deposit of 30-40 cm. of shells on top of a small dune, with only late Islamic pottery being present.

Other shell mounds at the southern village of Ghubah will also be investigated, while the team will continue survey work on the island's central limestone ridge, paying particular attention to evidence of earlier shorelines. Some clearing of the MR-1 Neolithic site will also be undertaken.

The three man team, comprising Jakub Czastka (Field Director), Alex Wasse (Field Archaeologist), and Steven Strongman (Environmentalist), are also collecting ethnographical data from local fishermen, helping to build up a picture of fishing life on the island in the pre-oil era.

Of particular interest has been the recording of details of the barter trade with Basra-based merchants who swapped goods for dried fish from Merawah and Fiyya during the winter season. Records of this trade are not known to occur in existing accounts of the pre-oil period in Abu Dhabi.

Before completing the season, the team also hope to

Thanks to Sponsors

As always, the Project's work could not take place without the generous support of a growing number of sponsors, amongst whom we are delighted this winter to welcome several new organisations.

For this full winter season, support has so far been pledged in the form of cash by the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company, ADNOC, British Petroleum, the Italian state oil group, ENI, ADPPOC and the Al Fahim Group.

Logistical help has come, as usual, from ADCO, while other firms helping to provide us with equipment, either loaned or purchased, for the Project, include ICL (for our computers), ADDCAP and Union National Bank, who are also our very understanding bankers.

Appropriately for a Project involving the very best of British archaeological expertise, British Airways have come on board this winter with discounted tickets, while team members can sleep easy in their beds, or in the field, thanks to personal accident cover kindly provided by Emirates Insurance Company. Project photography is all being taken on Kodak film, kindly donated by Emirates PhotoMarketing.

As usual, the Office of the Project's patron, His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al Nahyan, has been of enormous help, loaning equipment, providing access to accommodation and other support on Merawah and generally underwriting all other needs.

To all of them, many thanks.

Bal Ghelam surveyed

One important result of the work so far undertaken by the Project over the last four seasons has been the beginning of a map of Abu Dhabi's coastal and island settlement in centuries, and millenia, gone by.

Little work has yet been done east of Abu Dhabi island, but the Project was delighted to be invited in September by Presidential Court Chamberlain HE Sheikh Surour bin Mohammed al Nahyan to carry out the second stage of a preliminary survey of the island of Bal Ghelam.

Surface evidence, including a small graveyard, the remains of a village, a number of fireplaces and remnants of a possible irrigation or water collection system, suggest that Bal Ghelam was used by fishermen and pearl-divers during the late Islamic period. Nothing has yet been found to suggest earlier occupation.

Similar evidence of seasonal use during Islamic times has been found on all of the main islands sur-

veyed in previous seasons, such as Merawah, Fiyya, Sir Bani Yas, Dalma, Ghaghah, Al F'zaiyyah, Kafai and North and South Yasat.

Evidence of late Islamic settlement, (probably mainly seasonal) has also been found during preliminary surveys of the coast at Sheleala, near Bal Ghelam, and on Thumayriyah and Qarnein islands, while a researcher from the National Avian Research Centre has reported the existence of an Islamic graveyard on the island of Muhayimat, north of the Sila'a peninsula.

While the effect of changing sea levels has yet to be properly assessed, (*see story on Merawah and Fiyya, above*), the finds suggest a pattern of significant usage of the offshore islands throughout the late Islamic period. As more islands are visited, so will the picture become more complete.

(If any Project sponsors can arrange access, even if only for a short visit, to other islands, please let us know).

A summary report on the Bal Ghelam finds, along with a report on birds compiled by a member of the Emirates Bird Records Committee, has been submitted to HE Sheikh Surour.

Dalma sites lost

As Project sponsors will know, two seasons of excavation have so far been carried out on the 7,000 year old 'Ubaid period settlement on Dalma.

Regrettably, the development of the past few years has meant that much of the island is no longer of archaeological interest.

Recently, thanks to ADMA-OPCO, the Project has obtained a copy of a brief archaeological survey of Dalma undertaken by a French team in 1979, which reported the presence of a substantial number of sites, all now destroyed, including remains of a possible early Islamic house and sites dating back to the pre-Islamic period. The report includes a number of drawings of pottery sherds and tentative datings of sites.

This report is all that remains of Dalma's early archaeological heritage, apart from the 'Ubaid site, which was preserved, purely by chance, in the children's playground of the Women's Association.

The incident underlines the importance of carrying out surveys wherever possible (even without excavations) before development work takes place.

If any Project sponsors are engaged in development work which affects the natural landscape, in particular along the coast and on offshore islands, we would be happy to arrange for a preliminary survey to be undertaken, so that at least some of the basic data can be recorded.

(And our thanks to ADMA-OPCO for responding so helpfully to our enquiries and for providing a copy of the report).