

# Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey Project

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1996-1997 Season

## *Occasional Newsletter*

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### *Useful results from Sir Bani Yas dig in Silver Jubilee season*

With the celebrations of the UAE's Silver Jubilee now over, our three person team on Sir Bani Yas has completed a first mini-season of excavations, with Deputy Director Salvatore Garfi and Registrar Henriette Maren flying back to Britain for Christmas and New Year. Jakub Czastka remained on the island for another week, in order to ensure that the sites were properly covered and 'back-filled,' so that the fragile plaster of the pre-Islamic monastery buildings are preserved.

One key purpose of the three week season was to ensure that visitors to Sir Bani Yas over the National Day period were able to see some of the island's archaeological sites, and we were delighted to be able to show the monastery site to the visiting Director General of the World Wide Fund for Nature, WWF, and to a number of groups of foreign journalists. Project staff were also able to brief a number of senior local officials.

At the same time, however, some useful archaeological work was done.

The entire church and the group of a dozen associated small rooms and courtyards, part of the main monastic complex, were uncovered, permitting for the first time a full photographic record to be made. In the past, the church and the neighbouring rooms could only be photographed individually, since they were excavated in different seasons. The new photographic record will be of considerable value in permitting ADIAS to study the overall layout of this central part of the settlement.

The second part of the work, undertaken by Sal Garfi and Henriette Maren, involved the excavation of part of the large building first examined earlier this year.

In the northern end of the llama pens in the Al Khor district, and around two kilometres north of the

main site, the building is one of at least eight such structures to have been identified, but is possibly the largest, with a minimum of seven rooms.

Earlier this year, the wind-blown sand covering the building was cleared away, while over the last three weeks, two of the rooms were cleared down to floor level. The walls, which still stand to a height of almost one metre, and the floors are covered with the same finely made plaster known from the monastery itself and from the other houses excavated in previous seasons, indicating that the building was constructed at around the same time.

Once again, the inhabitants of the building appear to have been remarkably neat and tidy - infuriatingly so, for they left little behind them in the way of rubbish that can be used to identify, for example, what kind of pots they used, and what kind of food they ate. The rubbish dump, we hope, is somewhere nearby, waiting to be discovered another season.

According to Sal Garfi, the building appears to have collapsed in two phases, once again showing that the inhabitants simply abandoned the site and were not driven out.

Apparently, in the first phase, the roof collapsed, and wind-blown sand covered its remains. In this sand, some fish-bones were discovered, indicating that a short-lived 'squatter' occupation took place, although this has not yet been dated.

Later, as a result of erosion and the rising of salts from the land surface, the walls also collapsed, falling neatly outwards.

"This short season has provided useful information to supplement our knowledge about the Sir Bani Yas sites," Garfi says.

"It has provided us with more information on the way in which the buildings on the island were constructed and internally arranged."

"It also provides an idea of how the ruins of the site were later used by subsequent squatters."

Further work on the building will take place in the main ADIAS season, in March and April 1997.

As usual, a number of the Project's sponsors provided useful support for the excavations.

We would like, in particular, however, to thank His Highness Sheikh Tahnoun bin Zayed al Nahyan, Chairman of the Private Department of His Highness Sheikh Zayed, who arranged for the necessary accommodation and supply of labour on the island, and the Office of His Highness Sheikh Abdulla bin Zayed al Nahyan, Under Secretary of the Ministry of Information and Culture, who facilitated the issue of the necessary visit visas for Sal Garfi and Henriette Maren, and also obtained permission for them to be flown to the island by the Air Force.

### ***Balghelam work resumes in January***

Early in January, work will resume on the Late Islamic settlement site on Balghelam, where we also carried out excavations early this year.

Field Director will be Salvatore Garfi, who will be working with the assistance of Jakub Czastka, and the season will last for around two and a half weeks.

The purpose of the work is to undertake further study of the area where a number of large hearths were identified and excavated during the first season, in the hope of gaining a better understanding of their purpose.

As readers of this *Occasional Newsletter* will recall, similar concentrations of sites have been found on a number of Abu Dhabi's offshore islands, and evidently reflect settlement patterns of coastal fishing communities. Through studying the site, we hope to gain a better understanding of how Abu Dhabi's inhabitants lived during the last few hundred years.

The site is the first Late Islamic site to have been excavated on the coast and islands of Abu Dhabi, and we are grateful to Presidential Court Chamberlain His Excellency Sheikh Surour bin Mohammed Al Nahyan for his permission both to work again on Balghelam and to make use of his facilities .

### ***Protection for Island Sites***

While Project excavations over the last few years on Dalma, Sir Bani Yas and at Abu Dhabi Airport have attracted a considerable amount of attention, both locally and internationally, one of the most important aspects of the Project's work has been the surveying of other islands, where we have been able

to identify important sites on almost every island visited.

Some of the most significant of these have been on islands in the extreme west of Abu Dhabi, Ghagha', Lefsa'iyah, Yasat al Ulya and Yasat Sufla, where sites dating back to the Late Stone Age have been identified, as well as important evidence of settlement during the first millennium of the Christian era.

Excavation of all of these sites will be a long and time-consuming process, not least because of the logistics involved. Now, however, thanks to help from the Abu Dhabi Municipality, the key sites have been given the protection appropriate to places of such importance for Abu Dhabi's heritage.

Fencing of the key sites on Ghagha' was completed earlier this year, while ADIAS archaeologist Jakub Czastka is now working with Rashid Salem Al Mansouri, of the Municipality's Agriculture section at Sila'a, to erect specially-designed notices on Ghagha' and the other islands which explain the importance of the sites and warn that they are protected.

We are grateful to the Municipality, in particular to its Chairman, His Excellency Sheikh Mohammed bin Butti Al Hamed, as well as Assistant Under Secretary Mohammed Fadhl Al Hamili and Rashid Al Mansouri, for their help and support.

### ***Film on Project work broadcast on Abu Dhabi TV***

For the first time, an outline of the Project's work has been broadcast on local television, thanks to the efforts of our sponsors the Abu Dhabi Company for Onshore Oil Operations, ADCO.

The film was the last to be made by producer John Rathbone, who died recently after over a quarter of a century of film-making in the Arabian Gulf, and was broadcast on Abu Dhabi Television, part of the Emirates Broadcasting Corporation, over the recent National Day holidays. It was commissioned by ADCO, as part of its regular programme of commissioning films to show aspects of the country's history and heritage.

It profiles the Project's work on Sir Bani Yas, Dalma and Merawah, and has been produced in both Arabic and English versions. Filming began three years ago, with additional material being shot in subsequent years to show the Project's progress from season to season.

A London launch for the film is being arranged at London University's School of Oriental and African Studies, in association with the UAE Embassy in London, while copies will be made available to Project supporters in due course.