

Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey Project

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1997-1998 Season

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Merawah season starts: focus on Late Stone Age

With the arrival a couple of days ago of draughtsmen Henriette Maren and Edward Gibbs, work on the main part of our winter programme is now under way.

Over the course of the next three months or so, a large part of our work will be focussed on the island of Merawah, courtesy of ADIAS Patron His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan.

The first task, to be undertaken by Henriette and Edward over the course of the next month or so, will be to continue the mapping and drawing of the important Late Stone Age site on the south-western tip of the island.

Previous work on the site has yielded not only a significant number of flint artefacts, one of the most extensive collections yet identified in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, but also the remains of a number of structures. Work on mapping and drawing these must be completed to determine their distribution before excavations are undertaken.

During the course of the season, probably in late March, we hope to welcome Professor Hans-Peter Uerpmann and his wife Margrethe Uerpmann, from Germany's University of Tubingen, to the island, so that they can examine the site.

The Uerpmanns are leading specialists in the Late Stone Age of south eastern Arabia, and will be continuing their examination of sites at Jebel Bu-hays, in Sharjah, in February and March.

Also looking at sites in the south west of Merawah will be a team from Australia, led by Soren Blau, who will be continuing work started last year on examining a number of cairns. During last year's excavation of one cairn, a complete

skeleton was found, but the attempt to obtain a clear Carbon 14 dating has proven unsuccessful. Last year's cairn, of a type previously unknown in the Emirates, contained no finds apart from the skeleton, and this year, we will be hoping to locate some artefacts to assist in dating. It is possible that the cairns are of Late Stone Age or early Bronze Age date, and this year's task will be to excavate one or two more cairns, to see if it is possible to date them accurately.

Apart from the focus on the evidence for settlement on Merawah in the Late Stone Age, work will also continue, led by Salvatore Garfi, on mapping and studying of the Late Islamic settlements on the island. Three small fishing settlements remain today, surrounded by evidence of previous occupation, while a number of other abandoned settlement sites, also believed to be Late Islamic in date, have also been identified during previous survey work. Results from this work will complement results from earlier work on Balghelam and Liffiyah, and should help considerably in the building up of an understanding of how Abu Dhabi's islands were used during the Late Islamic period, say from the sixteenth century AD onwards.

One other aspect of work planned for Merawah is also a continuing project - that of studying the geomorphology of the island, including evidence for changes in sea levels. Commenced last year, this project, led by Professor Graham Evans, who first visited Abu Dhabi to study the *sabkhas* along the coast over thirty years ago, should contribute further information about the relationship between patterns of settlement and access to nearby marine resources.

All in all, the long term objective is to carry out on Merawah the most detailed archaeological and geomorphological study yet undertaken on any of Abu Dhabi's offshore islands.

In early March, with the support of Minister of Information and Culture His Highness Sheikh Abdulla bin Zayed Al Nahyan, we plan to send a small team to Dalma to continue investigation of the important settlement site dating back to the Late Stone Age. In previous years, this site has proven to be that of the oldest settlement yet discovered in Abu Dhabi, whose inhabitants were not only important early pottery from the 'Ubad civilisation in Mesopotamia - one of the first indications of the maritime trading heritage of the people of the Emirates - but also to have been making their own rough vessels from a gypsum base. These 'white wares' are completely unknown anywhere else in the region.

The main purpose of this year's work will be to further delineate the extent of the site, and to recover environmental material that can be used to put a more precise dating on the site.

Working on Dalma will be Joe Elders and Mark Beech, the later of whom will also be continuing his work on the building up of a national fish reference collection for the Emirates, (*see following item*).

Support for fish research from The British Council

The local office of The British Council has once again extended support for the work of ADIAS with a further grant towards Mark Beech's studies on the UAE's fishes.

As sponsors will recall, besides undertaking study of environmental remains from a number of sites in the Emirates, including ADIAS sites on Dalma, Merawah and Balghelam, Mark is also in the process of creating a reference collection of the fish of the Lower Gulf.

Being undertaken as part of a PhD thesis for Britain's University of York, Mark's work will provide a valuable source of reference not only for archaeologists seeking to identify fish bones found in excavations, but also for marine scientists studying the fish stocks of today.

To facilitate his studies, ADIAS has also arranged for him to spend some time with the National Museum of Ras Al Khaimah, where he will be examining environmental remains from the recent excavations at Kush and will also be collecting some of the marine fishes from closer to the mouth of the Arabian Gulf

The collection will eventually be housed in Abu Dhabi's Environmental Research and Wildlife Development Agency, ERWDA, and we are grateful both to the Agency and to The British Council for their support for this work.

GIS data to be shared

In another bit of local collaboration, ADIAS has also reached agreement with ERWDA that the GPS (Global Positioning System) data from all the ADIAS sites will be incorporated into the GIS database being built up by the Agency.

Covering the whole of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, the ERWDA database already includes much information on wildlife and vegetation, and through the addition of data on archaeological sites, it may be possible to facilitate a correlation of evidence of human settlement with environmental features and availability of resources, such as water.

Addition of the ADIAS data to the ERWDA database will also facilitate access by other scientists working in the country.

More surveying in Dabb'iya area

Through a contract with locally-based Gulf Human Resources Development Company, GHRDC, ADIAS personnel were out in the field again in October and November to carry out a preliminary survey in part of the area of the Dabb'iya peninsula, west of Abu Dhabi, for our sponsor the Abu Dhabi Company for Onshore Oil Operations, ADCO.

As with the work carried out in the Taweela area in July, little was found of an archaeological nature, apart from a very few potsherds, probably of Late Islamic date, near the headland of Ras al-Kahf, and a shell scatter a little further inland.

More recent evidence of human visitation was, we regret to note, widely visible along the shoreline, including lumps of concrete, plastic bags and bottles, old tyres and all sorts of other rubbish not just dumped along the shoreline, but washed up from the sea.

As we've noted before, however, even if nothing much turns up during an inspection of an area, that itself can be of value.

A preliminary assessment suggests that the end of the Dabb'iya peninsula may have been little visited in the past because of the extensive stretches of *sabkha* that would have rendered any

approach by land difficult and the shallow inter-tidal zone, where the sea can retreat well over a kilometre at low tide.

The emerging picture suggests that use of the coastline seems to have been more extensive where deeper water permitted easier access by boats. Quite logical when you think about it, but it's always good to have some data from fieldwork to support the theory!

ADIAS environmental specialist Simon Aspinall was also contracted to undertake an examination of the birds of the Dabb'iyah area, which has proven to be one of the most important roosting and feeding area for migrant waders anywhere in the country.

We look forward to carrying out more such preliminary surveys in the New Year.

Sponsors' support

Emirates Holdings

We are delighted in this issue of the Newsletter to report that another prominent local company, Emirates Holdings, has joined our growing list of sponsors.

The founder of Emirates Holdings, Hussain Al Nowais, has long displayed an interest in our work on the offshore islands of Abu Dhabi, and responded with alacrity when we invited him to become an ADIAS sponsor. We are grateful for his support.

British Airways

Our usual supporters are turning out in force again too.

Among them are British Airways, who have been supporting the Project's work with tickets and other facilities for several years. We delighted to report that they have decided to continue their support for the forthcoming season.

Apart from paying our archaeologists - always an important consideration - travel is one of the main expenses incurred by ADIAS, and we are most grateful to "the world's favourite airline" for continuing to provide us with help.

ADCO

Moving people around from place to place is also important.

The Abu Dhabi Company for Onshore Oil Operations, ADCO, has provided logistics

support in the form of transport since ADIAS first began, and are kindly giving support again this year. They have also provided us with support from their geodetics department for some of our mapping activities.

We are pleased to note (*see story on Dabb'iyah*) that, at last, it's a relationship that is working both ways, with ADIAS able to help ADCO by carrying out preliminary investigations of areas scheduled for oil field development to see whether any archaeological sites are present.

Emirates Insurance Company

And, of course, our personnel need the security of on-the-job insurance, once again kindly provided by the Emirates Insurance Company. Again, many thanks.

And Finally

Just a reminder that there are plenty of archaeological sites around the Emirate that have as yet never been identified or examined.

The ADIAS Coordinator was visited the other day by an expatriate resident who mentioned, in passing, that he knew of several places along the Abu Dhabi - Al Ain road where there had in the past been scatters of pottery. In recent years, he added, some of these might have disappeared as a result of tree planting and other development work.

We urged him to go back and have a look again, and to take a GPS Global Positioning System machine with him.

Why? Well, the sites may only be former stopping points on the camel route from Al Ain to Abu Dhabi, but these could have been in use for hundreds of years, if not more.

Moreover, only one such site along the Abu Dhabi - Al Ain road has ever been properly noted in the country's archaeological record. The sites mentioned by our visitor are unknown to archaeologists - and, in consequence, they don't exist as far as the country's historical record is concerned.

The moral of the tale?

If sponsors, or sponsors' employees, see any evidence of archaeological artefacts anywhere, please take a GPS reading and let us know. There aren't enough archaeologists to cover the whole of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, and information from an interested public can add very significantly to our record of Abu Dhabi's ancient heritage.