

Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey Project

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1994-1995 Winter Season

Occasional Newsletter

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First phase of season completed New finds on Merawah

The first phase of the 1994-1995 Winter season of the Project ended on December 20th, with the completion of the surveying and excavations on the islands of Merawah and Fiyya.

As reported in our first *Occasional Newsletter* last month, the work on Fiyya produced remarkable results, with the discovery of a previously unsuspected pre-Islamic village site.

Surprisingly, another one was discovered on December 14th on Merawah, west of the village of Ghubbah, once again on a limestone ridge that had once been an old shoreline and now overlooks an inlet of sabkha. The structures are very similar to those found on Fiyya, a mixture of what appear to be small hearths and collapsed structures, some of which may possibly be houses. Full investigation will have to wait for another season (as usual, some of the most interesting discoveries came at the end of the season).

A much more recently abandoned village, perhaps a century or so old, has also been located on a rocky headland on the southern coast. On a nearby *gargour* (fish trap) a pair of Ospreys were nesting, though eggs hadn't been laid by the time the team left the island.

Excavation of shell middens proved a bit disappointing. One north of the village of Merawah, on the east side of the island, proved to have only around 40 centimetres of deposit on top of a natural dune, accompanied by a scatter of late Islamic pottery (and plenty of glass and tin cans).

A midden east of Ghubbah produced more useful material - about a metre of deposit, with evidence of more use, a mixture of two layers of gastropods with ash and fish bones in between. A single coin was found in one of the lower layers, which, when cleaned, will provide a definite date, while some of the gastropod shells will also be given a rough dat-

ing.

Overall, both from the excavations and from oral tradition collected from a Merawah-born fisherman, Darwish Juma al Rumaithi (*see separate story*), it seems as though the middens near the coastal villages are probably all relatively recent (say from the last couple of hundred years or so).

They represent the latest phase of occupation, with the pre-Islamic site mentioned above providing evidence of earlier occupation.

The oldest site, of course, is that on the south western headland known as MR-1, and here again important new discoveries have been made.

MR-1 has already produced the best collection of Late Stone Age flint tools from anywhere in the Emirates, dating perhaps to around 5,000- 4,000 BC.

A preliminary clearance of a ridge of stone on the north side of the feature in December produced exciting new information. Partly covered by rubble and wind-blown sand, the ridge, when cleared, proved to contain evidence of walls and of other signs of human occupation, including ash and charcoal. It also produced a flint blade which, judging by its typology, could be up to a couple of thousand years earlier than the other flint tools so far found on the site.

Detailed excavation will be required, as well as carbon 14 dating of some of the ash and charcoal, but it seems, provisionally, as though the site may have been a permanent or semi-permanent settlement from the Late Stone Age. If that is true, it will make MR-1 a site unique in the Arabian Gulf, further evidence of the enormous importance of Abu Dhabi's offshore islands for understanding the evolution of human settlement in the region.

Our Merawah Field Director, Jakub Czastka, is already dreaming of making the Merawah MR-1 site,

Oral History and local knowledge

During the season on Merawah, one of the most useful discoveries made was the wealth of information contained in the memory of Merawah-born Darwish Juma al Rumaithi, now probably in his late sixties or early seventies, who has lived on Merawah virtually all his life.

Darwish's contributions to the season began with his willingness to run the team over to Fiyya and back in his boat, but much more was to come. Once he realised what the team was after, he proved to be a mine of information. He led the team to the pre-Islamic village site, indicating the old shoreline, and recalled that it had always been known to be pre-Islamic.

He led the team during their last couple of days to other locations on Merawah where he knew pottery to be on the surface, and also took them to another island to the west of Fiyya, Bazm al Gharbi, to show them other previously undescribed sites, although unfortunately, the location has been partially disturbed.

He also told us that there had once been a fresh-water spring below high tide mark on Bazm al Gharbi. It had been abandoned, he said, around 150 years ago, when the inhabitants migrated to Bahrain, but added that the site could still be found by pottery on the seabed, and by the visible remains of the track once worn through the coral by donkeys going out to collect the water.

Project members have always recognised the importance of local knowledge, but it's not always proved too easy to get. Alexander Wasse made a good start with Darwish, while Laila Hellyer, who visited the island on December 14th, spent most of the day collecting stories and information from him - including the Bazm al Gharbi well.

Darwish's most memorable comment was that had he known exactly what the team were looking for, he could have led them to sites much earlier, but that since they seemed to know where they were going and what they were doing, he didn't like to interfere.

Now he knows we want as much interference as he can offer, future work on Merawah and nearby islands will depend very considerably on Darwish, a mine of information about the recent and more distant past.

In recognition of his efforts and assistance so far, British Ambassador Anthony Harris, who also visited Merawah with his wife Sophie on December 14th, presented Darwish with a Swiss Army knife, (always useful for fishermen), and a letter of appreciation signed by himself and the Coordinator, thanking him for his help to the team.

Ambassadorial Visit

British Ambassador Anthony Harris and his family visited the team on Merawah on December 14th. His programme included a tour of the main sites, including MR-1, and a visit to key roost sites for wading birds, guided by Simon Aspinall of the National Avian Research Centre, who was on the island the same day.

Highlights for Harris were the discovery of a flint arrowhead on MR-1 (he has a particular interest in flint tools, and a sizable personal collection made while serving in Egypt), half a dozen Flamingos offshore and the Osprey nest, while his children went home with a turtle skull and several dugong ribs to show off at school.

Thanks to the generosity of the Office of His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, a lavish lunch was also laid on, which left all present replete and satisfied !

Team filmed at work

A film crew from the Arabian Seas Expedition visited Merawah on a couple of occasions in December as part of preparations for a major television film on the marine life of Abu Dhabi, most of which will be shot next year.

Directed by Jonathan Ali Khan, the film will focus not only on the sea and marine life, but also on man's use of the sea's resources.

As part of that, the crew filmed the archaeological team excavating the late Islamic middens at Ghubbah, and also filmed them at work on the MR-1 Late Stone Age site, to illustrate the way in which inhabitants of the UAE's islands have lived by and from the sea for thousands of years.

Copies of their film footage will be provided to the Project for our own future use, while the ASE's own TV film should appear in due course on the BBC. Star TV and on local television channels, helping to underline the way in which archaeological studies are helping to reveal more information about the past life of the people of the Emirates.

The Next Phase

With the completion of the first phase of work on Merawah and Fiyvah, Alexander Wasse and Steve Strongman flew out on December 20th, to go home for Christmas. Jakub Czastka is staying on, and for the next couple of months will be un-

dertaking further surveying, during which we hope he will be able to visit Arzanah and Zirku, to carry out the first preliminary surveys on these important islands, while he will also be working on a report on the Merawah work.

He will also be assisting the Co-ordinator in preparations for the major March-April 1995 season, when the main team, led by Project Academic Director Dr. Geoffrey King, will be at work on Sir Bani Yas, Dalma, Al F'zaiyyah and elsewhere.

More work on Bal Ghelam

At the invitation of H.E. Sheikh Surour bin Mohammed al Nahyan, a third visit was made to the island of Bal Ghelam, east of Abu Dhabi, on December 29th, to continue surveying for archaeological sites and to commence mapping.

A re-evaluation of sites already discovered (*See Occasional Newsletter No. 1*), suggests that Bal Ghelam, like Merawah and Fiyya, also contains evidence of pre-Islamic settlement, once again primarily on a limestone ridge that is now inland, but which once lay on an earlier coastline.

With the benefit of better identification skills for such sites, gained from the work on Merawah and Fiyya, a number of new sites were also discovered elsewhere on the island, all probably dating to the period of higher sea level around 1,500 years ago.

In all, over seventy individual features were recorded for inclusion on the Project's map of Abu Dhabi's island archaeology, while the further evidence of pre-Islamic occupation of the islands is helping to add important new information to our understanding of Abu Dhabi's history.

The work was carried out by Jakub Czastka, Anthony Sinclair, a visiting Lecturer in Archaeology from Britain's Liverpool University, and the Project Co-ordinator, while further investigations into the island's bird life and other natural history were undertaken by Simon Aspinall of the National Avian Research Centre.

An updated report is being prepared for HE Sheikh Surour, to whom, once again, we extend our thanks.

Bu Khushaishah visited

To round off a successful 1994 for the Project, a first preliminary visit was made to the island of Bu Khushaishah, west of Abu Dhabi, on December 31st, at the invitation of Minister of State for

Foreign Affairs, His Highness Sheikh Hamdan bin Zayed al Nahyan.

The inward part of Bu Khushaishah, one of Abu Dhabi Emirate's largest islands, is mainly sabkha and very-low lying areas of little archaeological interest, but the outer areas contain typical low coastal dunes with some higher limestone and sandstone outcrops typical of those that have already produced important sites on Merawah, Fiyya, Bazm al Gharbi and Bal Ghelam

The short survey, carried out by Jakub Czastka, (survey), Simon Aspinall, (environmental), and the Project Co-ordinator, was designed to identify key areas for future study of this important yet little-studied island, and a summary of results with recommendations for future work is being prepared.

Our thanks to HH Sheikh Hamdan for his kindness in granting permission for the visit, and for arranging facilities on the island.

Talks

As part of efforts to make the work of the Project more widely known, Jakub Czastka gave an illustrated talk to students of the Abu Dhabi Women's College on December 19th, at the kind invitation of ADWC Director Dr. Graddon Rowlands.

We're delighted to report that the students, (especially a young lady whose cousin is the wife of Darwish al Rumaithi), were fascinated by the talk, and we hope to be able to welcome them to one of the Project's excavations, perhaps on Sir Bani Yas, in a few months time.

Jakub, (more informally and more easily known as 'Chas'), has also addressed the Emirates Environmental Group (Abu Dhabi), and is due to give a talk this month to staff at ADNOC, one of the Project's main sponsors. If any other sponsors would like a talk, please let us know.

Honour for Project sponsor

The retiring GM of the Abu Dhabi branch of computer firm ICL, Terry Finney, was awarded the O.B.E., (Officer of the Order of the British Empire), in Britain's New Year Honours List for his services to British interests in Abu Dhabi.

Thanks to Terry's support and interest for our work, ICL have been valuable sponsors of the Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey Project since its inception, providing us with all our computer requirements.

Our congratulations to him on his well-deserved award.