

# Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey Project

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1995-1996 Season

## Occasional Newsletter

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### *Duty Free backs Airport Excavation Major discoveries in rescue excavation*

*(Since archaeology in the Gulf, outdoors at least, generally ceases in the summer months, the Project's "year," for accounting and other purposes runs from July to June. Hence, despite the fact that we have had two archaeologists out in the sun by the Airport for the last few weeks, this is the first issue of the Occasional Newsletter for our 1995-1996 year. We hope that next summer all work will be indoors!)*

The decision last month to mount an immediate rescue excavation at the Abu Dhabi Airport Late Stone Age site has paid off handsomely, both in terms of discoveries made by our archaeological team, (with the help of a host of volunteers), and in terms of increasing the profile of archaeology within the Emirate.

As recipients of previous issues of the *Occasional Newsletter* will recall, the Chairman of the Abu Dhabi Department of Civil Aviation, HE Sheikh Hamdan bin Mubarak al Nahyan, displayed an early interest in the discovery of the site last February, and kindly gave permission for more survey work to take place inside the Airport perimeter.

Following the decision to launch the current dig, Sheikh Hamdan has been of enormous help, once again. On his instructions, the Abu Dhabi Duty Free has provided sponsorship for the excavations sufficient to underwrite our expenditure on equipment and on salaries for our professional archaeologists, while the Airport Catering section has also kindly provided cold drinks and sandwiches on site, much appreciated in the summer heat.

As far as we are aware, this is the first time that a Government Department has underwritten an excavation within its area of operations in this way.

The Abu Dhabi Municipality, which kindly agreed to halt land reclamation work on the site to permit

the dig to take place, has also been of considerable value, providing labourers for some of the heavy shovelling work, as well as helping in a number of other ways.

The help is much appreciated. In return, the results of the first three weeks of work indicate that the site may be even more important than we first anticipated.

Extensive surveying across the area of the site led to the recovery of a number of fine Late Stone Age flint tools, dating back to around 5,000 - 4,500 BC, with more such tools turning up during sieving of the more promising areas. The presence of the tools, some of which are made of material known to exist only far inland, indicates that the headland on which the site lies was used as a stopping point for travellers crossing from the Al Ain area to the coast.

Also turning up in the surveying and sieving were a number of fine red potsherds of a type typically known from the Umm an Nar tombs, dating to between 2,700 - 2,200 BC. If the preliminary identification is confirmed by our pottery specialists, it will help to confirm our theory that the site was used as a stopping off point for the copper trade from Al Ain through Umm an Nar to Mesopotamia - a theory that is also backed by the discovery of a few fragments of copper on the site.

Other major discoveries have included two structural features, originally visible only as sand-covered heaps of stone on the surface.

The best preserved of the two is now in the process of being excavated, and has proved to be a large circular structure some 3.5 metres in diameter, with stone walls which are preserved to a depth of at least two metres. This structure seems to have been covered by a corbelled stone roof, which has collapsed over time. Excavation has proved a bit dan-

chaeologists. Fortunately, no injuries have yet been sustained.

The interiors of both structures will be excavated before the end of this week, at which point we intend to stop work at the site, for the summer at least.

Until this is done, it is difficult to make a clear statement about the age of these structures. To date them we need to find diagnostic artefacts, such as dateable pottery, in clear association with the features. However, based on the range of dates we have for the use of the area, it is possible that they date back to the local Bronze Age, perhaps with later use during the Hellenistic/Parthian and Late Islamic periods.

In collaboration with the Airport Engineering Department and with the Municipality, we then plan to reconstruct both structures to a state as near as possible to their original shape, conserving them with carefully concealed cement, so that they can be retained as features in the leisure development the Civil Aviation department is planning for the area. Several other smaller features have also been discovered a hundred metres or so away from the two larger cairns.

One, which stands on its own, is roughly rectangular and was concealed by a small mound of wind-blown sand. Surface clearance of the structure, however, has indicated the possibility of it being an ancient well.

Besides this, surface surveying and sieving has also turned up substantial evidence of occupation of the site during the Islamic period, up until the early years of this century, although, somewhat surprisingly, very little glazed pottery has been unearthed. The site is of importance for a number of reasons. Despite the Project's discoveries of Late Stone Age sites on the islands of Merawah, Ghaghah and Al F'zaiyyah, no sites from this period have ever been confirmed on the Abu Dhabi coastline before. The Airport site suggests that the early inhabitants of the area may have ranged as far afield as Al Ain, the Abu Dhabi islands and Qatar, possibly even maintaining contacts with groups of hunter-gatherers within the Rub al-Khali and the Wahiba Sands in Oman.

The evidence suggesting a link with the Umm an Nar port-settlement is also a major discovery.

A fuller report of the finds will be supplied to Sponsors after the summer break, but it's already clear that the Project has been able again to add substantially to knowledge of our local history and heritage, thanks, of course, to the essential support provided by the Abu Dhabi Duty Free and our other sponsors.

One final note: the actual site was discovered completely by accident, fortunately by the Project Coordinator, who recognised the importance of the pottery scatters and stone structures.

There must be many other sites along the coastline that have been seen by people that have not been recognised, or have not been reported.

If any sponsors hear of people spotting pottery, scatters of old shells, or anything else, please let us know, and we will arrange to have some-one go out and examine the area.

## Thanks

Many thanks to ADPPOC and the National Bank of Abu Dhabi for responding to the appeal in our last *Occasional Newsletters* for sun umbrellas for the Airport dig. We've now got as many as we can use. Thanks, too, to ADCO, for, once again, providing us with transport for the archaeologists, and giving us access to the skills of their Geodetic data department, and to Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research HE Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak al Nahyan for offering accommodation for our archaeologists.

Our thanks as well to Ministry of Information and Culture Under Secretary HE Sheikh Abdulla bin Zayed al Nahyan, for arranging for the dig to receive coverage on Abu Dhabi Television.

Also, of course, to all of our volunteers, many more than we had ever expected, some of whom turned up on a regular basis to lend a hand, in some cases travelling from Dubai, Al Ain and Liwa to take part. We were particularly pleased to welcome a several UAE nationals, both men and women, who came to look at the site, and, like others, stayed to lend a hand.

## More publicity for Project

One of the main objectives of the Project is to disseminate information about discoveries, both inside the UAE and abroad, to help to create a better understanding of the country's heritage.

During the past few weeks, the Project's work has received attention in three magazines, the international corporate magazines of sponsors British Petroleum and ENI, and the local magazine of the Dubai National Investment Company, *Al Shindagha*. The Airport dig should also figure prominently in the next issue of the Duty Free magazine, *Shoptalk*, which will help to introduce Abu Dhabi's archaeological heritage to some of the millions of passengers who pass through the Airport each year.

If other sponsors would like material for corporate publications, we would be happy to assist.

### ***ADGAS become sponsors***

The Abu Dhabi Gas Liquefaction Company, ADGAS, is the latest local company to become a sponsor of the Project, with a financial donation in late May.

We are delighted to receive, and to acknowledge their support, which will be of considerable value in helping us to prepare for the winter season ahead.

### ***Project Auditors***

The increasing activity of the Project over the last year has, naturally, involved greater expenditure, much of it of money provided by our sponsors.

We are pleased to announce, therefore, that the local practice of top accountancy consultancy Ernst and Young have kindly agreed to audit our books as a way of contributing to our work. We are most grateful to them for their help.

### ***Sir Bani Yas church site***

Project sponsors may be wondering why there has, thus far, been no publicity in the local press about our discovery in March and April on the island of Sir Bani Yas of the largest pre-Islamic Christian site ever to be found in eastern Arabia.

The reason is quite simple. At the suggestion of Information and Culture Ministry Under Secretary HE Sheikh Abdulla bin Zayed al Nahyan, announcement of the discovery has been delayed locally until we can have a suitable piece of television film to accompany the announcement - and that, of course, will have to wait until the next spring season.

The discovery, however, has already been announced in archaeological and academic circles, where, not surprisingly, it has aroused considerable interest.

Work is also under way this summer, at the request of our lead sponsors, the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company, ADNOC, on a book outlining the results of the first few seasons of the Project's work, taking an approach that follows the results chronologically, rather than site by site, from the Late Stone Age until the Late Islamic period. The Sir Bani Yas discovery, of course, will figure prominently in the final manuscript.

Sponsors of the Project will be advised later of the plans for publication date of the book.

### ***Finally...***

.. the extensive range of activity undertaken by the Project over the last seven months could not have taken place without the help of all of our sponsors. A year ago, we had planned only a month's work on Merawah, and six weeks on Sir Bani Yas and on the regular island survey.

By the time Jakub Czastka and Alex Wasse finish work on their reports in mid-August, however, we will have had one or more people in the field from mid-November for a total of nine months. This could not have happened without the tolerance and understanding of our sponsors.

The *Occasional Newsletter* has, we hope, given an indication of the results of the work, which have broken new ground literally, both in terms of the historical periods from which sites have been found, and in terms of the areas covered by surveying and excavation activity.

After a summer break (though writing of reports will continue), activity should resume again from late October or early November.

On behalf of all Project personnel, may I express our thanks to all our sponsors? We are most grateful for all your support and assistance, and hope very much that we can count on your continued support for what promises to be an equally active, (and, we hope, equally successful) 1995-1996 season.

***Peter Hellyer,  
Project Co-ordinator***