

Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey Project

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1994-1995 Season

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Largest pre-Islamic Christian site in Eastern Arabia **Church, monastery identified on Sir Bani Yas**

With the 1994-1995 Winter/Spring season now completed, the Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey Project is delighted to report that the major complex of sites being studied on the island of Sir Bani Yas has been definitively identified as being that of a church and associated monastery, the largest of its period and type so far known from anywhere in Eastern Arabia. An announcement to the press will be made within the next few days.

Pottery discovered in the first season in 1992 permitted a rough dating of the site to between the Fifth and the Eighth Centuries AD, spanning the period of the arrival of Islam in the Emirates, with the most recent pottery apparently dating to around the end of the Omayyad Caliphate.

In the 1994 season, the discovery of a small cross made of fine plaster on the main site in the Al Khor district of the east of the island meant that we could be sure that Christians were present on the site.

This spring's excavations revealed the clear outlines of a church measuring 14 metres by 11 metres, with a central nave and two side aisles, and an adjacent monastic settlement, surrounded by a large wall, and with other, smaller buildings scattered nearby.

The site adds very significantly to our knowledge of the region in the period at the beginning of the Islamic era. It has long been known that many of the Arab tribes in Eastern Arabia were Nestorian Christians before the coming of Islam, and other churches have previously been found at Jubayl and Thaj in Saudi Arabia and on Failaka island, off Kuwait. Nestorian Church chronicles refer to the presence of dioceses of Bait Qatraye (Qatar) and Beit Mazunaye (Oman), but no archaeological evidence of the pre-Islamic Christian presence has ever been discovered before in either the UAE or Oman.

Project Director Dr. Geoffrey King says the church's stone walls "had fallen in ancient times,

toppling outwards and forming great heaps of rubble. Our excavation of the rubble of the east wall revealed a large amount of decorative moulded plaster, with grape clusters, leaves, and crosses in scrolls."

"We are increasingly of the view," he says, "that the church is part of a monastery, and that the rooms excavated in 1995 were the cells of the monks residing at the site."

Taken together with the results of other excavations this season, and in the 1993 and 1994 seasons, he adds, "we now have evidence of a major settlement on Sir Bani Yas dating to between the Fifth and Eighth Centuries AD."

"Of importance is the fact that the church walls seem simply to have collapsed, thus suggesting that the church and monastery were abandoned. The inhabitants of Al Khor, it seems, may have simply adopted the tolerant new message of Islam when it arrived, with the result that they moved away and the site fell into disuse."

Details of the discovery have been provided to President His Highness Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al Nahyan, along with the Project's thanks for his continued support for our work over the last few years, and for his encouragement of our work, in particular on Sir Bani Yas.

There is, of course, much more work yet to do at the Al Khor monastery, and on other sites nearby. It would be of particular value, for example, to locate the monks' cemetery, which may, in turn, provide an idea of the size of the monastic community.

The relationship with the sophisticated courtyard houses to the north of the main site also has to be examined.

Preliminary plans for the Project's 1995-1996 season are being discussed, but will, subject to finance, certainly include more work on the Al Khor church

Airport Rescue Dig commences next week

Somewhat against our will, Project staff will be commencing a rescue excavation just outside Abu Dhabi International Airport early next week.

Sponsors will recall (*Occasional Newsletter No. 4, March 1995*), that a Late Stone Age and Late Islamic site was discovered on a rocky but sand-covered headland above the sabkha to the immediate west of the airport terminal. On the site, which has produced flint tools from the Fifth Millennium, of identical types to those known from Jebel Huwayyah (Fossil Valley), near Al Ain, there are also two circular stone cairns, of indeterminate date.

Following discussions with Civil Aviation Department Chairman HE Sheikh Hamdan bin Mubarak al Nahyan, it was agreed that we would carry out further surveying inside the airport fence, prior to making recommendations for protection and possible excavation.

The site is of particular interest because over 4,000 years ago it would have been on the old shoreline, and have been the closest point on the mainland to the ancient port-town of Umm an Nar, from where copper from Al Ain was exported to Mesopotamia.

We had planned to survey gently over the summer, and then discuss excavation plans with Sheikh Hamdan again in the autumn.

On Tuesday this week, however, our archaeologists Jakub Czastka and Alex Wasse (recently arrived from Bahrain to spend a few weeks working on the report of last December's work on Merawah), paid a visit to the site to find contractors' bulldozers two metres away from the stone cairns, and much of the site already bulldozed away.

Prompt calls to Sheikh Hamdan's office brought immediate help from the office of the Airport's Chief Engineer, who sent his staff out yesterday and today to explain to the contractors the need for an immediate cessation of work, and to follow that up with calls to the relevant department in the Municipality. With bulldozing and tree-planting likely to resume at almost any moment, however, Jakub and Alex have, somewhat reluctantly, agreed to undertake a rapid three week campaign to survey and map the site, to collect all pottery, flint tools and other artefacts, and then excavate the two cairns.

Abu Dhabi National Hotels have kindly agreed to provide cold drinks for them from their airport catering section, which will no doubt come in very useful, and the Project co-ordinator is now in the process of ringing around to obtain other bits of support to make the working environment at least relatively tolerable for Jakub and Alex, and for the two or three workmen they will need for the excavation of the cairns themselves.

If any sponsors happen to have nice large sun umbrellas to spare, two or three would be very useful.

as would a number of other items, although we will be collecting some of our own equipment from our store on Sir Bani Yas before work starts next week. The incident underlines the necessity for proper environmental and archaeological surveys to be carried out before bulldozers get to work, although we should say both that the Civil Aviation Department acted immediately (within fifteen minutes) when the danger to the sites was brought to their attention, while the contractors also promptly agreed to cease work on any undisturbed ground.

We will now be pursuing discussions with the Municipality in the hope of preventing such incidents again.

The sudden, and now unavoidable, need to undertake the rescue excavation, has meant that we shall have to delay until winter some other work planned over the next few weeks.

This includes a continuation of the examination of other low hills along the old shoreline to the east and west of the airport site. In April and May, extensive surveying was undertaken, on foot, on the hills that stretch from the airport towards Mafraq and on the "islands" in the sabkha between the airport, Mafraq and Mussafah. No archaeological artefacts of any kind were found, although flint outcrops were noted.

Further surveying may yet yield some new sites, but the negative evidence of the past few weeks adds weight to suspicions that the Airport site may well have been a main halting point on the route inland and above the sabkha, in recent times and on the shoreline prior to around 2,000 BC.

We're glad to have the opportunity to dig on the Airport site, but wish it didn't have to be done as a mid-summer rescue operation !

Sandbank Survey

During the Eid al Adha, Staff Archaeologist Jakub Czastka took the opportunity of a few days on Merawah to pay a visit to nearby Umm Amim, a small island that is of primary importance because of its small colony of breeding Crab Plovers, one of only two colonies known anywhere on the Arabian side of the Gulf (the other, much larger, is on Abu al Abyadh).

A survey of a few hours produced a few potsherds of the typical late Islamic coarse red ware to be found throughout the islands, as well as a few patches of ash, representing the remains of small fires, but nothing else of significance.

Umm Amim is little more than a sandbank, with no raised areas that would have been above the sea lev-

el in the early Islamic period, and the island itself may be no more than two or three hundred years old.

Until this year, the island was visited by fishermen from Mirfa during the summer breeding season of the Bridled Tern, when eggs were collected (this year, a guard has been placed on the island by the Office of Project Patron His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed), and was presumably visited for the same purpose in the past.

The potsherds found probably derive from such egg-collecting expeditions in the relatively recent past, an indication of the way in which the coastal and island inhabitants of Abu Dhabi have long made use of any available sources of food.

The survey added little to our knowledge of the archaeology of Abu Dhabi, apart from another dot on our map, but at least Umm Amim can now be ticked off the list of islands still to survey.

ENHG Pottery Collection to be studied

Over the years, the Emirates Natural History Group in Abu Dhabi has amassed an extensive collection of potsherds, flints and other items from archaeological sites throughout the UAE, most of which was collected by 'Bish' Brown and Rob Western, formerly Group Archaeology Recorder.

The unscientific collection of surface potsherds is, of course, not welcomed these days, when there is the appropriate scientific expertise around, at least during the winter, to examine sites properly.

When Bish and Rob did their collecting, however, there was much less scientific archaeology being undertaken than today, with virtually none at all along the coast and on the islands of Abu Dhabi. Some of the material comes from sites that have since been damaged, destroyed or comprehensively "collected" by visitors, who have not shown their material to archaeologists. Such material includes the only late Islamic potsherds known to have been collected on the island of Abu Dhabi, apart from a few sherds collected by Project staff earlier this year, and is, therefore, of particular value.

The ENHG has now kindly loaned its collection to the Project, so that the pottery and flints can be examined and dated. Some of it is of display quality, while other items will prove of enormous value as a reference collection, permitting Project archaeologists, and others, to handle and to recognise typical pottery and flint types.

The material dates from the Late Stone Age, (flints from Jebel Huwayyah), until the Late Islamic period, and will be of considerable value.

Our thanks to the ENHG for their kind loan of the material, which has never before been examined by professional archaeologists. Our ceramicists will

look at the material next winter, once preliminary sorting and description has been completed.

Surveying around Sheleala

As sponsors will recall, the first site on the coastline of Abu Dhabi Emirate dating to the Hellenistic/Parthian period (circa 200 BC to 200 AD) was discovered by Project staff earlier in the year in the Sheleala area, north east of Abu Dhabi, inside a compound belonging to HE Sheikh Mubarak bin Mohammed al Nahyan.

With the kind permission of Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research HE Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak al Nahyan, Jakub Czastka and Alex Wasse are currently staying at Sheikh Mubarak's resthouse.

Once the rescue work at the Airport site is completed (see above), they will undertake more surveying along the coastline and on dunes near Sheleala.

During February, scatters of late Islamic potsherds were found on the dunes, indicative of seasonal use, but the main objective of the work is to see whether any further evidence of Hellenistic / Parthian occupation can be identified around the edge of what is now sabkha, but would have been a shallow bay during periods of higher sea levels. We are most grateful to Sheikh Nahyan for providing accommodation, and to sponsors ADCO, for yet another loan of a vehicle, and BP, for assistance with accommodation for Czastka and Wasse in Abu Dhabi prior to the beginning of the work.

Dalma finds for discussion at Seminar

The unusual whiteware 'pottery' discovered at the 7,000 year old 'Ubaid period site on Dalma is to be the subject of a paper to be delivered at the annual Seminar for Arabian Studies in Britain, being held in July in Cambridge. The paper, to be presented by Project ceramicist Phil Trevell, will explain research being undertaken on the whiteware, which appears to have been made locally from gypsum, copying the patterns of imported 'Ubaid pottery.

Project Director Dr. Geoffrey King also presented a major paper to a recent conference in Kuwait on local archaeology, including his earlier work at the late Islamic mosque at Julfar, the Project's activities on Abu Dhabi's main islands over the last four years, and survey work in Fujairah's Wadi Safad, carried out by Project members at the invitation of His Highness the Ruler of Fujairah.