

Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey Project

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1995-1996 Season

Occasional Newsletter

No. 7

Date : June 29th 1996

Another successful year

As sponsors will know, June 30th marks the end of the Project's year, the summer months usually being a time when outdoor archaeology is at best uncomfortable, Last summer's work on the Abu Dhabi Airport site was an aberration! It is appropriate, therefore, to provide a summary of the twelve months past, which has been another successful year for the Project.

The main focus was on our excavations on the pre-Islamic Christian sites on the island of Sir Bani Yas, where a six week excavation season was carried out in March and April, under the supervision of Project Director Dr. Geoffrey King.

The site of the monastery and church, first definitively identified during the spring 1995 season, was subjected to further examination, with a substantial amount of decorated plaster being recovered to add to finds from previous seasons. It was also possible to delineate fully the layout of the church, confirming that it had been built in more than one phase, and indicating that it had a plaster floor laid on the sub-surface bedrock, without any cellars.

Another one of the nine courtyard houses, whose discovery first indicated the importance of the site in 1991, was examined, with a structure of at least nine rooms being identified. Excavation of this site will be completed in a subsequent season.

Two other excavations were undertaken during the course of the year.

Last July saw completion of work at Abu Dhabi Airport, thanks to the generosity of the Civil Aviation Department and Abu Dhabi Duty Free. Subsequent examination of the pottery recovered from the surface confirmed that the site had been in use during the middle of the Third Millennium BC, roughly contemporary with the port and tombs on the island of Umm an Nar, the first time that any site from this period had been identified along what was then the

Abu Dhabi coastline.

Other periods of occupation identified were the Late Stone Age, around 5,000 - 4,000 BC, and the early centuries of the First Millennium AD. The two wells excavated on this site may well date to this period

There was also limited evidence of use in the Late Islamic period, indicating interrupted use over a six or seven thousand year period.

Last January and February, ADIAS was also fortunate to be able to work on the island of Balghelam, north east of Abu Dhabi, at the invitation of Presidential Court Chamberlain HE Sheikh Surour bin Mohammed al Nahyan. The four week excavation examined two types of features, an extensive well field, showing the former exploitation of water on the island, and a complex series of large hearths on a relict shoreline, similar to features also identified during survey on a number of other offshore islands.

A further short season on Balghelam is planned next winter, but initial indications are that the site was extensively used during the period from around the Sixteenth Century AD onwards.

Besides excavation, ADIAS members have, as usual, been engaged in extensive survey activity.

Detailed surveying was undertaken on the islands of Ghaghah, now emerging as one of our most important discoveries, and also on Yasat al Ulya, Yasat Safli and Al F'zaiyyah, yielding evidence of occupation over a substantial length of time, in the case of Ghaghah as far back as the Late Stone Age.

Many of these sites are so remote that a lengthy excavation programme would pose almost insuperable logistic problems and Dr. King and surveying colleagues are now considering ways of undertaking brief exploratory excavations on some of the more important sites.

Sheikh Shakhbut's summer house

As sponsors may know from the local press, the former summer house of the late Sheikh Shakhbut bin Sultan al Nahyan, Ruler of Abu Dhabi from 1928-1966, and the brother of President His Highness Sheikh Zayed, is to be restored, following the intervention of Ministry of Information and Culture Under Secretary Sheikh Abdulla bin Zayed.

ADIAS is pleased to be associated with this project, having first studied the building several years ago, and having drawn the attention of the authorities to the need for its preservation. One of the very few traditional buildings left in Abu Dhabi, it has become dilapidated over the last three decades, but remains a fine example of a domestic building.

Project archaeologist Jakub Czapka spent a few days earlier this month photographing, planning and drawing the building, and a full survey report is being submitted to Sheikh Abdulla to pass on to the Municipality. ADIAS team members will also be consulted in an effort to find some pictures of the building in its heyday. If sponsors have any idea of where pictures can be obtained, please let us know. For those who wish to take a look, it is to the west of the Eastern Corniche, near the Police Officers' Club, and on the edge of Bateen Airport.

Historical research in Venice, Florence

Project Director Dr. Geoffrey King and our ceramist Dr. Christina Tonghini were in Florence last month to set the ball rolling on an important research project that is potentially of enormous importance to the medieval history of the Arabian Gulf.

The project involves an examination of the historical archives in Venice and Florence to see whether there are any references to trade with the Arabian Gulf. Initial indications are that a wealth of information is there to be studied, including records of the purchases of Gulf pearls by the Medici family at the height of the Renaissance, as well as some early maps that precede the coming of the Portuguese to the Gulf in the Fifteenth Century.

The research project is being developed as a joint operation between ADIAS, Abu Dhabi's Centre for Documentation and Research, the University of Florence and the School of Oriental and African Studies at London University, while non-academic support is being offered by the Italian state oil combine ENI, one of the sponsors of ADIAS.

At an archaeological level, the research should help us to understand the pearling industry, and that, in turn, will help in an explanation of the nature of settlement on Abu Dhabi's offshore islands, like Dalma and Ghaghah, in the mid-Islamic period.

Looking ahead

Several members of the ADIAS team, including the Director and the Co-ordinator, will be attending the annual Seminar for Arabian Studies in London next month. The Seminar, also to be attended by archaeologists working in a number of other emirates, as well as representatives of several local government departments, will provide an opportunity for an exchange of news about the results of last winter's archaeological work throughout the country.

ADIAS members will also take the chance to hold discussions with a number of experts in UAE and Gulf archaeology about future collaboration.

One particular area to be discussed is that of future work on the 7,000 year old village on Dalma, while ADIAS also plans to work with a team from Australia's University of Sydney on a Third Millennium BC tomb near Sir Bani Yas airport next spring.

More thanks to sponsors

One of the major problems facing archaeologists in the Emirates is the lack of a good reference library close at hand. Thanks to a promise of support from our sponsors Union National Bank, ADIAS is now able to begin the collection of relevant books and publications to create our own library, which will be of great value in terms of interpreting our own results and of seeing what other work has been done in the UAE over the years. We are grateful for the Bank's assistance.

We are grateful, too, to another sponsor, the National Bank of Abu Dhabi, which has recently underwritten the purchase of a new top quality Nikon camera for the Project. Further help is always gratefully received!

The *Occasional Newsletter* will cease over the summer, resuming in the autumn, when Project sponsors will be advised of plans for the 1996-1997 season.

Initial indications are that another busy few months will be ahead, with more work planned first on the Balghelam Late Islamic site, and then on Sir Bani Yas and on the island survey, as well as possible work on Dalma and surveying along parts of the coastline. The first publications reporting on ADIAS work should also appear during the course of the winter.

The ADIAS team is grateful for the extensive help and assistance provided by our sponsors over the course of the last year, and is delighted to have been able to welcome some new sponsors. Without the support of all, we would not have been able to continue our task of "filling in the blanks on the historical map of Arabia." We hope that sponsors will feel that their support has again yielded valuable results.