

# Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey Project

PATRON : H. H. SHEIKH MOHAMMED BIN ZAYED AL NAHYAN

1994-1995 Winter Season

## Occasional Newsletter

No. 4

Date : March 12th 1995

### *Spring Season commences*

The main Spring Season of the Project got under way on March 5th, with the arrival of a dozen assorted archaeologists, environmentalists and others from London, led by Project Director Dr. Geoffrey King. After sorting out a few logistical details, (such as the obtaining of temporary driving licences, with help from Project sponsor ADCO), the team set off for Sir Bani Yas, which will be the main area of operations until April 22nd, the end of the season.

Naturally, one of the main objectives of this six week season is further investigation of the complex of buildings in the Al Khor area of Sir Bani Yas shown last year to have been a pre-Islamic Christian site, the first discovered in the Emirates.

The whole site covers an area of around 400 metres by 200 metres, a huge area to dig. Under Joe Elders, one of the first tasks this season will be a magnetometer survey, carried out by Roman Krivanek, of the Institute of Archaeology in Prague, the Czech Republic, to identify evidence for walls and other structures underneath the present surface. This, in turn, will permit excavation to be directed where it is most likely to yield results.

Research undertaken in London over the past year on pre-Islamic Christian settlements in eastern Arabia will then be matched up with the results from the Sir Bani Yas field work in an attempt to determine the possible functions of the buildings, and, in particular, to answer the question of whether they had a domestic or a religious purpose. Before the end of the season, we hope the excavations will give us some answers.

Near the Al Khor area, on a ridge, a plaster-lined tank and a water channel, from the same period as the main site, were discovered last year, too near to the end of the season to be fully excavated. Sal Garfi, from the University of Lampeter in Wales, will

be completing excavation of this site, with the objective of determining whether it represents a water catchment and storage system, or a well or some other features. That, in turn, should offer some answers about the possible sources of water for the main settlement.

On the north of Sir Bani Yas, at Ras Danan, Elizabeth Shepherd, from the Field Archaeology Unit in Norfolk, will be mapping a fragile Late Stone Age site which yielded flint tile knives and other tools during the first survey season in 1992. Surface evidence suggests the possible presence of some rudimentary structures in the area, of around 5,000 BC. She will then commence excavation of a mound in the Al Khor area that, from surface evidence, appears similar to the house dating to the pre-Islamic period excavated in the 1993 season.

Around the middle of the month, thanks to the loan of a dhow from the Private Department of His Highness President Sheikh Zayed, the island survey team, led by Angus Stephenson, will move to undertake further studies on the islands of Ghaghah and Al F'zaiyyah, north of the Sila'a Peninsula, to map sites discovered in 1993 and 1994. The team also hopes to make a preliminary reconnaissance of Khardal, north of Ghaghah, and of Jazirat Na'itah, where the presence of an ancient cemetery is reported in British records from the middle of the nineteenth century.

Time permitting, the survey team will later move to Merawah, to map the pre-Islamic sites discovered by Jakub Czapka and his team in November and December.

During the course of the season, another focus of activity will be the study of pottery by our ceramics specialist Cristina Tonghini, from Florence in Italy, so that a typology for the pottery on Abu Dhabi's islands can be prepared.

## *Sila'a survey yields new sites*

ADIAS team member Jakub Czastka spent a long weekend on the Sila'a Peninsula in mid-February, to search for sites on the coastline that could be related to discoveries on the nearby offshore islands.

In all he found a total of eleven new sites and clusters of sites, several of which were similar to the rectangular hearths identified on several other offshore islands during the winter. Again, they were found on the raised shoreline that has been provisionally dated to the period between around 300 - 650 AD, suggesting that the culture on the islands was also present, as expected, along the coastline. More of the peninsula is yet to be surveyed.

Some of the hearth features, however, were found in association with Late Islamic pottery and shell middens, suggesting that they may be of the same date. Excavation will be required on several hearths, ideally in a number of locations, to determine whether they are all of pre-Islamic date, or whether the type can be associated with both pre-Islamic and Islamic occupation.

## *Key Jubayl sites preserved*

Following the survey carried for ADCO on the islands of Jubayl and Fahid in January, Jakub Czastka returned to the islands in mid-February with Neil Ashcroft, an ADCO geodetic engineer, to mark out the Islamic and possibly pre-Islamic sites, including graves, to be protected ahead of forthcoming drilling operations early next year.

During the visit, four new sites were located, raised circular mounds of the type being identified throughout the offshore islands, and provisionally dated as being pre-Islamic burials, from the results of the excavation carried out on Fiyya in December. The key sites have now all been marked for fencing. Some of the small ephemeral sites, which contain shell scatters and potsherds, will be in the way of forthcoming drilling, and be destroyed. All the pottery has now been collected and recorded and will be described and drawn. It will also be used in preparation of a typology of local pottery.

Geographical co-ordinates of the sites themselves have been taken, so they can be included on the Project's map of Abu Dhabi's archaeology, which is in preparation.

## *Last site on Abu Dhabi island ?*

The development of recent years has, naturally, taken a toll on any archaeological sites that may once have existed on the island of Abu Dhabi.

Two such sites were identified a couple of years ago by the Project Co-ordinator between Bateen

Airport and the new Eastern Corniche. This consisted of a scatter of oyster shells and a nearby scatter of potsherds, adjacent to the ruinous remains of the last traditional building on the island.

The sites lay on the edge of what was once a shallow inlet on the east of the island, that subsequently became sabkha, and was cut off from the sea by construction of the Bateen Airport and the road across the Maqta in the nineteen sixties.

The shell scatter was briefly examined by Project Director Dr. Geoffrey King in 1993, but produced no potsherds. It has now disappeared as a result of levelling work adjacent to the new Corniche.

The levelling process, however, has left the old building standing alone on a small remnant of sandstone outcrop, above the old shoreline.

During a brief survey of the site in mid-February, remaining potsherds, all of recent Islamic date, were collected for preservation, while the location of the site was recorded.

The building itself and the remnant of a hill on which it stands may well be the only remaining archaeological site on Abu Dhabi island, and a call for its preservation was made in the daily *Emirates News* on February 16th, (a call with which sponsors may like to associate themselves). Whatever happens to it, however, at least archaeological evidence on the site has now been recorded for posterity.

## *First Hellenistic/Parthian site found on Abu Dhabi's coastline*

The first archaeological site to be found on Abu Dhabi's coastline dating to the Hellenistic/Parthian period, (from around 200 BC to 200 AD), has been identified at Ras Bilyaryar, in the Sheleala area, about 40 km. north east of Abu Dhabi.

The site is inside a compound belonging to HE Sheikh Mubarak bin Mohammed al Nahyan, and investigations have been carried out with the permission of Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research HE Sheikh Nahayan bin Mubarak.

The site, which has a surface scatter of shells and potsherds, but no evidence of structures, was first identified two years ago by the Co-ordinator.

Last month, samples of potsherds from the site were shown to an expert working at the National Museum of Ras al Khaimah, who identified some of them as being of Hellenistic/Parthian date.

The site is scheduled for development work, and, with the permission of Sheikh Nahayan, further investigation was undertaken over Eid al Fitr by Jakub Czastka and the Project Co-ordinator, in order to collect any further artefacts and potsherds, and to record the precise location for inclusion on the forthcoming map of the archaeological sites of Abu Dhabi's coast and islands.

Further Hellenistic/Parthian potsherds were collected, as well as other pottery of probable late Islamic date. Several scatters of late Islamic pottery were also noted on a range of dunes a couple of kilometres inland from Ras Bilyaryar.

In the apparent absence of evidence of structures, (the area of the site has been subject to considerable surface disturbance), the site was probably used seasonally by fishermen and pearl-divers, although it is interesting to note that Ras Bilyaryar appears to have been used in this manner around 2,000 years ago as well as in relatively recent times.

Other evidence of occupation around the beginning of the Christian era has also been found on islands in the Western Region, like Al F'zaiyyah and Ghaghah, but the Ras Bilyaryar site is the first so far discovered on the coastline of Abu Dhabi.

The best known coastal site of the period is at Ad Door, in Umm al Qaiwain.

The Project thanks HE Sheikh Mubarak and HE Sheikh Nahayan for permission to examine the site, which, though not extensive, provides definitive evidence of human utilisation of Abu Dhabi's coastline at the beginning of the Christian era.

## ADIAS at fossil conference

One of the more puzzling questions yet to be answered about archaeology in the UAE is that of when man first arrived. Owing to the changing sea levels of the last forty or sixty thousand years, the earliest evidence may well have disappeared.

Work on the six million year old Miocene fossils to be found in the western Baynunah region, however, has produced a number of worked stone tools that have resemblances to Palaeolithic material from elsewhere, such as East Africa.

The work was the focus of a conference held at Jebel Dhanna in early March, organised with support from our sponsor, ADCO, and the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research.

Project staff attended in order to meet with the scientist who discovered the tools, Sally McBrearty, of Yale University, to discuss questions relating to dating, identification and typology.

## Sea level and Sabkha studies

As sponsors will know from previous *Newsletters* one of the key questions identified over the course of this winter has been that of sea level changes over the last few thousand years. The raised shorelines on the islands, about one metre above present levels, contain extensive evidence of ancient occupation that is believed to be pre-Islamic. Further back, sea level changes in prehistoric times would have covered evidence of Stone Age occupation.

Sea levels also affect Abu Dhabi's coastlines. A rise of one metre, for example, would flood most of the extensive sabkhas between Abu Dhabi and Sila'a.

Following a talk given by Jakub Czastka in February to geologists working for our sponsors ADNOC, however, we have now been offered access to geological data on sabkha formation and the old shorelines, which will in turn, help to build up a picture of what the coast looked like in the past.

The data is held by the Geology Departments of both ADNOC and ADCO. Our thanks to both companies for their offer of assistance.

## Late Stone Age site at AD Airport

Following the discovery of late Islamic potsherds by the Co-ordinator on an old headland close to Abu Dhabi Airport at the beginning of March, a further site visit was made on March 5th by Geoffrey King, Cristina Tonghini, Jakub Czastka and the Co-ordinator.

Besides the pottery, which covers an extensive area, a circular stone structure was identified, together with fragments of flint tools and flakes provisionally dated to around the Fourth Millennium BC, the first Late Stone Age site discovered so close to Abu Dhabi.

Before the formation of the sabkha commenced, (probably around 2,000 BC), the headland on which the site is located would have been on the coastline, interestingly at one of the points nearest to the key archaeological site at Umm an Nar, from where copper from the Al Ain area was exported to Mesopotamia between around 2,500 - 2,200 BC.

A summary report will be submitted to Civil Aviation Chairman HE Sheikh Hamdan bin Mubarak al Nahyan, requesting that the site be fenced and protected, prior to future further investigation, and possible subsequent excavation.

## More Sponsors, More Support

The Project has obtained three new sponsors. The New Medical Centre group in Abu Dhabi has provided mobile telephones from Bang and Olufsen at a highly discounted price, the Forte Grand Hotel, has provided us with the first ever ADIAS T-shirts, and Spinneys has donated sustenance and utensils both for feeding the team and for sieving finds.

Another long-term sponsor, Union National Bank, has purchased a PC and printers for the Project's use, while the Abu Dhabi Drilling and Chemicals Products Company, ADDCAP, has purchased equipment to facilitate the taking of photographs for record purposes and for weighing and sorting environmental samples.

To all, our thanks. More sponsors are always welcome !