

Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey Project

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1995-1996 Season

Occasional Newsletter

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Focus on pre-Islamic church, domestic building

More discoveries from Sir Bani Yas sites

With four weeks of work on Sir Bani Yas now completed, the island has continued to produce good results, primarily from the pre-Islamic Christian monastic complex and its nearby settlement.

Much of the focus of the work, naturally, has been on the site of the church, where site director Joe Elders has now completely exposed the surface plan, proving that it was an even more impressive building than we had originally suspected.

Of particular interest has been evidence that the collapsed eastern wall of the church may possibly have had a gable end. The east end must have been lavishly decorated. The now-familiar designs of Nestorian crosses and bunches of grapes have been appearing in profusion, and, according to ADIAS Director Dr. Geoffrey King, sufficient may preserved to allow us to prepare a drawing of how the wall may once have looked.

There is also the possibility that the church may have had a small bell-tower, judging by collapsed masonry at the south east corner of the site.

It is also clear that the church was built in more than one phase, suggesting that the monastic community may have begun in a relatively small way, and then, as it grew, the church had to be enlarged to accommodate the population.

Near the eastern wall of the church, Joe Elders, assisted by John Martin, has also identified the site of a small well, now dry, which may have been used for ablutions before prayer.

About a kilometre to the north of the church and monastery, Sal Garfi has been clearing a mound similar to, but larger, than the two mounds cleared in previous seasons. Thus far, he has uncovered the upper remains of a domestic building that appears to have contained about nine rooms.

Finds, of pottery or glassware, for example, have been relatively scanty - the inhabitants of pre-

Islamic Sir Bani Yas seem to have been very tidy people, and we have not yet had the good fortune to find any of their rubbish dumps. The newly-exposed house, however, like the monastic complex itself and other buildings examined in previous years, continues to add to the picture now emerging of a highly-organised and sophisticated community capable of building structures of high quality.

Sponsors taking part in our planned visit on April 12 will be able to see both of these sites.

We have, at present, failed to find any graves linked to the monastic complex, although, naturally, we hope that a combination of more surface surveying and a bit of luck will produce some in the future.

Elsewhere on the island, Natasha Dodwell and Finnish volunteer Dr. Kurt West have commenced work on a large stone circle on top of a ridge overlooking the Al Khor area. Though extensively trampled by eland, which seem to like lying amid the stones, the surface indications are that it *may* be of an early date. We shall see ! (as will sponsors on April 12).

Finally, our other team members have been hard at work studying finds from previous seasons. Under the direction of Liz Shepherd, Mark Beech, Jakub 'Chas' Czastka and Annabel Durnford have been sorting finds from the 7,000 year old 'Ubaid village site on Dalma excavated in 1993 and 1994.

Mark, our environmental specialist, reports the identification of a gazelle bone which has been cooked and burned, presumably for human consumption.

This apparently represents the earliest evidence so far found from anywhere in Eastern Arabia of early inhabitants catching and cooking gazelle.

Liz and Annabel have been studying the pottery, much of which was imported from the site of 'Ubaid in Mesopotamia, clear evidence of the in-

Chas, meanwhile, has been sorting and examining the many thousands of flint fragments recovered from the Dalma site. Some are apparently comparable to tools known as 'Ras al Hamra wedges,' from a site close to the Omani capital of Muscat which is one of the earliest known settlement sites anywhere in south eastern Arabia.

Ceramicists Beatrice de Cardi and Dr. Cristina Tonghini have been examining the pottery from our Sir Bani Yas sites, and, as reported elsewhere, from last summer's excavations at Abu Dhabi Airport and from our earlier work on the island of Balghelam.

Sponsors Trip - Friday April 12th

Will sponsors please note that plans are now being finalised for the planned visit to the Sir Bani Yas excavations on Friday April 12th.

Anyone wishing to come who has not yet advised the Co-ordinator's secretary, Mrs. Ginny Droubi (tel: 02-451446; fax: 02-453662), should do so as soon as possible.

Details of the flight and programme will be advised to participants next week.

Visitors to Sir Bani Yas

We have been pleased to receive a number of special visitors in Sir Bani Yas during the first part of the season.

Early on, we were delighted to be visited by Presidential Court Chamberlain HE Sheikh Surour bin Mohammed al Nahyan, the sponsor of our Balghelam work. In an hour-long conversation, Geoffrey King, Sal Garfi, Liz Shepherd and Joe Elders briefed him extensively on both the results of the Balghelam dig and on this season's plans for Sir Bani Yas.

On March 28, Information and Culture Under Secretary HH Sheikh Abdulla bin Zayed al Nahyan flew specially to the island to tour the sites and to meet with Project archaeologists. He was provided with a full guided tour of the church site and the house being dug in the Al Khor district, and was then shown the finds from the church site.

He was also briefed on our earlier work on Dalma, and on the Balghelam dig in January and February, in all spending around a couple of hours with Dr. King and the rest of the team, and assuring us of the continued support of His Highness President Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al Nahyan for our work.

From overseas the Russian Minister of Culture, Evgeny Sidorov, visited the church site during a tour of the island on March 27, showing particular interest in the similarity of the decorative plaster to designs used in the Russian Orthodox Church.

Another valued visitor was Norwegian explorer and author Thor Heyerdahl, who, accompanied by the

Norwegian Ambassador, came down to look at the monastery and also to discuss the relevance of our Dalma site to his work on the origins of navigation. Thanks to a visit by BBC Radio journalist Malcolm Billings last week, the church site will figure prominently in a World Service programme in the 'Heritage' series, due to be broadcast in May.

During his visit, arranged by the Project with the help of the Ministry of Information and Culture, Billings also interviewed HE Sheikh Nahayan bin Mubarak al Nahayan, Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research and Acting Minister of Information and Culture, with particular reference to the significance of the Sir Bani Yas church site.

All in all, a busy programme of visitors, and one which underlines the increasing recognition being given to the work of the Project.

New information on Airport pottery

During the course of our season on Sir Bani Yas, Project ceramicists Beatrice de Cardi and Dr. Cristina Tonghini have been examining and drawing some of the pottery recovered during the rescue excavations carried out by Jakub Czastka and Alex Wasse at Abu Dhabi Airport last summer.

To our delight, their expert eyes have succeeded in identifying the presence of pottery from periods which had previously been unrecognised. These include the Ad Door 'C' and 'D' period, around 300 AD, not previously recorded on the Abu Dhabi coastline, and also pottery from the early Second Millennium BC, again the first time that material from this period has been found on the coastline.

This further underlines the importance of this site, which, although it contains no structures apart from the two wells, seems to have been in use almost continuously from the Late Stone Age until relatively recent times, a rare example of a multi-phase site with such a lengthy period of use.

More Balghelam work next season

Following the successful short season on Balghelam in January and February, Presidential Court Chamberlain HE Sheikh Surour bin Mohammed al Nahyan has now kindly agreed to permit a further short season of two to three weeks, which is provisionally scheduled to take place next season.

The work, to be undertaken again by Sal Garfi and Jakub Czastka, will focus on further investigation of the features on the relict shoreline which yielded evidence of hearths that, it is conjectured, might have been used for the burning of shells to make lime.