

Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey Project

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1996-1997 Season

Occasional Newsletter

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Another active winter season getting under way

With the summer break now over, planning for the winter season, the sixth of the Project, is now well under way, with work due to commence this week. The first task has been timed to coincide with the forthcoming Silver Jubilee celebrations of the UAE at the beginning of December. During a three week period from around November 25th to December 15th, we will have a three person team on Sir Bani Yas, headed by Salvatore Garfi. The team will be continuing excavation of the large house first tackled at the beginning of this year. The house dates to the same period as the pre-Islamic Christian monastic site, and should yield some further evidence of the lifestyle of the island's inhabitants in the Sixth and Seventh Centuries AD.

At the same time, under the supervision of Jakub Czastka, the foundations of the monastery's church will be exposed, so that visitors to the island over the National Day period will have the opportunity to see the site and have it explained to them.

The work is being carried out, as usual, with the support and permission of the Private Department of His Highness Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al Nahyan, and we are grateful to HH Sheikh Tahnoun bin Zayed al Nahyan for his assistance in providing us with the necessary facilities on the island.

Following completion of this first phase of activity, we plan to carry out a re-examination of the surface of the important sites discovered in the islands of Yasat al Ulya, Yasat Sufla, Al Ufzaiyyah and Gha-gha' to prepare for activity next spring.

Moving into the New Year, Salvatore Garfi and Jakub Czastka will undertake a second short season of excavations on the Late Islamic settlement on the island of Balghelam, with the kind permission and support of Presidential Court Chamberlain HE Sheikh Surour bin Mohammed al Nahyan.

The focus of the work will be on the large rectangular hearths identified last season, in the hope that more precise ideas about their function and dating can be obtained. This, in turn, will amplify our understanding about the nature of settlement on Abu Dhabi's islands during the last few hundred years.

During the surveys of the last few years, it has become increasingly evident that it is essential that we gain a proper understanding of changes in sea level over the last few thousand years. Even a small change can make a difference to the large number of islands and shallow lagoons along the Abu Dhabi coastline, right the way from Ras Ghanadha in the north east to the Sila'a peninsula in the west.

In an effort to obtain information, the Project is planning to bring out Professor Graham Evans, formerly of Imperial College, London, in February. The first person ever to study the *sabkhas* of Abu Dhabi, back in 1969, Professor Evans is one of the world's top geomorphologists, and should be able to help us draw up a map that will reveal the impact of sea level changes on the coastline. That, in turn, will help in interpretation of the occupation of the coast and islands.

Moving into the main Project season for March and April, two parallel projects will be under way on Sir Bani Yas.

The main focus of attention will be on further examination of the pre-Islamic Christian monastic site, both of the monastery complex and of outlying buildings. This should help us both to understand the layout of the monastery complex and, we hope, to gain a better idea about the precise period during which the site was occupied.

At the same time, with the help of a team from Australia's University of Sydney, we plan to investigate a large mound near the island's airport.

From its shape and from pottery collected on the surface, as well as from the results of a resistivity survey of the mound carried out for ADIAS in 1994 by Prague's Institute of Archaeology, the site may well be a burial mound from the late Third Millennium BC or early Second Millennium BC.

Although evidence of significant Third Millennium BC has been found on Abu Dhabi's inshore islands, most notably at Umm an Nar, no Second Millennium BC sites have thus far been excavated on the coast or islands, and we hope the Sir Bani Yas site will yield important new evidence about the extent of settlement during this period.

The boat-borne survey team will also continue work on the islands of Ghagha, the Yasats and Ufzaiyyah, to gain further understanding of the important evidence they offer of occupation offshore during the Late Stone Age and the First Millennium AD.

More support from Duty Free

As sponsors will recall, the Abu Dhabi Duty Free provided extensive support in the summer of 1995 for the Project's excavations at the multi-period site adjacent to Abu Dhabi International Airport. Indeed, without that support, provided at the request of Abu Dhabi Civil Aviation Department Chairman HE Sheikh Hamdan bin Mubarak al Nahyan, it would have been impossible for us to carry out the work, which yielded considerable evidence of occupation from the Late Stone Age, the Umm an Nar period of the Bronze Age and the beginning of the First Millennium AD.

Work at the Airport site is basically complete, apart from future excavation of the two wells, although the Project is maintaining a watching brief on the site and adjacent areas. Another flint tile knife, broken into two parts, was recovered during a quick visual survey during the summer, showing the value of keeping an occasional eye on things.

A full analysis of the pottery excavated and recovered on the site has now been received, showing that it was occupied throughout the Third Millennium BC, thus pre-dating Umm an Nar, and underlining the importance of the work that was undertaken. A full report on the pottery, written by our ceramist Beatrice de Cardi, is to be published in a forthcoming issue of the academic journal *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy*.

Over the course of the summer, and with the generous support of Sheikh Hamdan, the Abu Dhabi Duty Free extended a further offer of sponsorship for the current Project year. This will help us to carry out further excavations on the important late Islamic sites on the island of Balghelam this winter. We are grateful for their continued support.

Sir Bani Yas monastery "a very major discovery"

The pre-Islamic Nestorian church and monastery found by the Project on Sir Bani Yas has been recognised by a major conference of scholars in London as being "a very major new discovery that has brought Byzantine and early Islamic studies into a very new and unfamiliar area."

The conference, the fifth *Late Antiquity and Early Islam Workshop*, was held earlier this month at London University's School of Oriental and African Studies, attracting participants from scholars from major British, European and Middle Eastern Universities specialised in Byzantine and early Islamic history, archaeology and literature.

A paper on the site was delivered by ADIAS Director Dr. Geoffrey King under the title *The Arabian Gulf, the trade infrastructure and Nestorianism: fieldwork in Abu Dhabi and Ra's al Khaimah*.

During discussion, it was suggested by an academic from Oxford University's Institute of Archaeology that the site might have been related to penetration by the Nestorian Christians of Sixth Century trade networks in the Arabian Gulf and Indian Ocean.

Another point of interest to emerge from the workshop was the existence in the early Islamic period of an important trade in guano from the islands to the Southern Gulf to Basra, where it was sold at a high price for use as fertiliser.

The guano is likely to have been obtained from islands used as roosts or for breeding colonies by the Socotra Cormorant, which still occupies the area in large numbers.

In collaboration with ornithologists from the National Avian Research Centre, part of Abu Dhabi's new Environmental Research and Wildlife Development Agency, ADIAS will now plan to plot the presence of Socotra Cormorant roosts and colonies, to see if these can be related to evidence of the ancient trade in guano.

Major cormorant colonies still exist on the islands of Yasat al Ulya and Khardal, west of Sir Bani Yas, while roosts are known from small islets such as Mahamiliyah and Farijidat..

Film on Project nears completion ...

The first film on the work of the Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey Project is now nearing completion, and should be ready for transmission by the end of this month.

Being produced at the initiative of one of our earli-

est sponsors, the Abu Dhabi Company for Onshore Oil Operations, ADCO, the film includes footage shot on the islands of Sir Bani Yas, Dalma and Merawah, as well as of the boat survey team on other islands.

Work on the film commenced three years ago, and the finished product should represent a useful visual record of the Project's work so far.

Once the film has had its premiere in Abu Dhabi, it will also be shown at London University's School of Oriental and African Studies, to introduce the Project's work more widely to a British audience.

... and book out soon, thanks to ADNOC

Sponsors may also be interested to know that a book summarising the first five years of the Project's work is also nearing completion.

Written by the Project Co-ordinator, it has benefited from the professional archaeological eyes of Project Director Dr. Geoffrey King and Project members Beatrice de Cardi, Dr. Cristina Tonghini, Salvatore Garfi and Jakub Czastka. It is, however, written to be comprehensible to the layman!

The book is being produced for the Project by the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company, ADNOC, and should be ready before the end of the year, to coincide with the Silver Jubilee celebrations both of the UAE and of ADNOC itself.

Since the days of the first Danish excavations at Umm an Nar in 1959, archaeology in Abu Dhabi, particularly on the coast and islands, has always been able to count upon the local oil community for logistic and other support. We are delighted to be able, once again, to acknowledge the continuing and valuable backing the Project receives from ADNOC and its group of companies, as well as from the rest of the oil industry.

ADCO support continues

The new season ahead should include, as reported above, a variety of survey and excavation activities outside the main Sir Bani Yas season next spring, and, once again, we hope to make use of the support of the Abu Dhabi Company for Onshore Oil Operations, ADCO, to facilitate access to areas not usually accessible.

Under the terms of ADCO's Health, Safety and Environment policy, the Company requires assessment of the presence of archaeological remains in areas where it plans activity, and, as a result, ADIAS sur-

veyors have already visited three areas, the islands of Ramhan and Qusabi and the route of the Main Oil Line running from Habshan to Jebel Dhanna. In all areas, sites were discovered, and have now been entered in the database of Abu Dhabi's archaeological sites.

While the Project welcomes the opportunity to provide help to ADCO in these areas, which, in any case, permits us to investigate parts of the islands and coastline that might otherwise not be visited, it also provides us with an opportunity to do something in return for the help the Project has received from ADCO since it began.

As anyone who runs a 4 wheel drive vehicle will know, they are expensive pieces of equipment, and the Project has been able to count on the supply of vehicles for months at a time, thanks to ADCO's generosity. We are most grateful.

More thanks to Municipality, other sponsors

We are also delighted to acknowledge the provision of help from the Abu Dhabi Municipality, which has kindly placed a vehicle at the Project's disposal for a period, and is also making signboards in both Arabic and English which will be placed on sites on the Yasats, Ghagha' and Ufzaiyyah.

The boards will state that the sites are protected by Municipality order, and will briefly explain their significance.

We are also pleased to record that a number of our other sponsors have already made commitments to provide further support during the course of the forthcoming season, including the Abu Dhabi Hilton, the Al Fahim Group, ICL, the Emirates Insurance Company, Emirates PhotoMarketing (Kodak), ADNOC-FOD, Union National Bank *et. al.*

We are grateful to them all.

SBY features at London Exhibition

As Project sponsors may be aware, a major photographic exhibition on the Emirates, entitled Phoenix Rising, was held in London in September.

Inaugurated by Britain's Secretary of State for National Heritage, Virginia Bottomley, it was attended by Information and Culture Ministry Under Secretary HH Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed al Nahyan and invited guests from the diplomatic corps and from business and political circles in London.

A plaster cross from the Sir Bani Yas church was specially flown to London to be put on display during the opening ceremony, attracting considerable attention from guests.