

Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey Project

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1998-1999 Season

Occasional Newsletter

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Survey of ADCO oilfields , more Merawah work to be focus of another busy winter season

Our apologies to ADIAS Sponsors for having been somewhat delayed in commencing the issue of the *Newsletter* this winter. The only justification that we can plead is that ADIAS activity has got under way earlier than usual, and the planning for and carrying out of field work, as well as the associated preparation of reports has pushed the writing of the *Newsletter* to the back of the queue. The initial signs are that the 1998-1999 winter season will be our busiest yet.

As usual, the programme now under way includes a balance of preliminary field survey work, to add to our database of archaeological sites throughout the coast and islands and also in much of Abu Dhabi's Western Region, and a programme of detailed drawing, study and excavation of a number of sites identified in previous years.

Much of the survey work is being carried out in association with our long-term corporate sponsor, the Abu Dhabi Company for Onshore Oil Operations, ADCO.

As other sponsors will know, the Abu Dhabi National Company, ADNOC, group has recently introduced a more tightly defined set of guidelines relating to the protection of the environment throughout the areas of operations of the oil companies, with the identification and preservation of archaeological sites and other items relating to the country's heritage being included in the programme.

As part of this process, ADIAS is now working with ADCO on carrying out baseline studies throughout the ADCO field areas. The work will include a re-examination of archaeological sites known to exist in field areas, survey for new

sites, and the drawing up of a code of practice for ADCO employees and those of their contractors on how to deal with the discovery of archaeological artefacts and sites.

The first phase of the work is already completed, a survey of parts of the ADCO Jebel Dhanna terminal areas, which produced important and previously unrecorded sites. ADIAS Director Dr. Geoffrey King, together with Co-ordinator Peter Hellyer and the Director of the ADIAS Environmental Studies Unit, Simon Aspinall, undertook a survey of the area with the assistance of ADCO staff at the beginning of November.

Along the beach adjacent to the ADCO housing complex, evidence of occupation during the Late Islamic period, (from around the 16th Century onwards) was identified.

Of more significance was the identification of the relics of industrial-scale mining for sulphur on the hill of Jebel Dhanna itself. Although only a small part of the hill was surveyed in detail, four mining sites were found, with a total of around 100 shafts, up to 5.5 metres deep, and a number of long trenches with galleries leading off them.

The discovery confirms oral reports that Jebel Dhanna was once a major source of sulphur, and research is now under way to determine the truth of suggestions that the Portuguese once obtained sulphur from Jebel Dhanna.

Further work is required on the sulphur mines and on adjacent remains of buildings, presumably used by the miners, but it is already clear that the Jebel Dhanna site will add significantly to our understanding of the UAE's national heritage. Apart from smaller deposits of sulphur on the nearby island of Sir Bani Yas, the Jebel Dhanna

mines are the only deposits of sulphur yet identified in the Emirates, and are believed to have remained in use by local inhabitants until well into the twentieth century.

Field surveys on a second phase of the survey work for ADCO, in the areas of the Dabb'iyah, Shanayel and Rumaitha oil fields, are now under way, and are scheduled to be completed in early December, while survey work in the areas of the major onshore oilfields is due to take place early in the New Year.

ADIAS is grateful to ADCO for its interest in, and support for, archaeological studies of the Emirates, and we are delighted that the first phase of this survey programme has produced such important results.

Support for mapping the results is being provided by the Environmental Research and Wildlife Development Agency, ERWDA, which is working with ADIAS on building a database where both archaeological and environmental data will be accessible. More details of the field surveys will be announced in due course.

More work on Merawah

In the middle of December, the first of two short seasons of activity on the island of Merawah commences, with the arrival of our drawing team of Henriette Maren and Edward Gibbs, to continue drawing of the Late Stone Age site of MR-1, on the south-western tip of the island.

The MR-1 site, largest of its kind known in Abu Dhabi, was first identified during the first ADIAS season in 1992, and has since yielded an extensive collection of stone tools and implements. The outlines of over 50 structures are visible on the site, and the detailed drawing programme, now in its second year, is designed to record the surface evidence in as much detail as possible, before we move on to possible excavation.

In early February, we hope to welcome Professor Dan Potts of Australia's University of Sydney, and one of the top international experts in Gulf archaeology, to Merawah, for discussions on future plans for work on the site.

A third season of work by the Australian team on Bronze Age burial mounds on the island is also being planned.

Studies of the small ceramic vessel found in excavation of one of the cairns at the MR-6.4 site on Merawah last spring have suggested, as suspected, that it is probably of Third Millennium BC date. This is the first clear indication yet

found of Bronze Age occupation of Abu Dhabi's offshore islands, although an articulated burial found in 1996 in the adjacent MR 6.3 site may possibly be from this period. Results of dating on the human remains has thus far proved inconclusive.

In an effort to clarify the dating of the group of cairns at MR 6 and the group of smaller burial cairns at MR 12, some distance to the east, our team of Australian archaeologists, led by Soren Blau from the Australian National University, will be returning for a third season of excavations on the island next March.

Finally, the need for more work on the extensive collection of large hearths and fireplaces at the MR-9 site has become apparent, with the results of Carbon 14 dating from some ash taken from one of the hearths last spring during excavations by ADIAS Deputy Director Sal Garfi. Tests carried out at Oxford University have suggested, with some considerable degree of probability, that the ash can be dated to between 320 - 200 BC, over 2,000 years ago.

Similar such hearths have been identified by ADIAS on many offshore islands, but this is the first C14 date we have obtained. Pottery found in the context of similar hearths on Balghelam in 1996 was of Late Islamic date, (c. 16th/17th Century AD), while we have been informed by local fishermen that the same kind of structures were in use until around 50 years ago. We now need to examine the MR-9 site further, as well as other such hearth sites, to test the hypothesis that the same kind of structures may have been in use, almost unchanged, ever since the end of the local Iron Age, or perhaps earlier.

Permission for the work on Merawah has, once again, been granted by our Patron, His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, to whom, as always, we extend our thanks.

Back to Mantiqa al-Sirra

Following on from the ADCO-backed desert survey early next year, we plan to send a team, led by Sal Garfi, back once again to the site of Mantiqa al-Sirra, to the east of Medinat (Bida) Zayed.

The site, last studied in the 1997 spring season, yielded evidence of a fortified enclosure and an adjacent area of possible wells or an abandoned date palm plantation, together with Late Islamic pottery. Other desert camp sites, again from the Late Islamic period, were identified in the vicinity.

Judging by the pottery evidence, the Mantiqa al-Sirra site appears to be of roughly 16th or 17th Century AD date, and we hope that the studies will produce further information about the nature of the site, and whether it can be linked with evidence from the historical record of a fort in the region at that time.

As before, the Mantiqa al-Sirra work will be carried out with support from the Chairman of the Abu Dhabi Municipality and Ruler's Representative in the Western Region, His Excellency Sheikh Mohammed bin Butti Al Hamed, to whom our thanks.

Other Surveys

While the projects above will occupy much of our efforts over the course of the next few months, smaller scale survey work will also be undertaken.

Earlier this month, following the Jebel Dhanna survey, the ADIAS team paid a short visit to the island of Ras Farda, just off the Ras Ghumeis peninsula in the extreme west of Abu Dhabi. Sites from two periods were identified on the island, one a Late Islamic building with associated mound of ash and extensive pottery scatter, and the other an area of pottery scatter, with possible remains of buildings, dating to the late Pre-Islamic period, (3rd to 7th Centuries AD). A further visit is planned during the course of the winter.

Later in November, Co-ordinator Peter Hellyer and Environmental Studies Unit Director Simon Aspinall, accompanied an ADCO team along the route of a new road from near Tarif to Medinat Zayed, locating evidence of Late Islamic use of a small inter-dunal plain on the northern edge of the dune field. Of particular interest at the site, which has been named Bab-1, was an extensive scatter of fragments of ostrich egg shell, the largest such concentration found anywhere in the Emirate.

A further detailed survey is also provisionally planned during the winter on the island of Abu Al Abyadh, with the kind permission of His Highness Crown Prince Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan. A preliminary survey by Simon Aspinall in May identified over a dozen sites from the Late Islamic period on the north-west and western coasts of the island, and the survey should permit us to fill in a major gap in our record of use of the islands during the Late Islamic period. The work is being carried out at the initiative of Minister of Information and Culture His Highness Sheikh Abdulla bin Zayed

Al Nahyan.

Pottery Studies

Analytical research on finds from previous seasons continues apace.

One main objective this winter will be to examine all the pottery from sites of the Late Islamic period, with a view to preparing a detailed summary of the pottery assemblage, some of which has been excavated on sites like Balghelam and Merawah, and some of which has been retrieved during survey work.

The study is being undertaken for ADIAS by Dr. Robert Carter, who will be doing his work in collaboration with the Department of Antiquities and Museums of Ras Al Khaimah, which has an extensive collection of pottery from the period. This should prove of major value in helping to understand the whole sequence of Late Islamic pottery for the Emirates.

In Britain, our archaeo-zoologist Mark Beech is hard at work analysing the environmental remains excavated from sites on Dalma, Balghelam and Merawah, as well as other material from sites in the northern emirates.

Support from Sponsors

With the variety of work now under way, ADIAS is, of course, grateful for the support extended by its corporate and other sponsors.

We are delighted to acknowledge the continuing support from many existing sponsors, among whom should be mentioned British Petroleum, Abu Dhabi Duty Free, the Abu Dhabi Gas Liquefaction Company, ADGAS, Al Fahim Group, the Kanoo Group, ICL, Kodak, and the Emirates Insurance Company. British Airways, as always, are assisting with the cost of tickets and excess baggage, while other facilities are being provided from a variety of sources, including the Ministry of Information and Culture and the Abu Dhabi Municipality.

We are pleased, too, to welcome GAMCO as a new sponsor of ADIAS. Further sponsors are always welcome!

We should mention, in particular, the continuing support offered to ADIAS by the Abu Dhabi Company for Onshore Oil Operations, ADCO. Their offer of logistic and other support for the winter programme of surveys, such as that at Jebel Dhanna, has made it possible for ADIAS to extend its activities into areas that were previously inaccessible, and we are most grateful for their assistance.