New light on Late Stone Age from excavation of Airport site

The Project's 1994-1995 'Winter' season finally concluded in late August after completion of the rescue excavation at the Abu Dhabi Airport site. Despite a few grumbles from our archaeologists, Jakub Czastka and Alex Wasse about the heat and humidity, preliminary results suggest that the whole operation was well worth while, yielding substantial information about the occupation of the coastline during the Late Stone Age, between 5,000 BC and 3,500 BC. Among artefacts found during the course of the surface pick-up and subsequent sieving were a number of fine flint tools, clearly made elsewhere, judging by the nature of the stone, as well as rougher flint scrapers made from the tile flint to be found on a hill adjacent to the site.

Some of the pottery found on the surface of the site, according to one of our ceramicists, Beatrice de Cardi, has now been definitively identified as of types used at the port of Umm an Nar, which flourished between 2,700 BC and 2,200 BC, prior to the formation of the sabkha. Though relatively limited in quantity, this is the first pottery of the period ever to have been identified on what was then the coastline of Abu Dhabi, Umm an Nar and the two other sites from the same period, at Ras Ghanadha and Ras al Aysh, all having then been islands.

Also found was a wide range of Late Islamic pottery, believed to date to the last 200-300 years or so, evidence that the site continued to be in use in relatively recent times. A large collection of fragments of stone of types found found naturally on the site was also collected, and is to be analysed and identified for us by ADCO (see story on Page Two).

The best examples of the flint and pottery are now being professionally drawn in London, after which a preliminary report will be submitted to Abu Dhabi Duty Free, who sponsored this unseasonal dig, on the instructions of Civil Aviation Department Chairman HE Sheikh Hamdan bin Mubarak al Nahyan.

During the course of the excavation, two stone structures were examined which we had originally thought, from surface evidence, to be early tombs. After clearing the sand, however, it became clear that they were wells with a superstructure built of stone brought to the site from nearby, and with the well shafts being dug into the sandstone rock. Due to the danger of the superstructures collapsing on top of our archaeologists, we were unable to reach the bottom of either well, but hope that this can be done, with the assistance of the Abu Dhabi Municipality, in the spring.

It has, therefore, been impossible so far to date the wells, which may be either relatively recent or considerably older. Certainly there is now evidence of water having been available on the site over a long period.

A full analysis of the importance of the site must await detailed investigation. It appears so far, however, that the most important discoveries on the site were the Late Stone Age material, which has never before, as far as we know, been discovered in such profusion anywhere along the coastline of Abu Dhabi, and the Umm an Nar period pottery.

Thus it is possible to say that as much as 7,000 years ago, there was a route used by hunters across what is now desert, but was then much more fertile, between Al Ain and the coast, which then linked into people living on the offshore islands. The site continued to be used up until around 4,000 years ago, prior to the formation of the sabkha, and then again was used in more recent times, making it a so far rarely identified multi-period site for Abu Dhabi's coastline.

Further preliminary surveying will be undertaken...
To help us in the first stage of this detective work, one of our sponsors, the Abu Dhabi Company for Onshore Oil Operations, ADCO, has kindly agreed that it will put the facilities and expertise of its Geology Department at our disposal. A selection of the rock types has now been prepared which ADCO geologists are studying for us, with two objectives - to identify the types or rock, and then to give an indication, if possible, of the nearest known outcroppings of such rocks, whether in the Hajar Mountains or further afield. This, in turn, will help to provide us with knowledge of the trade routes along which the rock fragments must have travelled, although it may not be possible to determine the periods when this took place.

As far as we know, this is the first time that the geological expertise that exists in Abu Dhabi's oil industry will have been put to use in analysing archaeological discoveries, an interesting example of the way in which archaeologists are able to interact with other scientific disciplines, and a good example, too, of unusual ways in which sponsors can contribute to the work of the Project.

Our thanks to ADCO Management for their swift response to our request for help, and to ADCO geologists for their interest and assistance.

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**Planning for the New Year**

Planning for the next field season is now under way, which we hope will include further detailed excavations on the Sir Bani Yas pre-Islamic Christian monastery and on the 7,000 year old settlement site on Dalma, as well as work on another offshore island closer to Abu Dhabi.

There will also be a continuation of some of the preliminary surveying work undertaken on a number of other islands last winter and spring, as well as research into environmental data. The texts of the first two Project academic reports, on the Season One survey and on the important complex of Late Islamic buildings, including a pearl merchant's house and two mosques, on Dalma, are now complete, and production work prior to publication is under way.

Sponsors will be kept informed as our plans become more concrete.

In the meantime, sponsors might like to note that we will shortly be commencing the annual process of seeking support of various kinds. We hope the achievements of the last few years will have proved sufficient to persuade sponsors to continue with their invaluable support.

Peter Hellyer