

Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey Project

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1995-1996 Season

Occasional Newsletter

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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 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

The British Council to support Environmental Research Programme

Archaeology is not just about digging up things, uncovering remains of buildings and finding items for display like pottery and the like. Increasingly over the years it has come to involve a wide variety of related studies, all designed to provide as complete a picture as possible of the way in which people lived in the past, as well as what they left behind them.

Thus one key focus of interest is on the remains left behind of what the people ate, whether they grew it, raised it, like livestock, or hunted and fished for it.

Over the course of the seasons of excavations on our major sites on Sir Bani Yas and Dalma, we have recovered a substantial amount of environmental data, like fish bones, shells, animal bones and the like, all of which need to be studied and identified.

This Environmental Research Programme, being co-ordinated by our environmental archaeologist, Mark Beech, involves discussions with a wide variety of scientific institutions, and also will lead eventually in collaboration with others, to the creation of reference collections of the bones of, for example, fish, to help in future research studies.

The British Council has recently agreed to provide a useful amount of financial support for the programme, which will involve liaison with scientific institutions both in Britain and in the UAE.

We acknowledge, with thanks, their support.

ADCO help on geological data

During the Abu Dhabi International Airport excavations in the summer, our archaeological team recovered a large number of fragments of rock that had obviously been brought to the site by human agency, for they are not present naturally in the area. The purpose of flint chippings is obvious - flint tools were being made on the site. The other types of stone must, however, have been brought for some purpose, as yet not properly understood.

Some may perhaps have been used for net sinkers, or grindstones, or even for export, for from excavations at Umm an Nar in the nineteen sixties, and from clay tablets found on sites in Mesopotamia, we know that certain types of stone, such as diorite, were being exported from Umm an Nar in the Third Millennium BC as well as copper.

We cannot begin to evaluate the possible uses of these rock fragments, however, until we are able to identify them as to type.

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.

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