

Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey Project

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1999-2000 Season

Occasional Newsletter

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Preparations under way for the ninth ADIAS field season

The opening of the ninth season of the Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey, ADIAS, is now upon us - time to give a preview of some of the project's plans in the period running round to next April.

First the fieldwork.

Although final plans have yet to be refined, fieldwork looks like getting under way next month with more geomorphological studies by Professor Graham Evans and Dr. Tony Kirkham of the old shorelines on the islands of Merawah and Balghelam. As reported in a separate story, studies of the pottery collected from both these islands suggests occupation much earlier than had previously been recorded. In order to understand the pattern of occupation, as well as its dating, more information is required on the shorelines and on the fluctuation of sea level over the last four thousand years or so.

Some time around New Year, we plan a further season of drawing the major Late Stone Age site of MR-1, on Merawah. Over 200 flint tools have been collected on this site, which also has over 50 small stone structures, and the drawing programme is designed to record the surface exposure of the structures before excavation begins. The drawing is slow and painstaking work, (perhaps a little boring too), but it is important to complete it before the digging starts.

Also early next year, perhaps in March, we also plan a further round of survey and fieldwork at Jebel Dhanna where we identified the UAE's first (and only?) sulphur mines a year ago. The Abu Dhabi Company for

Onshore Oil Operations, ADCO, one of our Sponsors, has agreed to support this further fieldwork, which should give us a better idea of the extent of the sulphur mining industry, which appears to date to the 16th-18th Centuries AD.

Other smaller campaigns of fieldwork will also take place. Earlier this month, for example, Peter Hellyer and Simon Aspinall, the Director of our ADIAS Environmental Studies Unit, carried out a brief survey, in collaboration with ADCO, of parts of south-east Abu Dhabi, prior to the drilling of a new oil well. Little of archaeological significance was noted, but we welcome the opportunity to be involved in survey work before development takes place.

Another focus of work over the course of the next few months will be the completion of analytical studies on the results of earlier excavations.

We hope, for example, to receive results of Carbon 14 dating on samples of ash from old fireplaces on Merawah and Balghelam. The ash comes from sites where there is not only Late Islamic but also pre-Islamic and Bronze Age pottery, and the results of the dating will help us to understand when these sites first came into use.

Results are also awaited from C14 dating of the lime-kilns excavated on Merawah last March. Pottery from the kilns has been dated to the 1st - 6th Centuries AD, and it will be interesting to see if the results match.

The receipt of the data will also help us to complete reports on the Balghelam and Merawah sites.

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Together with data obtained from survey work on other islands and on parts of the coast, this will permit us to put together the outlines of the patterns of settlement on the coast and islands from the Late Stone Age, over 7,000 years ago, up until recent times. This, it is hoped, will not only tell us *where* people lived, and *when*, but will also shed light on *how* they lived.

Along with further interpretation of the results from the desert survey carried out last year with the support of ADCO, which help to explain the links between the coast and the interior, this should go a long way towards providing a coherent picture of Abu Dhabi's history since prehistoric times.

With the results of more scientific analysis of our finds coming in, we hope during the course of the year to be able to move towards further publications dealing with our work.

Finally, one objective of ADIAS is the identification and training of UAE nationals interested in the country's history and archaeology. So far, we must admit, we have not had a great amount of success in this field. Nor have others. Although there have been museums and antiquities departments in the UAE for thirty years, there are no academic courses in the country offering archaeology as a subject, and there is, as far as we are aware, only one UAE national who has completed a degree in archaeology.

If any of our Sponsors are aware of young nationals who would be interested in pursuing studies in archaeology, *please* let us know. It may be possible to obtain support for their studies.

Abu Dhabi at the coming of Islam

Over the last few years, finds of pottery on the islands of Qarnain. Yasat al-Ulya and Ghagha' and on the mainland at Ra's Bilyaryar (Sheleala) have shown that the coast and islands of Abu Dhabi were occupied in the centuries before the coming of Islam in the early 7th Century AD. Until recently, however, the only site to have been investigated in detail that relates to this period is the pre-Islamic monastic site on Sir Bani Yas.

The historical records refer to the existence of a people the Greeks called the Ichthyophagi, (eaters of fish), who lived in the islands of the lower Gulf at around the beginning of the Christian era, but give virtually no information about them.

Now, however, thanks to a study of pottery collected by ADIAS in surface surveys, it is apparent that occupation during this period was widespread and a picture of a people who lived on the islands harvesting the marine resources of the Gulf is slowly beginning to emerge.

The study, carried out by our ceramics (pottery) specialist, Dr. Robert Carter, of London University's Institute of Archaeology, has identified pottery from the 1st-6th Centuries AD on a number of other sites. Besides Qarnain. Yasat al-Ulya, Ghagha' and Ra's Bilyaryar, the same type of pottery has also been identified in collections from Merawah, Balghelam, al-Rufaiq, east of Abu al-Abyadh, and, perhaps most interestingly, from Abu Dhabi island itself.

On Merawah, the pottery comes from one of the two large lime-kilns excavated during last winter's season, which can now be dated to this period. On Balghelam and al-Rufaiq, it has been found in association with old hearths which have also produced pottery from the Late Islamic period, suggesting that the sites were used over a period of 1,000 to 1,500 years.

A similar hearth on Merawah has previously produced a Carbon 14 date of 320-200 BC, over 2,000 years ago, and at roughly the period when Nearchus, the admiral of the Greek Emperor Alexander the Great, sailed down the Gulf.

More C14 dates are awaited.

Of particular interest is the identification of some sherds of pottery of this date from Abu Dhabi island. The pottery was originally collected by an amateur enthusiast in the Al Bateen district of the island around twenty years ago, but has only recently been made available for scientific study and for comparison with material collected by ADIAS.

This pottery represent an important discovery in terms of the history of Abu Dhabi island.

Although the well-known site of Umm al-Nar, adjacent to Abu Dhabi, dates back to the Third Millennium BC, no evidence from this period has yet been found on Abu Dhabi island. The earliest information available about settlement of Abu Dhabi relates to the middle of the Eighteenth Century AD, the first village being reported as having been founded around 1761. Pottery from this period has also been identified.

Thus the material from Al Bateen is at least 1,100 years older, and perhaps at much as 1,700 years older, than any previous finds from Abu Dhabi island.

The area of Al Bateen where the pottery was found has now been developed, and surveys by ADIAS personnel have failed to find any

surviving trace of archaeological sites.

The pottery is sufficient, however, to show that there was a settlement of some kind on Abu Dhabi island before the coming of Islam, possibly related to sites of the same period on other nearby islands.

We are pleased to be able to make this note for the historical record. The discovery not only underlines the potential role to be played by amateur enthusiasts, but also the need for archaeological surveys to be undertaken, wherever possible, prior to development taking place.

New Light on Ancient Fishing

The fishing strategies of the inhabitants of the UAE's coast and islands were the focus of a paper presented by ADIAS fish specialist Mark Beech to the 10th meeting of the International Council for Archaeo-zoology in New York in September.

Research into fish bones found at the monastery site on Abu Dhabi's island of Sir Bani Yas and in Umm al-Qaiwain has shown that the main fishing season for the ancient inhabitants of the coastline of the Emirates was in the middle and late summer, according to Mark's paper. Besides analysis of fish bones excavated at the Sir Bani Yas site, dated to the 5th - 7th Centuries AD, it also examined results from a site in Umm al-Qaiwain, a shell midden (dump) and cemetery dated to the fifth millennium BC, between 6,000 and 7,000 years ago.

Otoliths (bones from the ears of fish) that were collected during the excavations at the two sites have been compared with similar bones from the same species of fish today. Both show signs of what appear to be bands related to water temperature, permitting Mark to work out the time of year when the fish whose bones were found on the archaeological sites were caught.

Many appear to have been caught in the mid to late summer, suggesting occupation of the coast and islands at this time.

"One of the key issues connected with the archaeology of south-eastern Arabia is whether the earliest coastal inhabitants were fully settled, or whether they followed a practice of living along the coast in the winter, moving inland in the summer," Mark says.

This latest data helps to explain how the inhabitants of the UAE's coastal areas lived in the distant past and also has implications for the availability of marine resources at different

seasons for the UAE's early inhabitants.

As part of his research into the origins of the country's fishing tradition, Mark has collected skeletons of over 100 species of local fish, which are to become the basis for a scientific reference collection to be housed by Abu Dhabi's Environmental Research and Wildlife Development Agency, ERWDA. His work has also been supported by The British Council.

Spreading the word

Ever since ADIAS was established, one key part of the project's research strategy has been the recognition that interested amateurs are often as likely as professionals to find archaeological sites. In Abu Dhabi alone, key sites found by non-professionals have included the major Third Millennium BC settlement and tomb complex at Umm al-Nar and the pre-Islamic Christian monastery on Sir Bani Yas. Amateur enthusiasts also often have the time to wander more widely across the landscape, visiting areas that would not be covered by carefully-planned surveys. Unless, however, the sites are reported and recorded, the information is lost.

One result of growing co-operation between ADIAS and the Abu Dhabi Company for Onshore Oil Operations, ADCO, was the release in September of two sets of posters and leaflets designed to inform ADCO personnel and the general public about archaeological sites and how to recognise them.

One set focussed on the Dabb'iyah peninsula, west of Abu Dhabi, and covered a whole range of environmental issues, as well as illustrating archaeological artefacts and sites, like pottery, net weights and shell middens that might be found in the area.

The other set was fully addressed to archaeology, showing pictures of the above, as well as items such as flint tools, pottery scatters and ancient hearths.

The idea behind the campaign, devised by ADCO's Safety and Environment Department, was to provide a basic recognition guide for personnel in the oil fields, both those working for ADCO and for its contractor companies, and to provide advice on what procedures to take if they identify a site.

Since the leaflets were issued, one possible Late Stone Age site in the area of the Bab oilfield has already been discovered.

We look forward to new discoveries being made and reported in due course!

Archaeology and Operation Ghazal

Earlier this month, the first-ever major international oil spill exercise in the Gulf, Operation Ghazal, was organised in Abu Dhabi.

Co-ordinated by the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company, ADNOC, with the help of ADIAS Sponsor BP-Amoco, and involving a number of major local companies and government bodies, including another of our Sponsors, ADGAS, the exercise was designed to test the readiness of Abu Dhabi to respond to a major oil spill.

Part of the response to any spill is plans to clean up beaches and coastlines in the event of the spill coming ashore, and ADIAS was pleased to be asked to provide information to help in preparing plans for this phase.

Why ADIAS? Well, if the oil hits the beaches, a clean-up operation would get under way, and that could involve trucks, bulldozers and other machinery, not only on the beaches themselves, but on the coastal areas adjacent to them. This in turn could destroy archaeological sites, many of which are extremely fragile, as well as being difficult to recognise.

One of the organisations closely involved in the exercise was the Environmental Research and Wildlife Development Agency, ERWDA, which was charged with preparing maps showing areas of environmental sensitivity. In discussions between ADIAS and ERWDA, it was agreed to include outline details of areas of archaeological importance in the mapping process.

ERWDA is already collaborating closely with ADIAS in plotting details of our sites on its Emirate-wide environmental database, and the new environmental sensitivity maps help to underline further the close connection between the protection of the environment and the protection of archaeological sites.

Operation Ghazal was only an exercise, but one day there may be a real oil spill along Abu Dhabi's shoreline. ADIAS will do its best to provide any information of value in planning the tackle any such incident.

ADIAS at London Seminar

ADIAS was strongly represented at this year's annual Seminar for Arabian Studies in London. Besides Dr. Geoffrey King and Peter Hellyer, also present were Mark Beech and Dr. Joe Elders, (who presented a paper on our Dalma discoveries), Dr. Robert Carter, our pottery

expert, Elizabeth Shepherd, who has undertaken work on both Dalma and Sir Bani Yas, Henriette Maren and Philippa Loates.

As usual, the Seminar provided a useful opportunity for discussions on the forthcoming season, while we were also able to review results from earlier work with other archaeologists working in the Emirates. These included Dr. Sophie Mery, of the Centre National pour les Recherches Scientifiques in Paris, who is studying our 'Ubaid potsherds from Dalma, Merawah and Ghagha', and Professor Hans-Peter and Margrethe Uerpmann, of Germany's University of Tübingen, who have been digging for several years on a Late Stone Age site at Jebel Buhays in Sharjah and provided us with useful information relating to the MR-1 Late Stone Age site on Merawah.

Season One report to be published in Arabic

Sponsors will be aware that a report on the 1st ADIAS survey season was published in late 1997 by Trident Press Ltd., with the support of the Ministry of Information and Culture.

Now, thanks to the interest of H.H. Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Director-General of the Office of H.H. The President, and H.H. Sheikh Abdulla bin Zayed, Minister of Information and Culture, the report is now also to be published in Arabic, helping to spread knowledge of our findings more widely among the people of the Emirates, so that they can learn more about the national heritage that ADIAS was established to study. We are grateful to H.H. Sheikh Mansour and to H.H. Sheikh Abdulla for their interest and support.

... and finally

As has become customary, our winter programme of activity looks like involving an extensive amount of fieldwork, while post-excavation expenditure on items like the drawing of pottery or on Carbon 14 dating is also set to be fairly extensive. Our publication programme is also continuing, while, as reported above, ADIAS team members are actively involved in presenting lectures to conferences to introduce the results of our work to the broader academic community.

We are grateful to those whose support for ADIAS over the last few years has made our work possible, and hope that we may count upon further support during the course of the next year.