

Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey

Patron: HH Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan

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7000 year-old houses discovered on Marawah island

A group of stone houses nearly 7,000 years old have been found on Abu Dhabi's Western island of Marawah, it is announced today. They are the oldest buildings of their type ever discovered in the United Arab Emirates.

The discovery was made by a team from the Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey, ADIAS, working in association with the Environmental Research and Wildlife Development Agency, ERWDA, who are responsible for management of the island's wildlife and environment as part of the Marawah Marine Protected Area, MMPA.

During work at a site known as MR-11 in spring 2003, ADIAS examined a group of stone mounds, and uncovered three buildings. One of these structures was fully excavated and revealed a well-constructed house with stone walls still surviving to a height of almost a metre in some places (see Pictures 1 and 2).

During the excavations, a fine flint spear and flint arrowhead were found, (see Picture 3), as well as a fragment of a stone pestle, probably used for grinding food items.

Samples of ash were taken from the floors of two of the buildings, and were sent to the Scottish Universities Research and Reactor Centre at the University of Glasgow in Britain, for radiocarbon dating. The results of the dating, recently received by ADIAS, prove that the buildings were in use between 6,500 and 7,000 years ago (see Picture 4).

No stone-built houses dating to this particular period are known from elsewhere in the UAE, although similar, but less well-preserved examples have been noted elsewhere in the Arabian peninsula at Shagra in Qatar, and at Sabiyah in Kuwait.

The latest discovery confirms the importance of Marawah, north-west of the port of Mirfa, as an important settlement site during the Late Stone Age. During earlier work on the island, ADIAS discovered traces of a number of intriguing stone structures at another site, MR1, to the west of site MR11. Large numbers of flint arrowheads were also collected from the surface of MR1, which was probably an important hunting settlement, and is a few hundred years earlier than the MR11 site.

The importance of Abu Dhabi's islands during the Late Stone Age is also underlined by the results of ADIAS excavations on the island of Dalma in 1993-4 and 1998. These uncovered traces of circular buildings constructed with supporting timber posts. Analysis of the pottery and radiocarbon dates from these, and other, sites has shown that around 7000

years ago, there was extensive settlement on the offshore islands. The people of the time were also trading by sea with Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq), the beginning of the UAE's well-established tradition of maritime trade.

Research by Dr Mark Beech, the ADIAS Senior Resident Archaeologist, has shown that these early inhabitants of the UAE had domestic animals like sheep and goats, but also supplemented their diet by hunting gazelles and exploiting rich marine resources available offshore. Besides catching a wide range of fish, they also caught dolphins, dugong and turtle and ate shellfish – including the pearl oyster. The pearling trade of the Southern Gulf probably began around this time. Evidence from Dalma suggests that the people at that time also began exploiting the date palm for the very first time. Charred date stones found at the Dalma excavation represent the earliest evidence for the consumption of dates in the Arabian peninsula.

"We are delighted by these latest results from Marawah," the ADIAS Executive Director, Peter Hellyer, said today. "The island has one of the most diverse groups of archaeological sites anywhere in the country, ranging from the Late Stone Age to the Late Islamic period, covering the country's history from the very earliest settlement. It is, therefore, particularly appropriate that Marawah is now fully-protected as part of the ERWDA-managed Marawah Marine Protected Area."

A new season of archaeological fieldwork is due to commence on Marawah next March and April. Directed by Dr. Beech, the work will include more excavations at MR11 and also further survey on the neighbouring island of Liffiyah.

The work is being carried out in partnership with ERWDA and all information collected will be added to the Abu Dhabi Environmental Database being developed by ERWDA.

Further details of ADIAS activities are available on its website: www.adias-uae.com

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PICTURE CAPTIONS:

Picture1-MR11-house1.jpg

Caption: 7000 year-old house at site MR11 on Marawah island.

Picture2-MR11-house2.jpg

Caption: 7000 year-old house at site MR11 on Marawah island.

Picture3-MR11-spear-arrowhead.jpg

Caption: 7000 year-old flint spear and arrowhead from site MR11 on Marawah island.

Picture4-MR11-radiocarbon-dates.jpg

Caption: The results of the two radiocarbon dates from site MR11 on Marawah island.