

# **ROUND UP**

## **Archaeology Review**

### **ABU DHABI** ***UAE's oldest houses discovered***

A short season of work in March on the island of Dalma by Mark Beech and Dr. Joseph Elders of the Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey, ADIAS, revealed traces of Late Stone Age houses. The site was first identified in 1992. The presence of imported 'Ubaid pottery from Mesopotamia and flint tools suggested that the houses date back to over 6,000 years Before Present, BP, the first time that houses dating to this period have been identified in the Emirates. At least one round house, 7 metres in diameter, was identified. The cobbled floor and traces of the wooden posts which supported the walls and roof could be clearly seen.

The quality of the construction suggested that the people may have lived on Dalma for most of the year, rather than just being occasional visitors, the first evidence of permanent Late Stone Age settlement in the UAE. Since by that time Dalma was already an island, the pottery is the earliest evidence yet discovered of the UAE's maritime trade.

A large amount of sherds from broken cooking and storage vessels was found in and around the house, including a small amount of fine imported pottery from southern Mesopotamia. The greater part of the sherds found during the excavations consisted, however, of 'white wares.' These were locally-produced pots made of plaster (gypsum), with simple black-stripe decoration, copying 'Ubaid designs from Mesopotamia, but using locally-available material. Stone tools found during the excavation included knives, drills, scrapers, chisels and arrowheads. A large number of waste flint flakes were also found, indicating that the tools were made locally. Other finds included beads and stone disks, some of which were perforated, suggesting that they might have been used as net or loom weights.

The greatest number of finds consisted of the refuse of food consumed in the settlement. Bones and shells indicated that fishing, the gathering of shellfish and hunting, as well as animal husbandry, formed the basis for the economy. Fish provided the bulk of the diet. Important species included the grouper (*hamour*), needlefish, seabreams and tuna. Sharks and rays were also regularly consumed, some being very large. Work being carried out by Mark Beech as part of his doctoral thesis at York University in the UK suggests that some of the *hamour* were up to a metre in length.

Other resources exploited included sea urchins, crabs, marine turtle, dolphin and dugong. Gazelle and Socotra Cormorant also appear to have been occasionally exploited, while some bones from domesticated sheep and goat were also recovered. Large amounts of shells, representing refuse from shellfish consumption, were also found, consisting mostly of pearl oysters, turban shells and clams.

The excavations, supported by Minister of Information and Culture Sheikh Abdulla bin Zayed Al Nahyan, revealed for the first time a detailed picture of life in Abu Dhabi around 6,000 years ago. Further studies will be carried out on the finds, while samples will be submitted for radiocarbon dating to try to establish a more exact date.

This year's work shows that the Dalma site is one of the most important of its kind in Eastern Arabia. Much remains to be done. The whole site covers an area of at least 100 metres by 80 metres, and it will take several years to excavate it fully and to study the remains.

**Mark Beech & Dr. Joseph Elders, ADIAS**

### ***A Late Islamic site on Merawah***

Site MR-9 on the island of Merawah, west of Abu Dhabi, is an open camp site of probably Late Islamic date, consisting

of clusters of stone-lined hearths, situated south west of the village of Ghubbah. A season of survey and recording on the site was undertaken in January and February 1998. The site contains 160 hearths in all. Most are polygonal, although there is a distinct cluster of rectangular hearths.

The hearths average around 0.75 metres in diameter. At least four, however, are considerably more than a metre in diameter, and these are probably 'roasting pits,' presumably used in the past for specialised food preparation.

In all likelihood, the hearths represent camp sites which were probably occupied on a seasonal basis. They cluster in groups overlooking what is now a *sabkha*-filled embayment on the southwest side of the site, and an area of beach ridges, also with a shallow embayment which only floods at high tide, along the eastern side of the site. The hearths are also clearly situated on areas where limestone bedrock is present.

The fieldwork also provided an opportunity to study the life-cycle of the hearths, yielding a basic understanding of the way in which the hearths were constructed, used and re-used over time, and to understand better how hearths degrade through wind erosion and deflation.

To the north, approximately one km. away, is Site MR-8, a well site of more than six wells, previously provisionally recorded by ADIAS. The wells were partially fed by water which collected on the plateau to the west along a channel lined with stone rubble and then, later, with low earthen banks. The plateau is up to 3 metres higher than the well site, but on top of it are shallow, natural basins, which show evidence of feeding one into the other. Water from these basins used to flow through gravity into two channels, one of which shows evidence of being cleared by people in the past. These then led to the lower earth and stone-lined channel which directed the water to the well-site. This site is of very considerable interest since it shows how rainwater could have been collected in the past.

**Salvatore Garfi, ADIAS**

### **SHARJAH** ***Earliest writing found***

The earliest writing known in the UAE has been found during excavations of a site at Muwailah, near Sharjah Airport. The excavation was a joint project of Sydney University, Australia, and Belgium's Ghent University, directed by Dr. Peter Magee of Sydney, under the auspices of the Sharjah Directorate of Antiquities and Museums. A pottery sherd found on the site and dated to the Iron Age II period, between 1100 BC and 600 BC, carried three letters tentatively identified as the South Arabian letters B, M and L. The find predates the earliest use of South Arabian in the area by over 500 years, and is a very early manifestation of the language outside its centre. (*A detailed report will appear in a subsequent issue.*)

More Iron Age discoveries have been made by a team from the Autonomous University of Madrid at Al Thuqaibah, on the Madam Plain south of Dhaid. The team, working in association with the Sharjah Archaeological Museum, carried out a month-long season of excavation and survey, during which more evidence was uncovered of houses from the Iron Age, which began around 1,300 BC and lasted until shortly before 300 BC.

Nearby, on the slopes of Jebel Buhays, a team from Germany's University of Tubingen, directed by Professor Hans-Peter Uerpmann, continued work on a Late Stone Age site. In collaboration with the Sharjah team, excavation continued of a mass grave in which over one hundred skeletons have been found. C14 dating has shown that the site dates