

# New Evidence for the Medieval Occupation of Abu Dhabi

by Robert Carter

Golf and archaeology make unlikely bedfellows, but recent study of finds from the Abu Dhabi Golf and Equestrian Club has provided new evidence of the medieval occupation of Abu Dhabi Island.

Written sources state that Abu Dhabi island was first settled during the 18th century by members of the Bani Yas tribal confederation. Lorimer recounts that water was accidentally discovered there in 1761, after which a small village of twenty houses was established (Lorimer 1915: 763). Ceramics collected by the Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey, ADIAS, from one site on Abu Dhabi, known as **AD-2**, appear to confirm the historical record: the pottery dates to the 18th and 19th centuries, and not before.

Evidence from two other sites now shows that occupation began considerably earlier. Although it was apparently empty at the time of the settlement of the Bani Yas, Abu Dhabi island had been inhabited long before. Both these sites, **AD-3** and **AD-4**, have since been destroyed or buried by development. It is thanks to the efforts of amateur enthusiasts, who collected pottery from the sites, that we know of their existence.

Material from the first of these, **AD-3**, was picked up in Bateen during the late 1970's by J.N.B. Brown and was deposited in the collections of the Emirates Natural History Group. It has subsequently been made available to ADIAS for study. The area concerned is now covered by the area of development that includes the Central Bank. The collection consists only of base fragments, and a tight dating framework cannot yet be established. The ceramics are considerably earlier than the 18th century, and their paste and firing indicate a date some time during the 1st millennium AD. One sherd, a delicate base with a smooth red slip, is reminiscent of western Indian pottery dating to the first five centuries AD.

The chronology of the second collection, from the Golf and Equestrian Club (**Site AD-4**), is clearer. This

material was gathered by ENHG member and golfer Cathy Ryan between the mid 1980s and the early 1990s from a pottery scatter on the golf course. At the time of its first exposure, imported soil and sand had not been brought to the area, so it appears that the pottery relates to a small settlement within the golf course area, rather than having been transported from elsewhere during landscaping activities. No remains are reported other than the surface scatter of ceramics, and the site has since been destroyed.

Two widely separated phases of occupation are evident in the Golf Course collection. The latest relates to the recent historical occupation of the island, and dates to the 19th and possibly the 18th century AD. Five pieces of porcelain belong to this horizon, including a fragment with a brown glaze sometimes known as "dead leaf brown" (*fig. 1: top left*). This variety first became popular during the 18th century (Hansman 1985: 32). Blue and white porcelain is also present, as are two porcelain cups with black and red paint over the glaze. Other relevant wares include speckled brown-glazed "Bahla Ware", made in Oman from at least the 18th century and up to the present day (*fig. 1: bottom centre*). Another characteristic ware has a thin speckled bluish or greenish glaze, and geometrical black under-glaze paint (*fig. 1: top centre*). This ware is a common and late variant of a type of pottery sometimes referred to as "Manganese Purple" (Kennet 1994: 193), named after the composition of its paint. This first appears in the 17th century, but the variety found here probably dates to the 19th century. A sherd with a speckled mustard-coloured glaze is also present, a type which often accompanies Manganese Purple at the later end of its range (*fig. 1, middle centre*). The unglazed wares include a fragment of earthenware originating from the Northern Emirates: this known as Julfar Ware, after a site in Ras al-Khaimah (*fig. 1: top right*). Additionally, there are two pieces of a



Fig. 1: Late Islamic ceramics from the Abu Dhabi Golf and Equestrian Club. Picture by R.A. Carter

type probably originating from the kilns at Ali, Bahrain, which are still in use (fig. 1: middle right). Finally, three pieces of a buff ware with a roughly grooved external surface were found, a variety of pottery found at numerous recently abandoned villages in the U.A.E. and Oman (fig. 1: bottom right).

The earlier, medieval phase of occupation took place some time between the 9th and 13th centuries AD. This horizon is represented by at least two types of pottery. One type has a turquoise glaze and a cream body (fig. 2: left hand side), and belongs to a long ceramic tradition of turquoise-glazed vessels stretching from the Hellenistic period to the 14th century AD or later (Kennet 1994: 188). The external ribbing and appliqué under-glaze decoration may indicate that some of these pieces belong to a sub-class of "Sasanian-Islamic" turquoise glazed vessels dated to the 8th/9th centuries (Kennet 1994: 194), though most of the sherds are from vessels too small to fall into that category.

The other type, represented by two sherds (fig. 2: top and middle right), has a fine red-brown body and a green glaze covering a cream slip. Crucially, one of these has had its surface incised below the glaze. Despite the poor condition of this sherd, it can be identified as *sgraffiato*, a type of decorated pottery which appeared around the start of the 10th century, and became widespread until the 13th century AD (Kennet 1994: 191). It is not clear where *sgraffiato* was manufactured, but it does not appear to have been on the Arabian peninsula. Another sherd has an unusual light-brown speckled glaze on one side, with green glaze on the other; it may be a variety of *sgraffiato* (fig. 2: bottom right). *Sgraffiato* has not been previously recorded among ADIAS ceramic collections from the coast and islands of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi.

The discovery of an early medieval horizon lurking in a bag of pottery that, at first impression, appeared to relate only to the 19th century, was unexpected. Unfortunately there is insufficient evidence to discern the nature of the medieval settlement, for example whether it was a permanent village or a temporary campsite. It seems, however, that people were visiting or living on Abu Dhabi island at least five centuries before the start of its current occupation, and that these people were in contact with the wide trading networks running through the Arabian

Gulf. The finds from the Central Bank site at Bateen may represent an even earlier horizon, whose connections stretched as far as the Indian Ocean.

If these finds had not been brought to the attention of archaeologists, neither of these sites would have been recorded and dated. It is essential that enthusiasts and professionals continue to cooperate to record the U.A.E.'s fast-disappearing archaeological heritage.

#### Acknowledgements

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#### References

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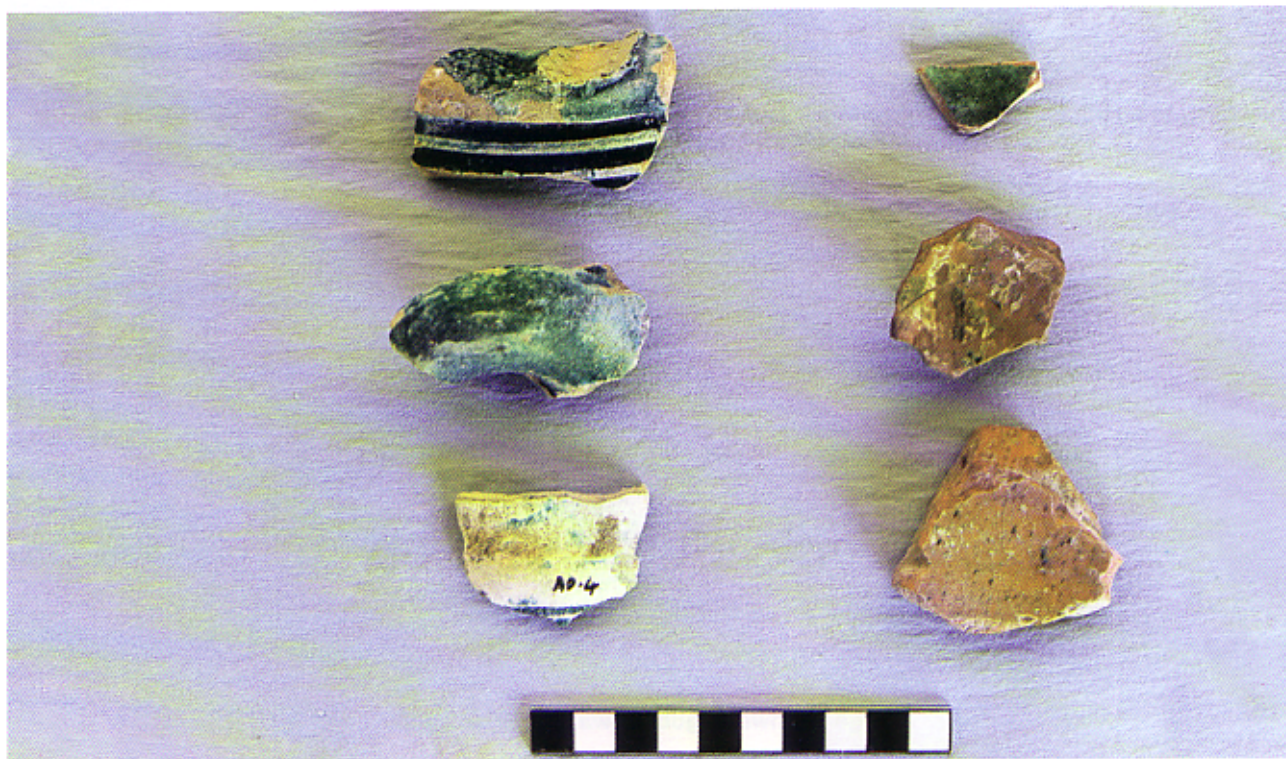


Fig. 2: Medieval ceramics from the Abu Dhabi Golf and Equestrian Club. Picture by R.A. Carter