

An archaeological survey of the Mantakha As'sirra area in Abu Dhabi's Western Region

by Jakub Czastka and Peter Hellyer

Introduction

On April 30th 1994, at the request of Sheikh Mohammed bin Butti Al Hamed, Chairman of the Abu Dhabi Municipality and Ruler's Representative in the Western Region of Abu Dhabi, a team from the Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey Project visited an area known as Mantakha As'sirra, approximately thirty kilometres due east of Medinat Zayed, (Bida Zayed), the capital of the Western Region.

With the assistance of Murshid Ali Murshid, Assistant Under Secretary of the Ruler's Diwan for the Western Region, a short visit was paid to Mantakha As'sirra and a nearby site, approximately ten kilometres due south, known as Mantakha Mu'assiri Sahel. The two-member team comprised Jakub Czastka, archaeologist, and Peter Hellyer, Project Co-ordinator.

During the course of the visit, the team was accompanied by Rashid Atij Khalfan Al Mansouri, of the Ruler's Diwan, who provided directions to the sites, and also supplied extensive oral information about the sites and about the area in which they were located.

The visit would have been impossible without the assistance of Rashid Al Mansouri, as a guide, as an experienced desert driver, and as a source of information on usage of the areas concerned during the course of the past forty five years.

Methodology

The location of the sites is known to the team's guide, Rashid Al Mansouri. In the absence of any Global Positioning System, GPS, equipment, notes of approximate location were taken. A precise GPS position for each site will be taken at a later date. Measurement of sites was done by pacing. A small collection of surface potsherds was made at each site.

Site One:

MANTAKHA AS'SIRRA

(MEDINAT ZAYED: AS'SIRRA = MZ:S)

MZ:S-1: Well field

The site lies in a low-lying depression of thin gravel with the occasional small mobile dune, in which there is a substantial amount of salt-tolerant vegetation, indicating the presence of brackish or saline water supply relatively close to the surface.

Scattered around over an area covering at least 75 metres by 75 metres are a number (exceeding thirty) of raised circular structures standing to a height of up to twenty centimetres above the surrounding land surface. Some structures were single, while there are others in groups of two or three. The centres of the structures were filled with sand. At a depth of approximately ten centimetres, the sand in one of the structures was found to be compacted and slightly moist.

We were informed by Rashid Al Mansouri that the structures represented the remains of old wells. He indicated that the roughly circular stone surroundings represented crystallised salts formed by the spilling of water being drawn from the wells.

The features show the characteristics of evaporite deposits formed by crystal growth. This would be consis-

● هذه الورقة عبارة عن تقرير عن نتائج المسح الأثري الذي تم إجراؤه في منطقة السرة في المنطقة الغربية من أبوظبي حيث تم اكتشاف آثار قلعة ضخمة يحتمل أن يعود تاريخها إلى القرن السادس عشر أو السابع عشر بعد الميلاد.

tent with the evaporation of the water from the wells releasing salts and associated minerals, promoting crystal growth which would, in turn, form the circular crusts visible today. Al Mansouri said that the wells had not been in use in his lifetime, and that neither his father nor grandfather had any knowledge of the people who might have used them.

There was a considerable amount of pottery scattered around the area of the well-field, a small amount of which was collected. All appeared to be of typical local manufacture and was unglazed. It appeared to be of Late Islamic date, of the typical 'Julfar-type' known from other sites throughout the Emirates. The pottery will be submitted to experts for identification.

A single piece of worked flint was recovered from the surface of the site, a flake tool fragment, of which the description is as follows:

Orientation: ventral up, Proximal top.

Predominantly direct retouch around complete periphery of flake. Retouch is continuous, causing convex side on right, and concavity on left, (caused by notch). Piece broken at distal end.

Ridges dulled, and edges display damage due to crushing.

With regard to general form, especially considering the notch, the working end, (distal), is the one broken off, probably making the piece the remains of a borer.

Site MZ: S-2 Fortress (?)

Approximately five hundred metres east of the well-field, (Site MZ:S-1), the ground rises gently to a crest, surrounded by low mobile dunes. The site MZ:S-2 is on the peak of the crest.

The site is a roughly square enclosure, approximately 80 metres by 80 metres, of eroded walls made of locally-obtained material, partly obscured by small dunes.

The material is geologically different from the surrounding sand, and appears to have been formed into rough 'bricks' that have subsequently decomposed into their original material when subjected to erosion through wind and rain. The 'bricks' may have been made of a material similar to that visible beneath the surface of the sand in nearby areas which have been bulldozed to provide the raw material for the Municipality tracks through the desert. More precise geological study is required.

The north east corner of the structure is occupied by a smaller structure, of approximately fifteen metres square, with what appears to be a much smaller, roughly square, corner buttress of approximately 2 metres by 2 metres at the south western corner.

The eroded walls have been cut through on a line running roughly east to west in the southern half of the enclosure. We were informed that this cut marked the passage several years ago of a seismic vehicle. The line of the walls thereby removed can, however, be traced on the exposed ground surface.

In the main enclosure, the walls still stand, partially masked by small sand dunes and by collapse due to erosion, to a height of at least 1.50 metres. In the smaller enclosure to the north east corner of the main enclosure, where the underlying ground level appears slightly higher, the walls appear to stand to a height of at least a metre, although without excavation it is impossible to be precise.

Some sand was removed from one of the walls in the north-eastern enclosure, exposing several courses of the roughly-made local 'bricks,' although the sand was not removed to the underlying ground level.

In the north eastern corner of the main enclosure, which also comprises the north-eastern corner of the smaller enclosure, some fragments of heavily corroded iron were seen lying on the surface.

We were informed by Rashid Al Mansouri that these fragments were the remains of a cannon which had once stood on the spot, but which had been removed to Liwa, "on camel, before the first vehicles arrived in the area." We were further informed that the cannon had since been taken to the Diwan of the Ruler's Representative in the Western Region at Medinat Zayed.

Scattered on the current land surface, (excluding that of the mobile sand), within the enclosure were a number of pottery sherds, a few examples of which were collected for further study. Like those found at the well-field, (Site MZ:S-1), they did not include any imported glazed pottery, and appeared to be of Late Islamic date, probably of Julfar type.

A single piece of worked flint was recovered from the surface of the site, a flake fragment.

There were also a small number of pieces of oyster shell, one of which was collected.

We were informed by Rashid Al Mansouri that the structure had originally been a small fortress, but that it had not been used in his lifetime. He also said that his father and grandfather also knew the site as a place of 'Athar,' (antiquities), but that they knew no stories relating to the people who might have occupied it, and that they knew it simply as being of considerable age.

Preliminary assessment of Sites MZ:S-1 and MZ:S-2

The site MZ:S-2 is clearly that of a building of considerable size, built on a commanding rise in the natural landscape, and with walls of a height and thickness that suggest that it must have had a defensive purpose. The reported presence of a cannon on one corner of the structure within relatively recent times tends to confirm such a conclusion.

The presence nearby of site MZ:S-1, the well-field, suggests that the fortification may have been used in part to defend the water supplies, and suggests further that there may be evidence of a settlement nearby, together possibly with associated evidence of agriculture. An aerial photograph of the site may provide some indications.

The Late Islamic pottery is in itself no indication of age, since it could have been deposited as natural breakage by visiting nomadic *Bedu*. (Rashid Al Mansouri indicated that he and his father had camped in the area when he was a child).

Likewise, the flint fragment is undatable. Flint implements were used in the area until relatively recent times.

Cannon are likely to have arrived in the region some time after the arrival of the Portuguese in the early sixteenth century, although there is no information on when they became available to local tribal leaders.

The fortress, however, was clearly in use some time after the arrival of cannon, although it cannot be determined from the preliminary survey whether it existed prior to that.

Mantakha As'sirra lies approximately fifty five kilometres due south of the present day coastline, and in a remote area where the presence of substantial settlements has not previously been suspected.

A clearing of the surface sand and planning of the fortress site, accompanied by the excavation of some sectors of the fortress, and of one or more of the dried up wells in the well-field should yield a clearer picture of the size of the fortress and its remaining walls, as well as yielding stratified artefacts that would permit a more precise dating of the site.

The archaeological objectives with relation to the site can be summarised as follows:

1. A basic aim of a first season of work would be to aim to answer questions at two levels. The first objective would relate specifically to the site, and primarily concerns the acquisition of archaeological data. The second objective would be to place the site into a broader environmental context. Only the integration of these two objectives would answer questions regarding why the locality was chosen in the first place, how widespread the occupation was, and why it was abandoned.
2. These objectives would be achieved by:
 - a) establishing the exact dimensions of the site
 - b) placing trial trenches across the site to identify phases of occupation and subsequent abandonment
 - c) instigating a detailed archaeological and geomorphological survey of the immediate vicinity.

An approach will also be made to the holders of the oil concession, the Abu Dhabi Company for Onshore Oil Operations, ADCO, to obtain access to seismic data from the site, to see whether such data could provide information on immediate sub-surface geology.

Overall, the site has the potential to yield a considerable amount of information about Late Islamic settlement in the middle of the desert from a period beyond the memories of local tribesmen.

Site Two :

MANTAKHA MU'ASSIRI SAHEL (Medinat Zayed: Mu'assiri Sahel = MZ:MS-1).

Approximately ten kilometres to the south of Mantakha As'sirra is a small oasis, (*nakh*), known as Mantakha Mu'assiri Sahel, to which the team were guided by Rashid Al Mansouri.

The oasis comprises a small fenced palm grove belonging to a number of UAE citizens, mainly of the Al Mansir tribe, together with a small plantation belonging to the Diwan of the Ruler's Representative.

Approximately 150 metres to the south east of the palm trees is a ridge rising above the surrounding mobile dunes, which stretches approximately seventy five metres from east to west, and has a width of around fifteen metres at its base, rising to a height of four to five metres.

Although overlain partly by drifted sand, on which typical desert salt-tolerant vegetation is growing, the ridge appears to composed primarily of degraded and eroded material similar to that used in the construction of the

fortress at Mantakha As'sirra. Further study is required. We were informed by our guide that the ridge was the site of a cemetery. He indicated a number of small scatters of stones which he said were the remains of graves. They did not seem to be aligned in the direction of the 'qibla,' suggesting possible pre-Islamic origin, although the state of erosion and degradation of the scatters was such that precise alignments were unclear.

One single piece of pottery was collected from the surface of Late Islamic date, comparable to the Julfar type.

As with Mantakha As'sirra, (above), we were informed by Rashid Al Mansouri that he had known of the site since childhood, and that neither his father nor his grandfather knew of any stories linked to people who might have been buried on the site, simply that it was known to be a graveyard. Asked about dating, he said that they could be either Islamic or pre-Islamic graves.

He said that more graves had been visible during his youth, but that many were now covered as a result of the southward movement of sand over the past forty years.

He further added that the oasis of Mu'assiri had been known and used by nomadic Bedouin tribesmen "for perhaps five hundred years."

Preliminary assessment

The site at Mantakha Mu'assiri Sahel is much less distinct than that of Mantakha As'sirra, while no conclusions can be drawn from the presence of a single Late Islamic pottery fragment, since the oasis has been in use for many centuries.

If, as suggested, the site is an early graveyard, it should be protected, although its location is sufficiently remote to render it relatively safe.

Only through a trial clearance of at least part of the area will it be possible to determine for sure, however, whether it is a graveyard. Moreover, in the absence of any clear alignment to the scatters of stones that are said to be graves, whether or not they are pre-Islamic cannot be determined without a trial excavation of at least one.

If, however, it is a graveyard, its size suggests, as for Mantakha As'sirra, the presence in the past of a significant settlement in the area, which in turn would suggest the previous presence of greater water supplies.

Also requiring investigation is the size and composition of the ridge upon which the 'graves' stand, since it is too large and stands too high above the surrounding land surface to be comprised purely of graves. Although significantly more degraded than the site at Mantakha As'sirra, that at Mantakha Mu'assiri Sahel appears to include the same kind of friable and easily eroded 'bricks,' suggesting at least the possibility that it dates from a similar period.

In view of that, and of the possibility that it is an Islamic graveyard, it is therefore suggested that further work at this site should commence only with a more detailed surface survey, without excavation, apart, possibly, from a trial trench to determine the nature of the composition of the ridge itself, which could possibly contain either a natural or remains of a man-made feature. A survey of the whole area surrounding the oasis of Mu'assiri may also yield additional information on the possible extent of former occupation from which the graves (?) derive.

Additional site information

To the west of Mantakha Mu'assiri Sahel and Mantakha As'sirra, and approximately half way between them, is a low hill named by Rashid Al Mansouri as Jebel Simmer. He told us that there was evidence of now-ruined hous-

es on the Jebel, although without appropriate transport it was impossible to approach the Jebel.

It is recommended that the Jebel be examined at a later date. There are also said to be sites with flints on the surface in the area though these were not examined.

Historical background

No evidence can be found in the Portuguese or Dutch archives dealing with the existence of a fort or fortress inland from the Abu Dhabi coastline.

However, an Omani source, '**A History of the Imams and Seyyids of Oman**,' provides a possible clue in a section dealing with an Omani civil war at the beginning of the seventeenth century, between partisans of the first Ya'aruba Imam, Nasser bin Murshid, and opponents led by the Hilali tribe, under by one Nasser bin Qahtan al Hilali.

Some time shortly after 1633, (the date is unclear in the history), Nasser bin Murshid instructed his Governor in Al Ain, Mohammed bin Saif al Haukani, 'to lie in wait for Nasser bin Qahtan on the confines of Oman.'

It continues "*The Governor accordingly selected a band of renowned warriors and on hearing of Nasser's approach, concealed them beneath the sand which forms part of the boundary of Ezh-Zhafrah. On learning this, Nasser retired into the fort of Ezh-Zhafrah, where he was joined by the Benu Yas, and sent one of his followers to Mohammed bin Saif soliciting peace.*" (1)

The passage is the only historical reference to a presence of a fort in the area of Mantakha As'sirra, and is also the first time that the Bani Yas confederation is mentioned in the literature.

There is a tradition among one section of the Manasir, (not known to Rashid Al Mansouri), that a Portuguese force once landed at Mirfa and marched inland, being defeated and annihilated in the desert. No evidence of such an expedition exists in the Portuguese archives. However Nasser bin Qahtan al Hilali, a leader of the Sunni Muslim resistance to the resurgent Ibadhis in Oman led by Imam Nasser bin Murshid, was at times allied with the Portuguese in the area, themselves under attack by the Ibadhi forces, and the tradition may derive from this.

Further investigation of the Mantakha As'sirra site may provide evidence of its occupation at the time of the conflict between Imam Nasser bin Murshid and Nasser bin Qahtan, and of any Portuguese connection.

Conclusion

Although limited, the survey produced valuable information, in particular the identification of the previously unknown site of Mantakha As'sirra, which was clearly once an important settlement, complete with extensive supplies of water.

From the available information, it is possible to suggest a tentative dating of between the seventeenth and late eighteenth centuries AD, although it should be stressed that this may be open to reinterpretation after excavation.

Lying just to the south of the division between the coastal Taff plain and the interior Sahel area, with better water, in the general area known as Dhafra (Ezh-Zhafrah), and near the route from Mirfa to Liwa, the site, if that of a major settlement and fortress, would have played a significant role in the political structure of the region in the period before local history was recorded.

Excavation could yield important evidence not only about the precise extent of the site and the size of its buildings, but also about the people who lived there, and during which period, adding significantly to our knowledge of the history of the people of the Western

Region, and of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi as a whole.

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Excavations at Jebel Al Emalah

by Jodie Benton

The archaeological site of Jebel al Emalah is situated in the interior of Sharjah, halfway between Mileiha and Madam along the Dhaid-Madam highway. The site consists of four circular stone built tombs, three of which are large 7 - 12m diameter mounds, all situated at the base of the eastern slope of Jebel al Emalah.

The site was discovered several years ago when two ceramic and one softstone vessel dating to the Umm an Nar period (2500 - 2000 BC) were found near the smallest of the three large tombs. These were presented to the Sharjah Museum, but it was not until 1993 that Nassir al Abboudi, Director of Antiquities and Heritage of the Sharjah Culture & Information Department, invited Professor D.T. Potts of the University of Sydney to carry out full scale excavations at the site. By the end of November 1993 an Australian-American team consisting of 15 students and professionals had arrived in Sharjah ready to begin work on the tombs of Jebel al Emalah.

One of the main reasons for wanting to excavate at the site of Jebel al Emalah was the excavation of the previous year at the site of Tell Abraaq in Umm al Qaiwain. Here a tomb of the Umm an Nar period was excavated which provided an excellent sample of human remains and good evidence of ancient burial practices. As Tell Abraaq is a coastal site it was considered important to attempt to find an inland site from a totally different environmental zone so as to have contemporary comparative material to work with. In this respect Jebel al Emalah provides just the data needed for comparative analysis.

The three larger tombs from the site proved to be of an earlier construction date than had been originally anticipated, based on the surface finds from the Umm an Nar period. Structurally the tombs are unique, conforming to none of the types previously excavated in the UAE, and each very different from the other. Despite being very diverse in construction, size and appearance, the tombs have each yielded one ceramic vessel that dates to the so-called 'Hafit' period, c. 3000-2500 BC. This is the first time that traces of Hafit-period occupation have been found in the Emirate of Sharjah. The Emalah vessels are as early as the earliest ceramic sites known anywhere in the entire Oman Peninsula.

The largest, and possibly the earliest, of the tombs is 11.5m in diameter and consists of a low external ring wall surrounding a second wall which is preserved to a height of c.1.4m - a very good state of structural preservation. Entry to the tomb is through a doorway in both walls, oriented slightly south of west, which leads to a

● عمليات التنقيب عن الآثار في منطقة جبل عمالة بالقرب من
الزبد - إمارة الشارقة - قادت إلى اكتشاف أربع حفريات هامة
يعود عمرها إلى أكثر من ٤٥٠٠ سنة.

passageway into the burial chamber. As the tomb was badly disturbed in the millennia following its construction, and as the human remains were in poor and fragmentary condition, it is difficult to estimate the original number of individuals that would have occupied the half of the tomb excavated this season. Nevertheless, the skeletal remains indicate that the tomb was used over a period of time for the successive and multiple burial of women, men, children and infants. Grave goods include the 'Hafit' style ceramic vessel mentioned above as well as hundreds of beads. The two main types were long (c. 1.2cm) tubes of a now degraded whitish stone, which may be talcose steatite or baked steatite, and micro-beads of black or grey soft-stone. It has been suggested that these may have been ornamentation sewn onto clothing rather than part of jewellery, and the disposition of some of the beads whilst 'in situ' certainly supports this idea. Also found were a number of carnelian beads, most of which are squat in appearance and range from pale orange to very deep red in colour. The origin of these beads remains obscure at present, but examples of each type have been sent to the USA for mineralogical analysis, in an attempt to determine whether they were imported items — possibly from the Indus Valley? — or whether they were locally produced.

During the Iron Age, perhaps two thousand years after the original construction and use of the tomb, a small squarish structure was built up against the exterior wall. Two decorated bronze bracelets, each weighing 750 grams, were recovered here. These represent a type that is typical of the Iron Age in the UAE and Oman. Surprisingly, no human remains were encountered in this chamber, but this may be an accident of bone preservation rather than a lack of original burial.

Later still, by a minimum of 500 years (some time between the Hellenistic and the Sassanian period), the entryway into the tomb was opened and a male, 25-29 years in age, clasping an iron spear, was interred. An iron pike was driven into the ground behind his left shoulder, and the remains of the wooden shafts are still present in the sockets of these two weapons. The re-use