

The lost churches of the Arabian Gulf: recent discoveries on the islands of Sir Bani Yas and Marawah, Abu Dhabi Emirate, United Arab Emirates

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The islands of Dalma, Marawah and Sir Bani Yas were initially surveyed by staff of the Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey (ADIAS) over a period of two weeks in April 1992 (King 1998), during which time a large number of sites were identified, ranging in date from the 'Ubaid related site on Dalma which has been the subject of previous papers (Beech & Elders 1999), up to the early years of oil exploration in the area. The evidence seemed to suggest a pattern of seasonal occupation of the islands throughout this period, a view we have since had cause to question.

The survey located the site of what proved to be a Nestorian monastery on Sir Bani Yas island. In subsequent years the church and a large part of the monastic complex were excavated, as well as six courtyard houses in the vicinity. During the April 2000 season a further church and related structures which may represent another monastery were located on Marawah. The church was partly excavated, revealing a building with remarkable similarities to the church at Sir Bani Yas. This paper summarizes the results of the work so far and offers some preliminary thoughts on their significance.

The excavations on Sir Bani Yas

The most immediately notable exception to the well-known pattern of seasonal occupation was provided by a group of obviously high-status sites on the eastern coast of Sir Bani Yas. These sites had been

tentatively dated to the late pre-Islamic and early Islamic period on the basis of the small amount of pottery found on the surface (King *et al.* 1995). The decision was taken to examine these sites more closely, in order to explore the reasons for this settlement of an at first sight relatively unattractive island (at least in terms of resources).

The island is located off the coast opposite the notable outcrop of Jebel Danna (Fig.1), 170 km west of Abu Dhabi. The surrounding inland area is characterized by barren salt flats, quite unsuitable for settlement. Compared with this, the island provides a secluded and more favourable environment. This is reflected in the variety and number of archaeological sites identified by the survey.

Sir Bani Yas is like Dalma a salt plug island with the mountains in the centre partly composed of copper and iron deposits giving them quite a striking appearance, with dark colours predominating. The underlying geology is calcareous sandstone and there is plenty of gypsum, which provided the basic building materials.

The island is now characterized by tree plantations, part of Sheikh Zayed's greening programme, in the shade of which such exotic animals as llamas, giraffes, emus, many types of gazelle and a large population of Arabian oryx now live. The tree planting has resulted in some damage to the archaeology, the sites having been partly

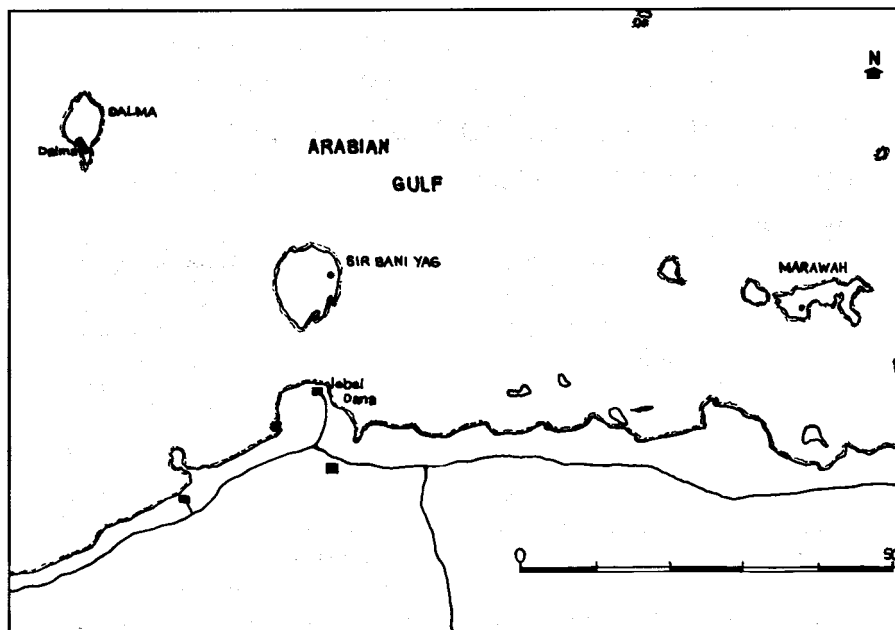


FIGURE 1. Location of the sites and the islands of Dalma, Sir Bani Yas and Marawah.

bulldozed and holes and trenches dug for tree planting and irrigation, but despite this the buildings and features have survived remarkably well.

The monastery and the houses of the associated dispersed settlement are to be found within the plantations on the east side of the island in an area known as Al Khor, adjacent to a sheltered lagoon which would have provided a good landing spot for boats. This may well be the reason for the choice of this site. Another is the presence of sweet water wells in the vicinity.¹

The Sir Bani Yas excavations took place over four roughly month-long seasons from 1993–1996, uncovering the church and a sizeable section of a large and sophisticated monastic complex and associated houses, which may also have been monastic in nature. The monastery church was richly decorated with stucco of high quality.

The monastery complex

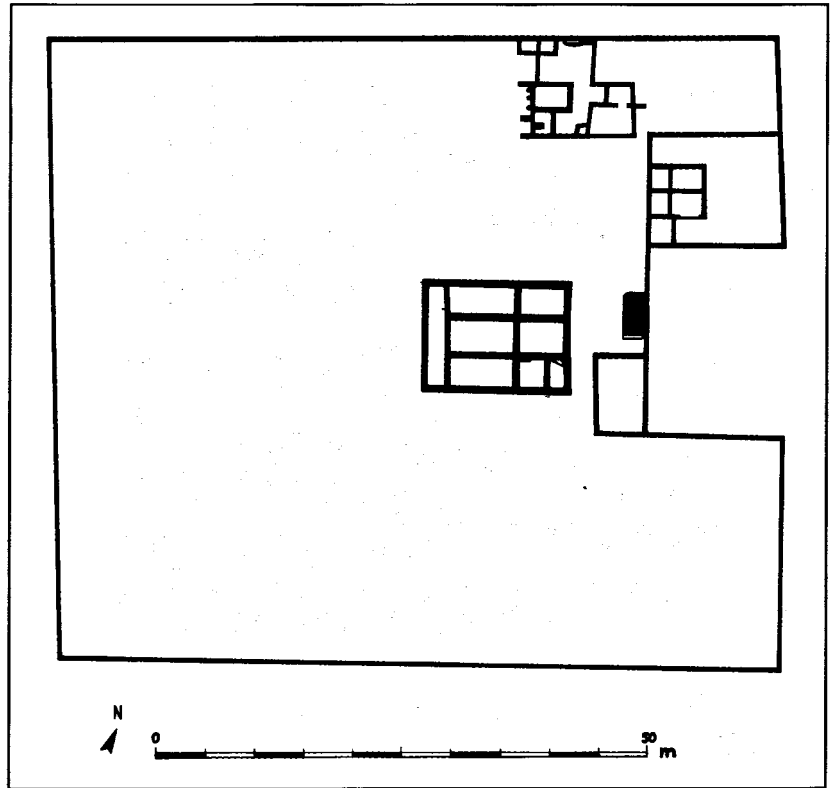
The outer walls enclosed an area of some 90 m east-west x 70 m north-south. The full extent of the monastic complex was not excavated, but was revealed by a combination of contour survey,

magnetometer survey, test-trenching, excavation and surface observation (Fig. 2). The walls stood to a maximum of 0.65 m high, but in many places were truncated or destroyed.

The clausal buildings enclosing the courtyard around the church were composed of blocks of four or five rooms with high quality plastered floors and walls, which were consistently devoid of occupation material or evidence for their function. There were occasional clues, such as the presence in the north wing of a stucco plaque decorated with crosses and a vine scroll (Fig. 3, type 1) adjacent to a stone projection within one of the rooms, probably an altar. Decoration was rare in the clausal buildings and this was therefore very probably a chapel, indicating that not all services were performed in the church, which would fit well with what we know of Nestorian monastic custom. The smaller rooms were most likely cells.

There were also enclosed spaces open to the sky between the blocks of rooms, which one could describe as internal yards. These had rough dirt floors and produced a small amount of occupation material, including pottery and food refuse (mostly

FIGURE 2. *Simplified plan of the monastery, combining results of excavation and survey.*



fish bone and shell). An interesting example was provided with a rectangular stone-lined feature against the north external wall, which seems most likely to have been an animal feeding trough. This suggests that this yard may have been used as an animal pen. Animals feeding from the trough would also have had easy access to the contents of a nearby water cistern.

The church

The church stands off-centre in a large courtyard enclosed by the ranges of the monastery clausur, and slightly raised above the latter on a rock promontory on the edge of the beach. The plan was established and excavation undertaken inside the church itself, with trenches dug through the floors down to bedrock. This work succeeded in providing us with an understanding of the church's development and its internal plan.² The phasing for the church proved to be quite complex, unlike the single construction phase encountered in the clausural buildings.

Although the church had been planned as a basilica from the beginning, the addition of the obviously secondary north aisle walls occurred after a break in construction, which was long enough to justify the plastering of the walls and the laying of rough floors in the completed parts of the church. The development of the building can be summarized into the following scheme:

- Phase 1: the beginning of construction of the church (perhaps late sixth century).
- Phase 2(a): the 'provisional' church with unfinished north aisle and rough floors.
- Phase 2(b): the finished church with narthex.
- Phase 3: post-monastic occupation (early eighth century).

Phase 1: the construction of the church

Construction layers and features were found under all the lowest floors, consisting of levelling dumps within the walls to form a solid base for the floors, post-holes representing either scaffolding or perhaps

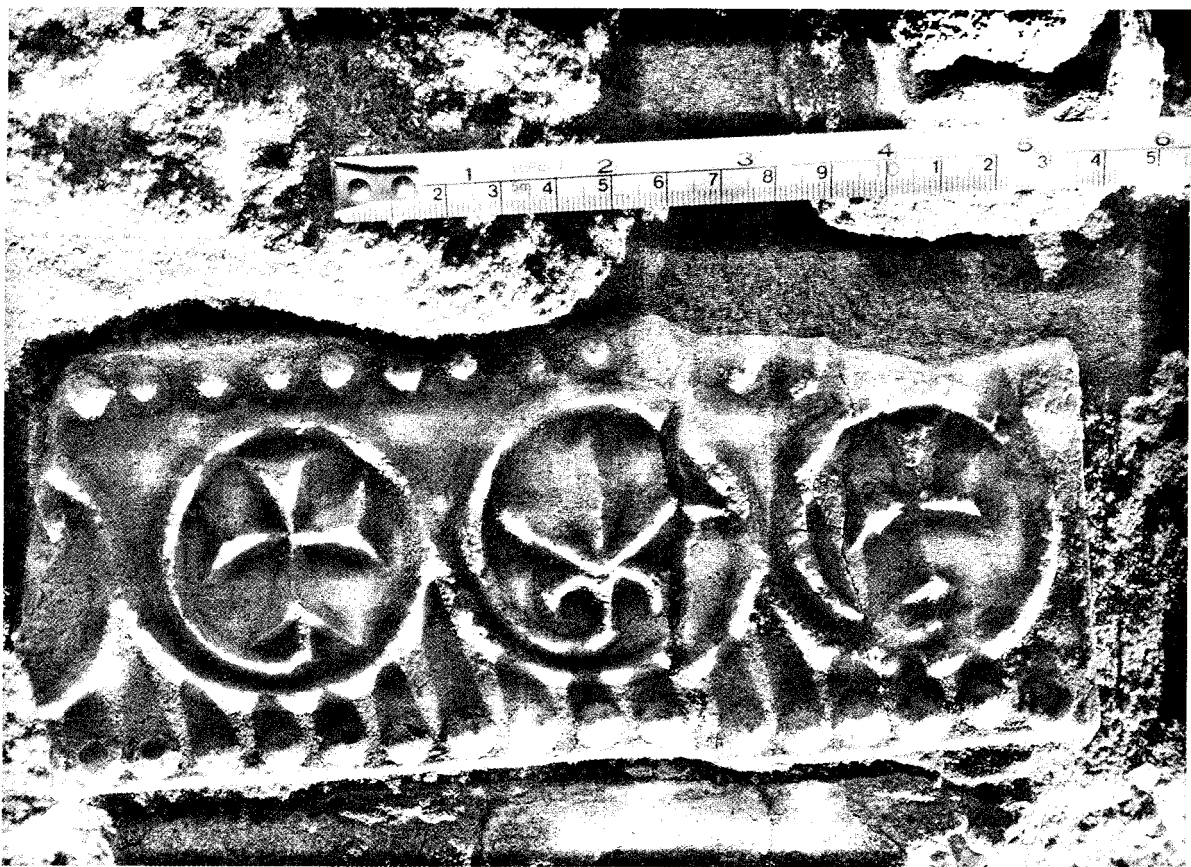


FIGURE 3. Photograph showing stucco of type 1 (foreground) and type 2 in the rubble from the east wall of the church.

temporary shelter, and clay slicks and puddling pits from mud mortar mixing.

Phase 2(a): the 'provisional' church with unfinished north aisle

The walls of the church itself were not built in one action. The partition wall between the north aisle and chamber and the west wall of the north aisle were built last and were not completed before a long break in construction. The east and north walls of the north chamber and north aisle were at least partly finished, but there were as yet no floors and no doors connecting these unfinished rooms (the east-west walls were not yet built) to the completed central aisle and the monk's choir, the chancel.

The completed south and central aisles, chancel and south chamber (east and west rooms) were provided with rough mud plaster floors and were connected to each other by doorways. The floors were very rough, uneven and patchy, which is to be explained by the fact that they were only meant as a stop-gap solution until the church could be finished, with the completion of the north aisle and chamber and 'proper' plaster floors as found in the rest of the monastery buildings.

Phase 2(b): the finished church with narthex

In this phase, the north aisle and chamber were completed, making the church tripartite in plan as no doubt originally intended, a classic basilica. New floors were laid throughout the church in the same

fine white plaster found elsewhere in the monastery (which may suggest that the church was the first permanent building). A narrow *narthex* was added to the west end of the church.

The excavations revealed double doorways in the north and east walls of the north chamber. The doorways were divided in two by a stone foundation exactly in the middle of the threshold, indicating that there were double doors with possibly a pillar in the centre. A plaster pilaster section was found in the fallen north wall, and could well have been the central pillar between the doors. Fragments of a stucco 'plaque' were found opposite both doorways at a height of approximately 2–2.5 m, which indicates that such plaques were mounted over the lintel above both doorways.

The north-eastern room of the church was the most interesting. It was full of fallen plaster fragments, which proved to have been the remains of a previously suspended floor. This room is thus the lower floor of the only two-storeyed structure yet found during the excavations on the Al Khor Christian sites, and has direct parallels with the identical room at the Marawah church (see below).

Two oval notches in the plaster floor of the room may well have been worn by the feet of a ladder giving access to the upper floor. Thus this seems likely to have been the 'bell tower', from which the faithful were called to prayer, probably with the beating of clappers rather than bells. This explains the increased thickness of the partition wall between this room and the chancel, giving extra support for the tower.

There was also a low plaster screen with a central opening across the north-east corner of the room. This seems to have been a cupboard, perhaps for the holy books, vessels, or a reliquary; this tiny room may well have fulfilled the function of a vestry.

The room adjacent to the west had one interesting feature, a circle of burning directly on the plaster floor. This might represent the baking of the unleavened bread used in the Eucharist, which was often undertaken within the church itself in the Nestorian liturgy (Badger 1969).

The fallen east wall of the chancel and north chamber was excavated and produced a large amount of decorated stucco and structural features, which allow a reconstruction of the east façade of

the church to be attempted. The wall does not appear to have fallen in one piece, rather it fell in blocks over a perhaps lengthy period of time.

The lower rubble layer reached a 'peak' at its easternmost extent directly opposite the central axis of the chancel; at this point a concentration of tabular flint slabs was noted, typically used on the Sir Bani Yas sites as coping stones. Thus it seems possible that the chancel was higher than the side chambers. It was certainly vaulted internally, as proved by a large piece of masonry with a plastered, curved inner surface, which curved in all planes; thus the chancel ceiling had perhaps at least a fake semi-dome at the east end to make the chancel internally apsidal and more 'church-like' in appearance.

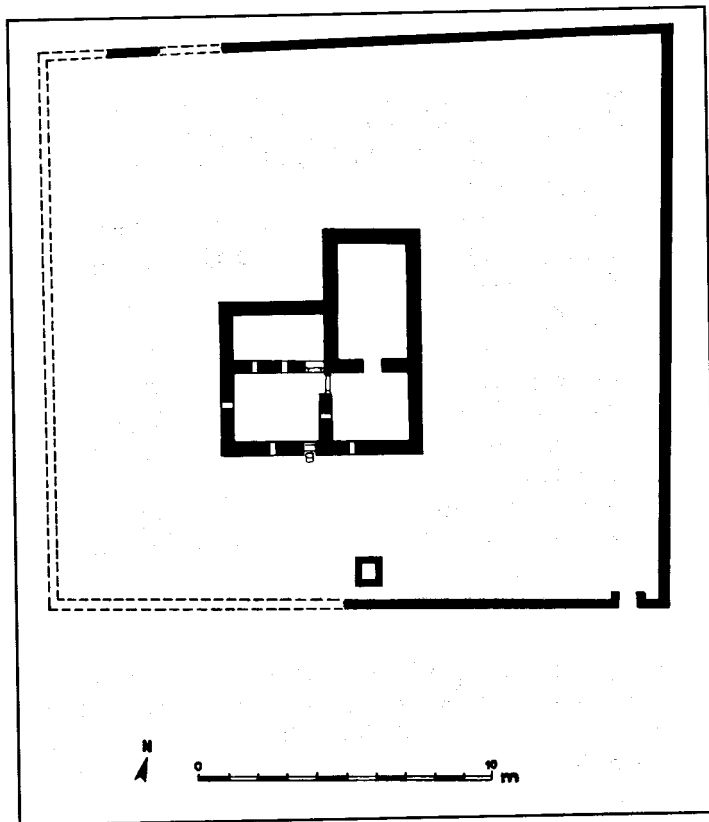
The height of the wall can be estimated to have been a maximum of approximately 4 m. The existence of a gabled wooden roof over the chancel and nave and sloping roofs in the parallel aisles and chambers with a relatively flat pitch seems likely, although the roofs could also have been flat.

The stucco

Most of the stucco fragments were found to the east of the church, concentrated within a 2 m radius of the central point in the chancel east wall. Two main types were found, type 1 and type 2 (Fig. 3). Type 1 sections were mostly found face down, type 2 face up. This pattern, along with the fact that type 1 sections were weather eroded, with indistinct pattern edges, while type 2 patterns were sharp and fresh, indicates that type 1 was mounted externally, probably around the frames of the doorways, while type 2 was internal decoration. One section of type 2 plaster was complete with both terminals intact, with four roundels; thus this pattern seems to have been set in horizontal strings on the lower part of the inner chancel wall, probably underneath an arch-headed window which was found almost intact in the rubble. It may have formed part of a stucco panel, as at Jubail (Langfeldt 1994), perhaps behind or above the altar.

The stucco decoration is of a high technical and artistic standard, combining Christian (both Latin and Greek crosses), classical (vine scroll, geometric designs) and Sasanian (palmettes, flowing floral designs) motifs.³ Stylistically they can be dated to

FIGURE 4. Plan of one of the courtyard houses (SBY3). Note the water cistern near the boundary wall.



the sixth–seventh century AD, a date provisionally supported by the sparse pottery and glass finds, which have however not yet been systematically studied. The decoration was made with wooden moulds pressed into the wet gypsum plaster.

Phase 3: The post-monastic 'squatter' occupation

On several examples of type 1 stucco, only the upper field survived; the lower field crosses seem to have been deliberately chipped off. Two such crosses have now been found in the rubble from the chancel wall. This may have been done during the post-monastic 'squatter' phase, which was represented by many small temporary hearths found amongst the rubble of the church and monastery. This activity seems to have begun in the early eighth century, and indicates that the inhabitants of or visitors to the island were now Muslims.

The east gate and burial

The gate in the east perimeter wall of the monastery was situated opposite the east façade of the church. The entrance was 2.4 m wide, with a well worn plaster threshold flanked by rectangular buttresses. The buttresses had been badly damaged by the fallen lintel of the gate, composed of huge roughly worked blocks of sandstone.

The single burial adjacent to the platform inside the gate was severely truncated by tree planting, and only parts of the interred individual's legs and parts of the ribs and left arm were still intact and *in situ*. The grave cut was 1.45 m deep and 30–50 cm wide with rounded termini. It was filled with loose sand and had originally been capped by a large slab of black tabular flint, the east end of which was still *in situ*. This was plainly an adult extended inhumation, laid on its back, the head at the west end of the grave as is normal in the Christian tradition. There were no finds.

The orientation of the grave is of interest, on an east-west axis exactly down the middle of the church. This may explain the asymmetrical siting of the platform, indicating that this was an individual of some status. One can of course only conjecture if this was perhaps the founder or patron of the monastery. There was a small enclosure adjacent to the burial, which may have been the monastic graveyard. This has not been further investigated.

The Courtyard Houses

A total of six separate 'courtyard houses' were identified outside the monastery complex itself which were so similar in form, technique and finds material that they seem certain to have been contemporary with it and each other. They were also remarkably similar to the house excavated on Failaka (D. Kennet, personal communication). Five of these structures were investigated by excavation, of which one, the simplest, was completed (Fig. 4). One other was too badly damaged to yield meaningful information.

The building materials used on all these sites are identical, sandstone, gypsum plaster, mud as wall-bonding and roof-proofing agent. This could simply be taken to reflect the easily available materials on this island. Other factors such as the uniform width of the rooms, never more than 2.7 m, can also be found in domestic buildings of all periods built with traditional materials in the Gulf, since the mangrove or date-palm roofing beams generally used are only capable of spanning this width. Better quality wood must have been imported for the church.

Aside from these enforced similarities in material and form, it is the similarity in layout that is really striking. The plan of the courtyard houses is reproduced in the blocks of rooms in the monastery itself, with three or four subsidiary rooms grouped around a larger room which gives access to them and to the external yard outside the block. Each block was provided with its own water cistern. One of the sites was provided with a larger plaster-lined tank with a sluice and adjacent channel. This fact, and the relative isolation of this building from the others on the plateau to the west of the coastal fringe, suggests that livestock may have been held there.

The relative scarcity of finds material from all these sites may be a product of a short period of

occupation, but may also be due to the lack of middens which may be expected to have existed but have probably been bulldozed away. It would appear that attention was given to cleanliness and this supports the impression given by the cell-like appearance of the rooms of a spartan lifestyle. As noted above, the rooms were conspicuously clean of finds and domestic rubbish.

This is not to say that the buildings are of inferior quality; indeed the reverse is the case. As at the monastery itself, the walls are well built, and the plasterwork on walls, floors, door jambs, thresholds, steps, windows and niches is of a uniformly high standard. It seems likely that the houses were inhabited by monks, perhaps senior monks living in self-imposed isolation from the rest of the community for all or part of the time.

The excavations on Marawah

During continued survey of the archaeological sites on Marawah during the 2000 spring season, a group of mounds denoted MR11 (King 1998) identified in the initial 1992 survey were re-examined. These mounds are of varying size and shape, littered with loose rock and upright slabs. There is no anthropogenic material visible on the surface at all on any of the mounds (with the exception of plaster, see below). The mounds had been variously interpreted as burial mounds or the remains of buildings. To clarify this, it was decided to investigate one of the smaller mounds by limited excavation.

Geologically, Marawah is quite different from Sir Bani Yas. It lies 60 km to the east, and is much closer to the mainland. The island is relatively flat, with limestone ridges running around the fringes of the island and raised beaches. The mounds are located at the western end of one of these ridges, which runs along the south-west coast of the island.

Work began on the 8 April 2000 and continued until 18 April. An area 10 m east-west and 8 m north-south was cleaned. A 2 m x 1 m sondage was opened within what proved to be the south-west corner of the chancel to investigate the depth and nature of stratigraphy and to attempt to recover dating material. The excavations were carried out by the author and Mr John Martin.

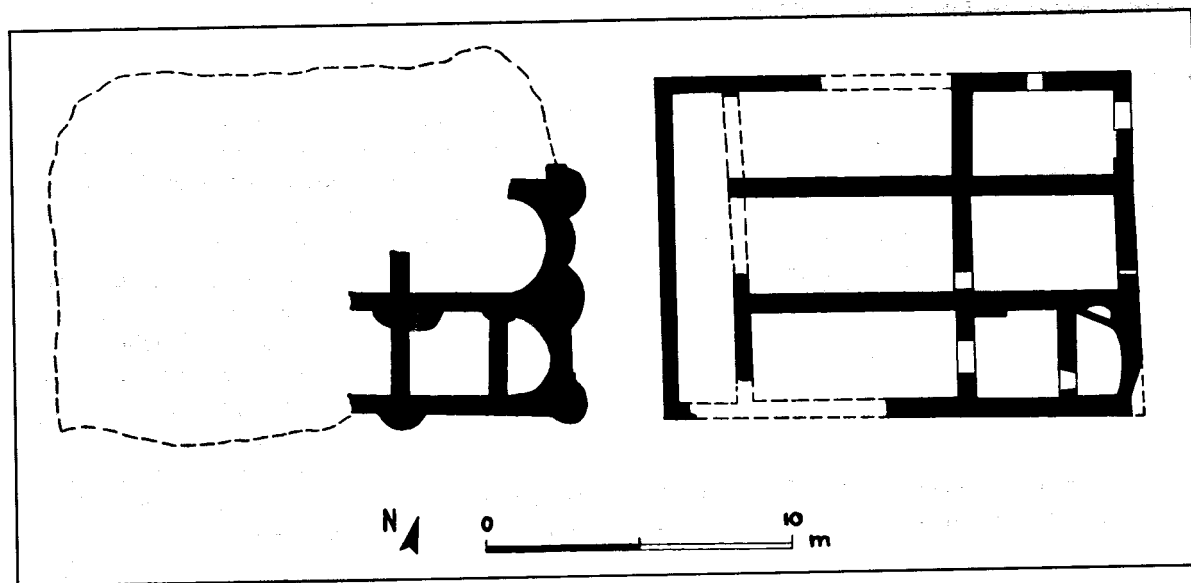


FIGURE 5. Comparison of the ground plans of the Sir Bani Yas and Marawah churches.

The church

The area of the central mound was some 15 m east-west and 12 m north-south. It was roughly oval aligned east-west, with a maximum elevation of 1 m sloping gently off in all directions. It was covered with loose stones lying in fine white aeolian sand, amongst which several possibly structural features could be discerned. These included large upright slabs near the east end of the mound, and a short stretch of what appeared to be coursed masonry at the south-east corner.

After initial cleaning, the above-mentioned wall was seen to continue for at least 6 m on a north-south alignment, and to have returns heading west at the centre and the end of this length. The walls were built of large slabs of beach rock bonded with mud, and could be seen to have gypsum plaster adhering to both faces. There were also doorways, with fragments of plaster door jambs, which were semi-circular in section as at the monastery site at Sir Bani Yas. These similarities, together with the quality, ground plan and orientation (east-west) of the building and the lack of occupation detritus, led us to the conclusion that this was probably a church. This informed our strategy for the further excavation of the site.

The structure of the church

The walls were some 0.55–0.6 m thick and survived to a maximum height of 1 m in the nave and chancel, with the outer walls progressively truncated towards the edges of the mound. The walls were built directly onto bedrock. The fabric of the walls consisted of assorted roughly-faced blocks of limestone, laid in rough courses. They were bonded with a mud mortar. The inner and outer faces had been rendered with a coarse white gypsum plaster.

Massive semi-circular buttresses (1 m diameter) were located at the wall junctions and at the corners of the building. There were even such buttresses internally where the south chamber internal walls met the south nave wall. This may be explicable in terms of extra height and, perhaps, vaulting throughout, given the attempt at architectural refinement characterized by the internal apses.

The plan of the church

The suggested ground plan is based on the fact that the parts of the Marawah church revealed so far exactly mirror the plan and dimensions of the Sir Bani Yas monastery church. The shape and dimensions of the unexcavated part of the mound

also fit this plan, giving dimensions of c.14 m east-west and 12 m north-south (Fig. 5).

Four rooms were revealed by excavation. There was a large apsidal room identified as the chancel of the church, measuring internally 5 m east-west and c. 3.4 m north-south. The south-west corner was revealed in the sondage, beyond which the nave stretched off to the west, as yet unexcavated.

The rooms to the south of this comprised the south chamber of the church, separated by a north-south internal wall. The larger, western room measured 3.2 m north-south and 2.7 m east-west, while the eastern was much narrower, only 1.7 m east-west. Comparison with the better preserved identical room in the Sir Bani Yas church (see above) suggests that this was the ground floor of the bell (clapper) tower.

There were no obvious floors remaining, however the rooms were severely eroded or robbed. The remains of a doorway between the two rooms could be discerned near the south end of the dividing wall, in exactly the same place as in the Sir Bani Yas church.

No stucco was found, which seems unusual given the profusion of decoration found at the Sir Bani Yas church. However, the Marawah church has not been bulldozed, which brought several pieces of such stucco to the surface at Sir Bani Yas. Future excavation may well produce stucco.

There were very few finds from the limited excavations, and no pottery or other diagnostic material, with the exception of a cylinder of dark green glass, which may be a fragment from the stem of a (wine?) glass. A wine glass was also found at Sir Bani Yas, which could be interpreted in both cases as a Eucharist chalice.

Discussion

The initially tentative identification of the central building at Marawah as a church was confirmed by the excavations. The apsidal east end and the identical dimensions and layout of the Sir Bani Yas church and Marawah building provide incontrovertible proof. Notable was the partition wall in both churches in the south chamber, convincingly shown at Sir Bani Yas to be the foundation for a tower at the south-eastern corner of the church, as still found in many eastern churches

today. The deep chancel and the relatively short nave and aisles are also common features to both churches. Given the geographical proximity of the two islands, only the survival and discovery of this building can be considered to be a surprise.

The identification of this building as a church, and the obvious parallels with the monastic church at Sir Bani Yas, raises questions about the nature of the other mounds adjacent to the church, several of which are larger in terms of both area and height. Plaster was identified on this as on all the other mounds, which would suggest that they are indeed contemporary with the church. The prominent raised location of this site on a ridge facing out to sea is reminiscent of the siting of the Sir Bani Yas monastery. This problem awaits further survey and excavation.

The discovery of Christian sites on Sir Bani Yas and Marawah help to fill what appeared to be a notable gap in the settlement record, namely the late pre-Islamic and early Islamic era, say AD 500–800. The Christian element was certainly a surprise at the time of discovery, but now can be seen to fit well into an emerging pattern along the length of the Gulf, with several important discoveries made in the last decade or so.

We now know of Christian sites on two islands off Kuwait, Failaka (Bernard, Callot & Salles 1991) and Akaz (J. Gichet, personal communication). There are two known sites along the Gulf coast of Saudi Arabia, at Jubail (Langfeldt 1994) and slightly inland at Jebel Berri (Potts 1994). There are unconfirmed but persistent reports of at least one, more probably two church sites on Qatar. Why Bahrain remains a blank is an interesting question which needs to be addressed. Now we have two monastic settlements on the western Abu Dhabi islands.

The peculiar geology of Sir Bani Yas, with its dark central mountains, has given rise to speculation that this might be the 'black island' mentioned in Nestorian texts as the site of the foundation of a monastery in the Nestorian diocese of Bēt Qatrāyē by the Arab Nestorian 'Awdīšō' in the late fourth century (Trimingham 1979: 280). This now seems unlikely, as this date is much too early. There are many possible 'black islands' in this area (for example Dalma), and probably many monasteries.

Such references do however broadly support the conclusion that what we are beginning to see is a chain of Nestorian churches and monasteries along the Arabian coast of the Gulf. These discoveries are a significant contribution to our knowledge of the nature and extent of the Christian presence in north-eastern Arabia, which is now appearing in the archaeological record after remaining hidden for so long, complementing and expanding on the sparse evidence provided by the historical texts.

However, attempts at equating the two records at this early stage may lead to distortions of the picture. More survey, excavation and evaluation of the archaeological record is necessary before we can safely identify particular places, or indeed personalities, whose names have come down to us in the written records. More pressing questions remain, such as the staffing and supplying of the Nestorian monasteries, their trade and cultural connections, and their relationships with the inland settlements and nomadic tribes. These are questions which the impending post-excavation analysis and publication of the Sir Bani Yas sites will go some way towards addressing.

Notes

The Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey (ADIAS) project was commissioned by President HH Shaikh Zayed bin Sultan al Nahyan in 1991 and is under the patronage of UAE Chief of Staff Shaikh Mohammed bin Zayed al Nahyan. The project is based both in Abu Dhabi and, under the direction of Dr Geoffrey King, at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. The ADIAS project is co-ordinated in Abu Dhabi by Mr Peter Hellyer.

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¹ A British Admiralty map from 1966 shows a well or waterhole near the monastery, and the presence of more in the past cannot be discounted. Dalma is said to have had up to 200 sweet water wells. Today the island is supplied with desalinated water, as is Sir Bani Yas.

² The author has avoided using Greek or Syriac terms for the various parts of the church and

monastery, as these can be confusing. The word 'chamber' is used as an objective term to describe the rooms flanking the chancel, avoiding functional connotations.

³ Much has been said about 'Nestorian' crosses, however a wide variety of styles was represented in the Sir Bani Yas stucco, all of which can be paralleled in other parts of the Christian world during this period, and it would be hard to make a case for any of the crosses being specifically 'Nestorian'.

Since this paper was submitted, a series of C-14 dates have been received. These came from a sealed context, from charcoal in a fireplace within the monastery complex near the church, directly sealed by a fallen wall and therefore providing a good *terminus ante quem* for the abandonment of the monastery. The dates are:

1σ cal AD 540–656, cal BP 1410–1294

2σ cal AD 430–686, cal BP 1520–1264

The errors are expressed at the one sigma level of confidence. The analysis was undertaken by the Scottish Universities Research and Reactor Centre. These dates indicate that the monastery was abandoned by the mid 7th-century at the latest, the time of the Islamic conquest of this area.

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