

# New finds at Julfar

by Peter Hellyer

*The ancient port of Julfar in Ras al Khaimah was an important centre of trade from before the dawn of the Islamic era until the eighteenth century. This article reports on the excavations on the site in early 1991.*

The third season of excavations on the site of an old mosque at the historic Islamic seaport of Julfar was carried out in early 1991, led by a British team headed by Dr. Geoffrey King, from the School of African and Asian Studies of London University. This article has been prepared with the assistance of Dr. King, who is, however, not responsible for any errors of fact or interpretation that it may contain.

Julfar, known to historians from frequent references in Arab literature to have existed from early Islamic times until around the late seventeenth century, was a major port and trading centre until it fell into decline during the period of the Portuguese presence in the Gulf in the seventeenth century. The historical record refers to a battle between the Portuguese and Julfar's inhabitants in 1621, during which a prominent mosque was used as a position by Portuguese cannon to shell the fort, and it is believed that the site being excavated by King is the mosque referred to in that report.

In three seasons of excavations, beginning in 1989, King's team, supported by Britain's Royal Asiatic Society, the British Academy, the Society of Antiquaries, and the Society for Arabian Studies in London, as well as the British Council, Emirates Airlines, IAL, (Ras al Khaimah), and Emirates Bank International, has uncovered several layers of building on the site, suggesting that the mosque was built and re-built several times over the centuries.

During the latest period, which is currently assumed to have ended after the seventeenth century battle with the Portuguese, the mosque, which had dimensions of 20 metres by 20 metres, appears to have been completely roofed over, with four rows of columns parallel to the 'qibla' wall holding up the roof.

Inside, there was a packed and plastered floor, still well preserved over much of the site, although in some areas holes had been dug, perhaps by local inhabitants in later years searching for building stone. A number of post-holes sunk into the floor suggest also, says King, that after the mosque had fallen into disrepair, temporary 'barasti'-type structures may have been erected on the site.

Beneath this late mosque, which had a semi-circular mihrab facing in the direction of Mecca, is another mosque, obviously dated earlier, with evidence of piers with a square base.

This season's work has shown that much of the structure of the mosque must have been levelled prior to the last phase of rebuilding, indicated by the pinkish level of plaster present on the mihrab and elsewhere, including the qibla wall, and partly because the white plaster floor of the last period of the mosque sealed the earlier set of piers, which must have been cut back to surface level before the floor was laid.

— هذه المقالة تلخص تفاصيل كشف أثري حديث بمنطقة جلفار في رأس الخيمة.

To the east of the mosque the archaeologists have uncovered the foundations of a rectangular stone building, which, according to King, "is the most remarkable new find of the 1991 season."

The building abuts the mosque wall, although its purpose at present remains unclear. The evidence emerging seems to suggest, however, that it is part of an earlier mosque.

The discovery of this mosque came only in the last week of the season.

According to King, the end-of-the-season discovery, which has completely changed previous ideas about the mosque, came as a result of part of the late period plaster floor in the interior of the mosque being removed, revealing the extension and outline of the earlier structure. More work will now be done on this mosque next season.

Yet another mosque lies beneath the top two, and of the same ground plan, except for a rectangular mihrab, which precedes the curved one that sits on top of it.

The site of the qibla wall and mihrabs of the successive mosques adjoins the edge of a shallow gully running through the elevated sand-bar on which Julfar lies, and between the mihrab and the gully, the archaeologists have discovered plaster and stones, in two distinct layers, which appear to represent the debris of collapsed qibla walls.

"Heavy rains and floods running down the gully may have undermined the qibla wall on two occasions, leading to its collapse and the subsequent rebuildings," King suggests.

Dr. King and his associate, Miss Beatrice de Cardi, the doyenne of foreign archaeologists in the UAE, are hesitant about speculating on the ages of the four phases of mosque construction, although, says King, "working back from the mid-seventeenth century, when we assume the mosque fell into disrepair, we can say that there is evidence of at least several hundred years of occupation."

Perhaps the most intriguing discovery, however, is the remains of a substantial mud-brick wall, nearly a metre thick, close to, but below, and earlier than, the rectangular mihrab of the early mosque. This wall, whose remains have been traced running out at a slight angle to the alignment of the qibla wall, is clearly of a building preceding the masonry on the site.

"In the absence of any clear understanding, so far, of the dating of the mosque itself," says King, "we cannot assess this lowest building, nor are we certain it is not itself also a mosque."

Other mud-brick walls of a similar style and at a similar depth have been found elsewhere on the Julfar site, but these, too, have not been dated.

King remains firm on refusing to speculate on the ages of the structures he has found until further analysis of the finds has been undertaken.

The dating of the newly discovered phases of the mosques, and of the underlying buildings, will depend to a considerable extent on analysis of the finds of potsherds and other items inside and around the structure.

"We are pleased that this year we have found a substantial amount of pottery, unlike our two previous seasons," says King. "Before this year, we thought we might have to depend on analysis of the pottery found by a French team working nearby, but this year we have plenty of our own with which to work."

A large proportion of the pottery, particularly from the later levels, is of the typical 'Julfar type,' reddish with striped red decorations, which can be found scattered over much of the surface of the whole of the Julfar site, as well as elsewhere in the area, including four unexcavated settlements found along an ancient shore-line nearby during a brief two hour survey.

Other sherds are obviously imports, from Iran and from further afield like China and Vietnam.

As yet, little is known of the evolution of the Julfar pottery, which was made in the mountains behind Ras al Khaimah. The pottery kilns remained in use until twenty or thirty years ago, and the style appears to have changed relatively little over the centuries, making dating extremely difficult.

Much of the Julfar site, which appears to have been abandoned at around the time that the modern town of Ras al Khaimah was established, perhaps in the late seventeenth century, was once almost cut off by the sea. The Al Mataf area, where the mosque stands, has a shallow khor in front of it, and then another sand bar on the sea. Behind it was once another arm of the sea, stretching in from the main khor, although this is now cut off by a causeway, built in recent years, that links Al Mataf to the southern Al Nudud part of the site, where British and other teams have excavated remains of dwellings.

Around part of the inland-facing area of the main Julfar sand bar, a German archaeological team has found remains of a thick wall, with the bases of what may have been defensive towers, suggesting that at least this part of the town may once have been a walled city.

The silting up of the inner khor, perhaps as a result of tidal action or perhaps because of silt being washed down from the nearby mountains after rainfall, would have made the Al Mataf area much more difficult to defend. Since the abandoning of the site appears to have coincided roughly with a period of intense, if intermittent, conflict between the local inhabitants and the Portuguese, the move of the population to the more easily defended site at Ras al Khaimah could have been prompted by the drying out of the inner khor, and perhaps the silting of the harbour.

The dating of this process, and of the other changes along the neighbouring coastline, will be one of the focuses of attention during the next season of work on the site.

Dr. King and his colleagues are well pleased with the results of their 1991 season of excavations and are pleased, too, that they chose to come out to Ras al Khaimah despite the fears earlier in the year that the crisis further up the Gulf would affect the Emirates.

Besides their work last season, there have also been excavations by a Japanese team, led by Professor Sasaki, of Kanazawa University, focussing on an area of settlement on the edge of Al Mataf, where remains of houses and streets were found built on top of the original natural surface of the sand bar.

Other teams that have been working on the site, although not this year, include a French team under the leadership of Dr. Claire Hardy-Guilbert, working on a series of occupation levels not far from the mosque, and a German team led by Dr. Michael Jansen, of the Rhine-Westphalia Technical High School in Aachen.

Together the four teams represent a significant example of international collaboration to uncover the past history of Julfar, and of the UAE as a whole.

All the teams, notes Dr. King, have been delighted with the continued support given to their work by the Government of Ras al Khaimah, and, in particular, by Major General Sheikh Sultan bin Saqr al Qassimi, a Deputy Ruler of the Emirate and its Director of Antiquities.

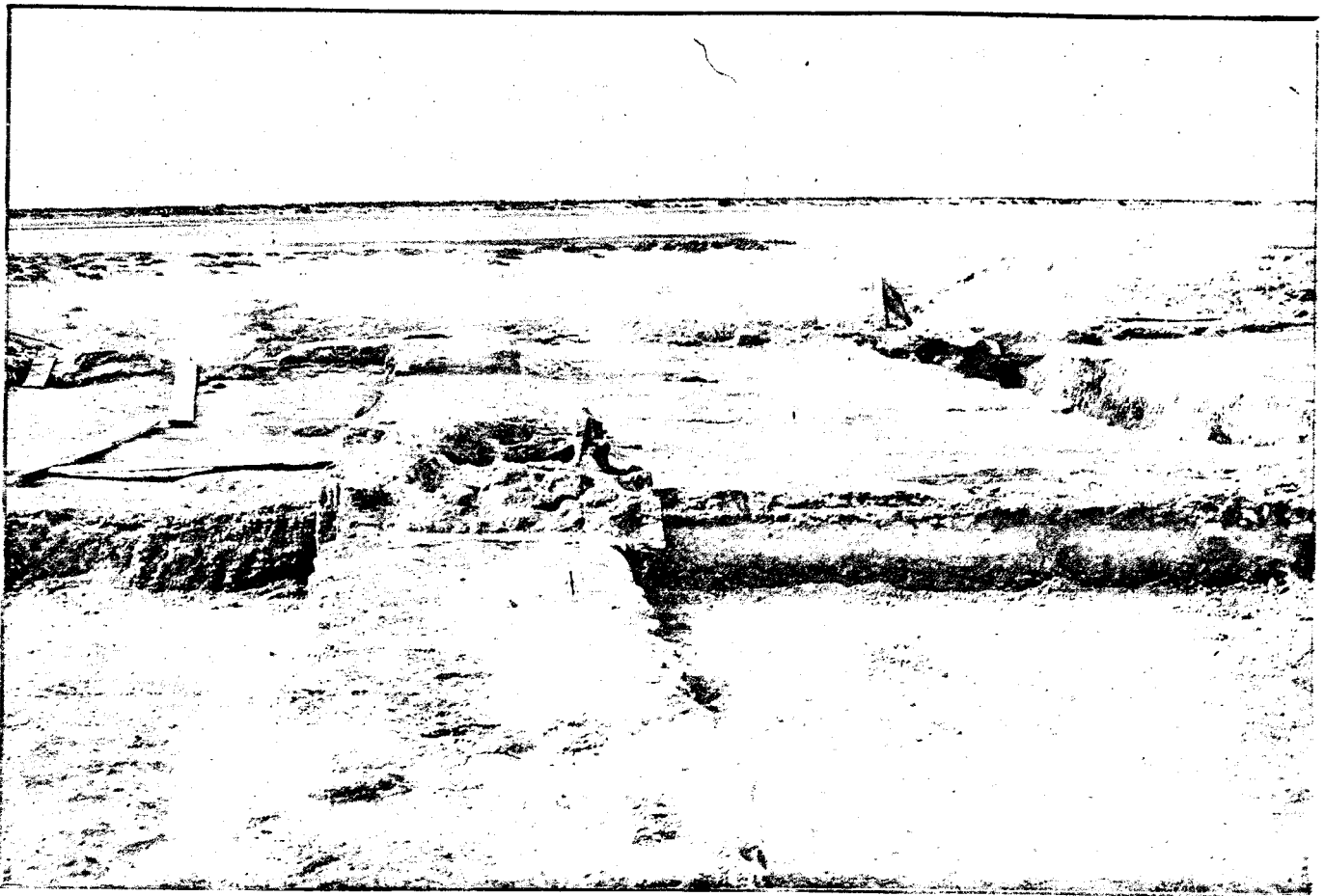
"Sheikh Sultan has taken great interest in our work," says King, "and has visited the site on numerous occasions, to study the evidence of our excavations. The encouragement we have received from him, and from (Supreme Council Member and Ruler of Ras al Khaimah) His Highness Sheikh Saqr, has made our work much easier."

"The historical record shows that Julfar is a site of very great importance for the Islamic period in the history of the United Arab Emirates, with evidence of perhaps approaching a thousand years of occupation. There is much work that we and our colleagues from other countries have still to do before we can claim to have an understanding of Julfar's history, but this year's season of excavations has added substantially to our knowledge of the mosque that must have been one of the most important buildings of the old city," says King.

*The author is Chairman and Archaeology Recorder of the ENHG.*

**Peter Hellyer**  
**ENHG, c/o P.O. Box 2380, Abu Dhabi, U.A.E.**  
**and**  
**3, Rockwood, Mont Cochon, Jersey, Channel Islands**

\* \* \*



Two views of the mosque at Julfar, showing the internal layout and the Mihrab and Qibla wall. See Page 19. (P. Hellyer)

