

NOTES AND QUERIES

Islands Survey

For a four week period in March and April 1992, a team of British archaeologists, led by Dr. Geoffrey King of London University's School of Oriental and African Studies, carried out a preliminary archaeological survey of three of the main offshore islands in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, Sir Bani Yas, Dalma and Merawah.

The survey, carried out in association with the Society for Arabian Studies in London, was undertaken on the instruction of UAE President Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al Nahyan, and was co-ordinated by the Emirates Natural History Group at the request of the Group's Patron, Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak al Nahyan.

Important discoveries were made on each of the islands. On Sir Bani Yas, the main sites of interest were the remains of buildings, including a possible township, dating back to Sassanian times, just before the beginning of the Islamic era, along with other Partho-Sassanian or Sassanian — Islamic material. The remains of at least six courtyard houses were located, some with visible stone coursing and pieces of plaster, some of which were decorated.

The bulk of the sites were inside pens built to hold llamas, part of President Sheikh Zayed's collection of wild animals. The first archaeological evidence from the pens was located in May 1991 during a Group study trip to the Island.

A number of cairns of uncertain date, Islamic campsites and a possibly Neolithic flint knapping site were also noted.

On Dalma island, which lies well offshore, around thirty kilometres from Sir Bani Yas and 27.5 kilometres from the coast of the Qatar Peninsula, the most important discoveries were two sites dating to the Ubaid period, in the fourth or fifth millenium BC, identified by potsherds, and described by King in a report as "one of the most important discoveries of the survey."

The sites, enclosed but endangered, also included flints and beads, and, as far as is known, are the only Ubaid sites yet to have been found on offshore islands in the Emirates. Ubaid sherds, originating from Mesopotamia, have also been found in shell mounds and middens along the coast in Sharjah, Ajman, Umm al Qaiwain and Ras al Khaimah in the northern Emirates.

Much of Dalma has been affected by agricultural development and the building of houses, but the team identified and recommended for preservation a number of recent Islamic buildings of a unique design.

Merawah island, the property of Deputy Chief of Staff Major General Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al Nahyan, was found to contain a large Neolithic site, "a significant addition to our knowledge of early archaeology in the UAE," according to King.

The site includes cairns, stone rings, and a number of rectangular structures, as well as a "profusion of arrowheads, knives, scrapers and piercers," some of which were taken to London, with the permission of Sheikh Zayed, for comparison with lithic material from the Qatar peninsula.

A number of large shell middens were also located, many of which are recent Islamic, although others may be earlier, a late Islamic mosque and a number of cairns and graves, many of which are pre-Islamic.

On the neighbouring island of Liffiyah, (Fiyyah), a brief examination also found evidence of three cairns and the site of a now abandoned village.

In his report, submitted to President Sheikh Zayed, Dr. King made a series of recommendations for preservation of the key sites. Those identified on each of the islands, the Sassanian on Sir Bani Yas, the Ubaid on Dalma and the Neolithic on Merawah, all have the potential to add significantly to the understanding of the country's history and pre-history, and are not paralleled elsewhere in the Emirates.

Sheikh Zayed has requested that the survey work continue in 1993, possibly associated with some excavation, and that the team should also examine other coastal and island areas, including the area between Jebel Shuweihat and Ras Khumays along the coast of the west of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi.

Air transport for the survey team was provided by the UAE Air Force, arranged by Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, while corporate support was provided by the following companies and institutions, many of them also Corporate members of the Emirates Natural History Group: Emirates Airlines, The British Council, the Al Fahim Group, Abu Dhabi Company for Onshore Oil Operations, Union National Bank, Abu Dhabi National Hotels Company, Wimpey (Abu Dhabi), Spinneys Abu Dhabi and the Higher Colleges of Technology. A small grant was also provided towards expenses by the Group.

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