

New discoveries on Dalma and Sir Bani Yas

by Peter Hellyer

The second season of the Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey Project took place in March and April 1993. Under the sponsorship of UAE Chief of Staff Major-General Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al Nahyan and directed by Dr. Geoffrey King of the School of Oriental and African Studies at London University, the season involved a continuation of survey work on islands offshore and along the coast, and excavations on the islands of Dalma and Sir Bani Yas.

The Dalma site was that of a settlement dating to the 'Ubaid period of the Fourth and Fifth Millennium BC, and shows that the island was occupied as much as 7,000 years ago. The oldest settlement yet discovered in the country, its location on an island offshore suggests that the inhabitants were capable of undertaking sea voyages at least around the Southern Gulf.

The site was first identified during preliminary survey work in 1992, and lies in and around the compound of the Abu Dhabi Women's Association. It covers an area of at least 150 metres by 300 metres. A lengthy test trench showed that archaeological deposits were more than one metre deep. From initial work it was clear that certain areas of the site were used more intensively than others, and further work is planned.

The finds included over one hundred and fifty potsherds, many of the typical painted 'Ubaid type known from southern Mesopotamia and elsewhere in Eastern Arabia. Other finds included two fine green stone amulets, believed to be the first of their kind ever found in the UAE, stone and pottery weights for fishing nets, a variety of beads and fragments of carved shell, large quantities of fish bones and shells, and several thousand flint chippings as well as a number of flint tools. There is no natural flint on the island, so the raw material must have been imported by sea.

At a lower level of the site, hard-packed surfaces were found, marked with post-holes, indicating that the site was a probable settlement, at least on a seasonal basis. The earliest settlement yet known in the Emirates.

The depth of the archaeological deposits, which begin a mere five centimetres below the current surface, indicate that the site was occupied over a lengthy period of time, with an interval of sand suggesting an interruption of occupation.

Major sites from the 'Ubaid period previously discovered have been concentrated further north in Eastern Arabia, in Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain although a few scattered potsherds were known from Ajman, Umm al Qaiwain and Ras al Khaimah. Together with another major 1993 excavation of an 'Ubaid cemetery in Umm al Qaiwain, however, the Dalma site proves the existence for the first time of a substantial relationship between the 'Ubaid culture and the southern Gulf.

On Sir Bani Yas, three sites were examined.

One was a shallow wadi in the Ras Danan area on the north of the island, with evidence of occupation in the Islamic period, although without permanent structures. Potsherds and other material, such as fish and dugong bones and a fireplace, were examined and plotted, with tentative evidence of dating, based on a comparison of the pottery, to the mid-Islamic period. Some of the pottery was of types known from elsewhere in the Emi-

rates, but there were also sherds of Chinese celadon, tentatively dated to the sixteenth century.

Additional surveying of surrounding bluffs and hillsides revealed evidence of occupation during the local Neolithic period, although dating was not possible.

The main excavation took place on a mound in a pen containing llamas, part of the introduced wildlife on the island. The site was first identified from potsherds collected by Group member Carolyn Lehmann in May 1991.

The mound with evidence of plaster and of the lines of walls visible on the surface, proved to cover a building surrounded by a courtyard. In antiquity, the walls had all collapsed neatly outwards, still showing the courses of stone of which they were built. Walls and floors were finely plastered, while the roof of the building had evidently been of wood or similar material, which had been destroyed by fire. Seven similar mounds lie nearby, one of which will be examined in the 1994 season.

Not far away, a much larger mound, covering an area of several thousand square metres, was sampled, following the discovery on the surface in 1992 of finely-worked plaster, (see **TRIBULUS Vol 2.2**, October 1992). Remains of walls and floors of what was evidently an extensive settlement were located, probably the main settlement in the area.

Preliminary dating of the pottery found both in the courtyard house and on the village site suggests a dating from late Sassanian times until the Omayyad period. No other sites from the same period were previously known from anywhere else in the Emirates nearer than Jumeirah in Dubai, over 400 kilometres east of Sir Bani Yas, although the 1993 Survey produced surface evidence of possible contemporaneous occupation on the island of North Yasat, south west of Sir Bani Yas.

Taken together, the Sir Bani Yas and Yasat sites suggest the presence of a sophisticated series of island settlements in the west of the southern Gulf.

The importance of the discoveries is underlined by the fact that nothing was previously suspected or reported, of any important settlements in the area apart from the well-known pearling centre on Dalma.

In its first two years of work, the Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey has made substantial discoveries that are beginning to change the understanding of the history of this region. According to Survey Director Geoffrey King, "Before we started our work, no-one had any idea that there was such a wealth of archaeology on the islands and along the coast of the Western Region. It was virtually a blank on the map of the history of the Gulf. As we begin to fill in those blanks, we can see that the people of the region have been playing an important role in the region for many thousands of years."

Besides the support of the Survey's Patron, the 1993 work was sponsored by Emirates Airlines and by Group Corporate member the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company, ADNOC, with additional logistical support being provided by Corporate member the Abu Dhabi Company for Onshore Oil Operations, ADCO, and ICL.

Further excavations, and survey work along the coast are being planned for the 1994 season.

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