

# A site from the early first millennium AD at Ra's Bilyaryar, Abu Dhabi, U.A.E.

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## **Introduction**

During preliminary surveys of parts of the coastline of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi since 1993 as part of the work of the Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey (ADIAS) (1), several visits have been made to the headland of Ra' Bilyaryar in the Sheleala area, approximately 30 km northeast of the island-city of Abu Dhabi (2). Despite extensive evidence of vehicular and other disturbance, an archaeological site has been identified on this headland, with pottery of early first-millennium AD date, comparable with ceramics known from the extensive coastal site of ed-Dur in the Emirate of Umm al-Qaiwain and the inland site of Mileiha, in the Emirate of Sharjah. Ra's Bilyaryar is the first known site from the coastline of Abu Dhabi to have produced evidence of early first-millennium AD occupation. There are, however, several sites of similar date on islands off the coast of the Western Region of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi (3).

## **Site description**

Ra's Bilyaryar is located at approximately 24°40' N and 34°40' E, and is comprised of

raised carbonate beach rock, rising 1.5 to 2 m above current high tide mark, and shelving gently downwards towards the east (inland). At the western end of the headland are buildings belonging to Sheikh Mubarak bin Mohammed Al Nahayan and his family. To the northeast a track runs along the edge of the coast, a metre or so above high tide mark. A few metres past the end of a helipad and adjacent introduced gravel, another track turns inland, to meet a third one running diagonally, approximately southwest-northeast, to join the track along the coast. The main site lies in relatively undisturbed ground enclosed by these tracks, although some sherds have also been recovered from more disturbed land beyond, to the west.

## **Methodology**

Following the discovery of the site in 1993, when extensive vehicular and other disturbance was visible, we were advised that further disturbance to the headland was likely. Since there was no surface evidence of structures, all visible potsherds were collected by the ADIAS team during a short visit in February 1995. The purpose was to

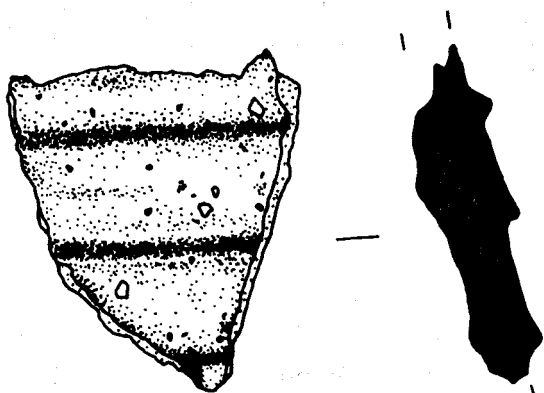


Fig. 1.  
Type C body sherd from Ra's Bilyaryar.

rescue all remaining archaeological evidence, rather than to carry out a detailed study of the already disturbed site. The main concentration of sherds was located in an area approximately 50×50 m, stretching back from the coastline. Once collected, these were then divided into two categories, those from land that was relatively undisturbed, and those from more disturbed land. There was no difference in the pottery from the two areas.

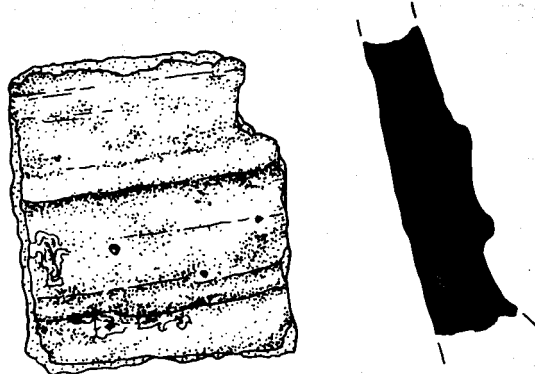


Fig. 2.  
Type C body sherd from Ra's Bilyaryar.

### Pottery

A little over 100 sherds were collected from the surface of the site during the February 1995 visit. Others noted during a November 1995 visit, which had presumably become exposed as a result of deflation, were left *in situ*, and were examined visually by Professor Ernie Haerinck (University of Ghent). Three main types of ware were noted: A, a coarse and fragile light buff ware; B, a coarse red ware; and C, a thick black-fired

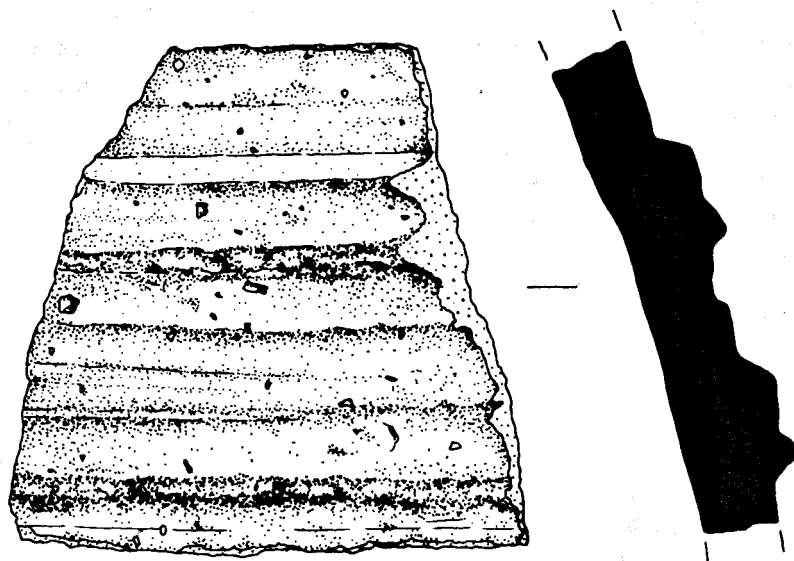


Fig. 3.  
Type C body sherd from Ra's Bilyaryar.

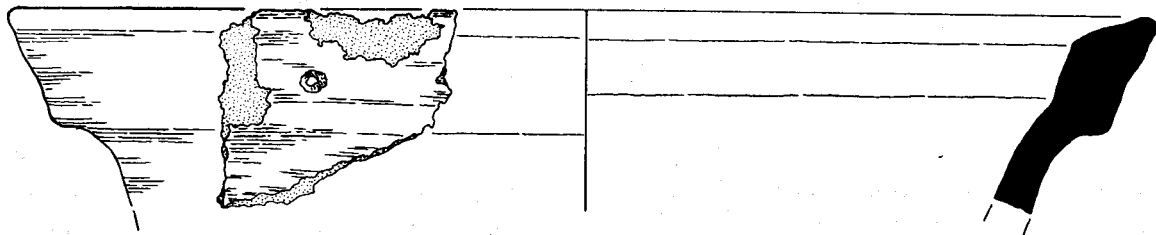


Fig. 4.  
Type C rim (dia. 31 cm) from Ra's Bilyaryar.

earthenware with white inclusions (Figs 1–4). Types A and B were also noted during a survey in February 1995 of a range of sand dunes that commence about 1 km inland from Ra's Bilyaryar and run northeast. Type A is said by local citizens to have been imported until a few decades ago, probably from Bahrain or Kuwait. Type B is comparable to Late Islamic wares of the Julfar horizon known widely throughout the Emirates and dated from roughly the sixteenth century onwards.

Type C is coarse and is characterised by thick ridges on the neck and incised markings. It appears to be related to the tradition of *céramique noire épaisse* (thick black ware) found in abundance from the coastal site of ed-Dur in Umm al Qaiwain and inland at Mileiha, where such vessels have been dated to the first and possibly the beginning of the second century AD, or Mleiha Period IIIB (second century BC to fourth century AD) (4). Examples have also been found at Khatt (5). This ware was used for the manufacture of heavy storage vessels. In studies of diagnostic sherds from the ed-Dur excavations, this pottery represented 17% of the total collection, and is thought to have been of local manufacture (6).

### Discussion

Ra's Bilyaryar is the first known site from the first millennium AD on the coastline of

the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, with no other sites published from the coast of the U.A.E. nearer than Al-Jumayra (Jumeirah) in Dubai over 100 km to the northeast. At Al-Jumayra, however, none of the ceramics found pre-date the Abbasid period (7). More relevant are parallels with sites identified by ADIAS on the islands of Ghagha', al-Ufzai'yya and the Yasats (Yasat al-Ulya and Yasat al-Sufila) in the extreme west of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, where ceramics with parallels to ed-Dur types have been noted by Dr. C. Tonghini (8). Other parallels have also been noted with pottery from the island of Qarnein, 140 km northwest of Abu Dhabi, and approximately 80 km offshore (9). Further evidence of early first-millennium AD occupation in coastal Abu Dhabi has subsequently been found by ADIAS at Abu Dhabi International Airport, approximately 28 km south of Ra's Bilyaryar, and 8 km inland on the edge of the coastal *sabkha* salt flats. Although the sherds from the airport included wares with parallels at ed-Dur (10), the heavy black ridged ware was not present.

This group of ceramics belongs to a period which was until recently unknown in the archaeological chronology of Abu Dhabi, and further work is required to assess the relationship between more substantial sites, such as those on Ghagha' and the Yasats and those of a more ephemeral nature, such as the sites at Ra's Bilyaryar, Abu Dhabi International Airport and

Qarnein. The sherds from Ra's Bilyaryar represent the remains of several large storage jars and may be interpreted as indicating seasonal evidence of occupation, perhaps in association with fishing activity of the type which continued to take place at Ra's Bilyaryar in the Late Islamic period until very recently. Evaluation of the function of the site requires an assessment of local geomorphology at the beginning of the first millennium AD. It has been suggested from studies in the Sharjah area that at around 500 AD sea levels may have been as much as 80 cm higher than at present (11), suggesting that Ra's Bilyaryar would have been a small rocky outcrop rising from the shallow sea. The *sabkha* salt flats between Ra's Bilyaryar and the higher terrain inland would probably have been subject to frequent inundation, at least during extremely high tides. Other studies, however, have suggested that 'after c. 900 BC, sea-level in the Gulf sank to almost one metre below levels prevailing during the Hellenistic, Parthian and Sasanian periods, rising to reach a level equal to our own sometime before AD 1000', suggesting that levels may have been lower at the time Ra's Bilyaryar was occupied (12). At high tide today, the headland can only be approached, with difficulty, by shallow draught craft, while at low tide the water recedes by nearly a kilometre. During periods of lower sea levels, Ra's Bilyaryar would have been more easily approached by land. As elsewhere on the southern coast of the Arabian Gulf, a more precise understanding of sea-level fluctuations in the Holocene is required before the issue can be properly understood.

The coast and islands immediately northeast of Abu Dhabi city have so far been little surveyed. Preliminary work has been undertaken by ADIAS on the islands of al-Fahid and al-Jubayl (13) and in the Ras Sadr area, 9 km northeast of Ra's Bilya-

ryar (14), and excavations, mapping and field surveys have been carried out on Jazirat Balghelam (15). Thus far, no evidence of early first-millennium AD occupation has been identified among ceramics collected from any of these locations. However, further work and a better understanding of the ceramic sequence in coastal areas of Abu Dhabi may yet identify additional sites from the early first millennium AD.

### Acknowledgements

The Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey acknowledges, with thanks, the permission granted by Sheikh Nahayan bin Mubarak Al Nahayan for visits to be made to his family property at Ra's Bilyaryar, and for agreeing to the publication of the results. ADIAS recalls with appreciation the fact that it owes its existence to initiatives taken by him in 1991. The authors are grateful to ADIAS ceramic experts B. de Cardi OBE FSA, and Dr. C. Tonghini (University of Florence), for confirming the preliminary identification of the pottery, and to Professor Ernie Haerinck (University of Ghent) for examination of other sherds during a November 1995 site visit. We also thank J. Czastka for assistance on earlier site visits and for help on an early draft of this note. Drawings of the ceramics were made by Arleen Edwards in Abu Dhabi.

### References

1. The Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey was established in 1992 by U.A.E. President HH Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahayan, and operates under the patronage of Lt.-Gen. Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahayan. Its Director is Dr. G. R. D. King, Department of Art and Archaeology, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London; its Co-ordinator in Abu Dhabi is Peter Hellyer.
2. The Ra's Bilyaryar site is owned by the family of Sheikh Mubarak bin Mohammed Al Nahayan, whose son, Sheikh Nahayan bin Mubarak, facilitated the visits. The site was first identified by P. Hellyer in May 1993. Further visits were made in November 1994 and February 1995, together with J. Czastka, and in November 1995, with Professor Ernie Haerinck, Department of Near Eastern Ar-

- chaeology, University of Ghent. A further visit was made in April 1998.
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