Reviews and Publications


The afflaj (Pl. afflaj) irrigation system is encountered all over the Oman peninsula but no comprehensive and detailed monograph of the systems within the UAE has been published hitherto. Dr Walid al-Tikriti’s contribution to our knowledge of these irrigation systems is therefore extremely welcome and has brought together the results of his research over nearly three decades on the afflaj systems of the Emirates.

He provides an account of the environment in which the use of afflaj developed for the exploitation of the limited water resources available in this arid country. These channels, both on the surface and tunnelled underground, allowed the oases of the Emirates and Oman to develop an irrigation system that has permitted sustained agriculture from the Bronze Age through the Iron Age down to the pre-oil period. In a map, Dr al-Tikriti shows the principal groupings of afflaj in the UAE, principally in the area of al-Hili, Al Ain in Abu Dhabi, on the western slopes of the Jabal Hajar in Sharjah and on the east side of the same mountain range in Fujairah. As a mild criticism, one hopes that a future edition might provide a more refined location map of these afflaj, and this point can, perhaps, be addressed in future editions of this important book. The sheer number of UAE afflaj that have been discovered is impressive and it would be an interesting exercise to expand Dr al-Tikriti’s mapping to encompass the afflaj of Oman as well, for the cumulative list would probably be quite formidable.

Dr al-Tikriti has also provided a map of the sites which were in use in the Iron Age when afflaj construction seems to have been especially extensive in the main areas with agricultural potential. It would be interesting also to see the distribution of afflaj in the area in the Islamic period, although distinguishing early and later Islamic examples inevitably presents problems of dating. Many of these Islamic irrigation systems continued in use up until the pre-modern period and were regularly cleaned out, thereby interfering with the stratigraphic accumulation that might have allowed dating. By contrast, the Iron Age afflaj have long-since fallen out of use and, sealed with later soil deposits, give a better chance of establishing dates.

The afflaj at Hili 2 and Hili 15 are especially interesting with the results of Dr al-Tikriti’s excavation showing the structure of afflaj channel system junction points as they intersect with other channels. These two sites are both dated to the Iron Age. Related to these afflaj systems at Hili and the agricultural regime that they supported is a very large structure, a large hisn excavated by Dr R. Boucherlat and whose presence puts the afflaj of Hili into a broader Iron Age settlement context.

Apart from the sites at Hili, Dr Tikriti also records his excavations at the Bida’ Bint Sa’ud afflaj system, 14 kms from Hili. The archaeological importance of this area had initially been recognised by Dr Karen Frifelt and the investigation of the site was continued subsequently by Dr al-Tikriti who has conducted extensive excavations there. In the neighbourhood of Bronze Age and Iron Age tombs, he found a remarkable afflaj with a well-preserved system of steps for descending to the afflaj channel. There was also a well-defined building of considerable size that he termed Baat al-afflaj from which Iron Age pottery was recovered.

Aflaj’ at Al Ain/al-Buraimi of the early Islamic period which Dr al-Tikriti records correspond well with the early Islamic sources which show that this oasis, under the name al-Tuwarm, appears to have been one of the region’s most important centres. A remarkably well-preserved stone-vaulted afflaj found in the city of Al Ain itself is of early Islamic date. Its deep channel (al-qanat al-jawfiya) had over 3 m. of deposit which produced the typical blue glazed sherds of a type encountered at many other early Islamic sites in the UAE and the Gulf region generally. Also pointing to an early Islamic date are the results of C14 analysis of samples recovered during excavation from this afflaj. These produced dates of ca 670 AD and ca 820 AD (+/-25 years in each case), fitting well with the presence of blue-glazed early Islamic pottery.

Near to the Al Ain afflaj was another very important
discovery, a mosque built of mud brick, whose origins also appears to be early Islamic. This is a discovery of note for we have virtually no record of early Islamic architecture in the Emirates. The presence of a mihrāb niche suggests a post-early 8th C. date, corresponding well with the presence of early Islamic pottery. Broader questions that are raised by these UAE afilāj include their relationship with the far better known Iranian tradition, a matter discussed at some length by the author. He also notes the important work of Dr Abdullah al-Nasif of King Saud University, Riyadh who has addressed the issue of irrigation systems in al-Ulā in the Hijāz. Dr al-Nasif has raised the interesting social and economic issue of access to water in western Arabian irrigation systems and individual farmers’ time-access to the water-flow from the al-Ulā channels. The matter of time/water-flow access allowed to the owners of land is a question of relevance to the UAE and Omani falaj systems as well. In the light of Dr al-Tikriti’s work, it would be of interest to expand studies of afilāj to Oman, where those around Sohar have been recorded in detail but not so far to lesser known sites. In addition, it would be interesting in the light of Dr al-Tikriti’s work to reconsider the irrigation channels in southern central Saudi Arabia at Laylā (in the district appropriately known as Aflaj) to estimate to what degree they relate to those of the UAE. This is an elegantly designed book and it is desirable that a study of a subject so important for the history of settlement in the UAE should be published in Arabic: with few exceptions, there is little written in Arabic and thereby readily accessible to nationals and especially to students of history and archaeology in the UAE. It is important that such up to date studies should be made available to the national readership. Having said that, it is to be hoped that Al-Aflaj will, one day, be translated into a European language to make this important research accessible to the non-Arabic speaking public.

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Emirates Bird Report No. 20 is a catch-up volume that summarises UAE bird records on a species-by-species basis for 1995-2000 and brings this formerly annual series more nearly up to date. For rare bird reports, the volume is current through summer 2003. This is especially important because the past several years have brought us a wealth of new species with each migration.

Also included are written reports of the first sightings of a number of species, a graphic index of monthly sightings (a picture is worth a thousand words), occasional graphs of comparative figures from year to year, and the UAE results of the Asian Waterfowl Census of conducted annually in the UAE’s wetlands from 1996 through 2000. At the back of the main list are introduced species and escapees, many of which continue to survive, if not thrive, in local parks and landscaped grounds, some to a greater extent than indicated by the records.

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For those whose principal interest is in ticking off new species on their life lists, this volume will alert you to what has been seen and where. But there is greater virtue in a comprehensive publication of data for several years, in that it has the potential to elucidate trends and patterns that may be of interest to students of ecology, behavior, migration patterns and timing, and biogeography. In many instances the authors have commented on apparent trends, especially population or range expansion or decline. It is useful, nevertheless, to be aware of various factors that may influence the generalisations that come out of records such as these, but that are not expressly acknowledged in the volume itself. These include, among others, (i) the increase over time in the number of observers reporting to the Emirates Bird Records Committee, fuelled in part by regular visits by foreign birdwatchers and foreign commercial birdwatching tours; (ii) the influence of several years of relative drought on species numbers and diversity in wild areas (affecting 1998-2000); (iii) a continuing dearth of reports from mountain areas, and perhaps even a decline in the number of such reports (with the result that Jebel Haft and Qarn Nazwa(1) are among the most frequently mentioned mountain sites); and finally (iv) the fall-off in the number of observers each summer (which, as much as anything, may account for the absence of summer sightings of two admittedly “elusive” or scarce resident birds that are restricted to “wild” areas, the Long-Billed Pipit and Desert Eagle Owl). The individual records often make surprisingly interesting reading for both birdwatchers and general naturalists. Thus, one can learn that three barn owls were seen chasing a cat at a UAO roundabout, an hour after sunset one September. Or that House Crows are limited to coastal towns and have yet to gain a foothold in Abu Dhabi, being seen there only in single digits through 2000. Among the many items that were news to this reviewer was the regular occurrence of the Hoopoe Lark at coastal sites, e.g., Khor Dubai, Khor Al-Beidah, Dreamland beach and Khor Kalba. There is even fuel for the emotions, from frustration to pride: I have yet to pick out the current, long-staying Red-Knobbed Coot at the Wimpsey Pits, but, given the excitement that attends each Purple Gallinule, I was pleased to learn that the one I saw at Ramtha Wetlands in 1995 was only the UAE’s fourth. Only occasionally do the editors seem to forget the nature of the underlying data, as when they remark on the Desert Eagle Owl that “most records [are] from Qarn Nazwa”, without acknowledging that many of these sightings are likely to be of the very same individuals resident at this small site. Other comments may be excessively diplomatic: the Brown-Necked Raven is said to be “declining due to disturbance and development of desert areas” whereas the [r]eson for decline at its Jebel Haft stronghold is unknown.”

The volume does not include an index, so it is helpful for readers to know the “birdwatcher’s alphabet” – the standard taxonomic order for listing bird species – but for those who do not, the table of monthly sightings serves