

# A Pre-Islamic Christian site on Sir Bani Yas

by Dr. G.R.D. King and Peter Hellyer

Between late February and mid-April 1994, the third season of work by the Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey Project was undertaken, under the patronage of UAE Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al Nahyan. During the course of the season, excavations continued on the 'Ubaid site on the island of Dalma, while further surveying was also undertaken on the Late Stone Age site on the island of Merawah, as well as on a number of smaller islands in the Western Region of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, including Ghaghah and Al F'zaiyyah, and at Mantakha As'sirra, near Medinat Zayed, on the mainland, (1).

A second season of excavations was also undertaken on sites on the island of Sir Bani Yas, first identified during a preliminary 1992 survey season, and tentatively dated to a period from the Fifth to Eighth Centuries AD.

The Survey Project was established in 1991 on the instructions of UAE President Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al Nahyan. It is charged with research into the archaeology of the coast and offshore islands in the Western Region of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi.

In 1992, preliminary survey work was carried out on the islands of Dalma, Sir Bani Yas and Merawah.

Excavation commenced in 1993 on Sir Bani Yas on a courtyard building, numbered as Site 3.1 during the 1992 survey, while trial trenches were dug on a complex of walls in the Al Khor area on the east of the island, Site 9.1. Further excavation was undertaken on the latter site during the 1994 season. One unexpected result was the discovery of conclusive evidence of the presence of a Christian community on the island at the time of the coming of Islam.

The excavations, conducted by Field Director J. Elders, assisted by S. Garfy, M. Beech and K. Gundel, focussed on the area where the trial trenches in 1993 had demonstrated the extensive preservation of walls and plastered floors below the surface, and had given some idea of the density of the settlement and its limits, covering an area of at least 200 m by 200 m.

The results of the trial trenches suggested that we were dealing with a large village or small town, which we dated provisionally to around the Fifth to Eighth Century AD on the basis of the pottery recovered. In the light of those results, efforts on Sir Bani Yas during the 1994 spring season were concentrated on Site 9.1, in order to clarify the nature of the buildings, to retrieve dating material, and establish the plan of the settlement.

In addition, it was also decided to open two further sites, described as 2.1 and 2.2 during the 1992 survey, on a plateau to the west of the main site, to identify their purpose, ground-plans, dating and their relationship, if any, to Sites 3.1 (the courtyard house excavated in 1993) and 9.1.

## Site 9.1

The structures excavated at site 9.1 proved to be very well preserved, with the architectural remains exposed providing a coherent and clear plan of a total of fifteen rooms and two courtyards, all generally in an excellent state of preservation. A number of doorways were identified, and we noted the same fine plaster finish for walls and floors to which we had become accustomed in

كشفت الحفريات التي قام بها مشروع البحث عن الآثار في جزر أبوظبي في ربيع ١٩٩٤م عن وجود مستوطن في صير بني ياس يرجع تاريخه للفترة قبل الإسلام. وتشير القطع المكسوة بالملصقات التي وجدت في هذا المكان، إلى أن سكانها مسيحيون، وتعتبر هذه هي المرة الأولى لاكتشاف دليل وجود المسيحية قبل الإسلام في دولة الإمارات العربية المتحدة.

1993 during the excavation of the courtyard house at Site 3.1.

Rooms built along the east and north side of the larger courtyard were cleared down to their fine plaster floors, but sand covering the south side of the courtyard will not be removed until the forthcoming 1995 season. Our plan then is to excavate along the south and west side of the courtyard, to determine whether there are other rooms belonging to the same complex.

A smaller secondary courtyard was found on the north side of the excavated rooms. This secondary courtyard seems to have been a functional area, with a trough for animals on its north side. The courtyard was littered with shells and fish-bones, which provided environmental samples providing information on diet. Close by was a small room identified by the presence of a 'tannur,' or bread oven, in a kitchen, which was still richer in bones, shells and other environmental material and dietary evidence.

Identification of the environmental material is being undertaken with the assistance of the University of London, UK, and of the National Avian Research Centre in Abu Dhabi, to provide a better understanding of the diet available to the people of the settlement.

Apart from the kitchen, other rooms excavated were consistently clean. This was also a sustained characteristic of the building excavated at Site 3.1 in 1993. Only a limited amount of pottery was found, but that which was discovered conformed to the same horizon, (ca. 5th - 8th Century AD), to which all other finds to date have belonged. (2). A single glazed vessel and an unglazed vessel was also commonly found in association with each room. Further study of the ceramics still has to be undertaken.

## Re-occupation

Two periods of occupation were identified in the secondary, northern courtyard, the first associated with the initial foundation of the structure, the second associated with a re-occupation when the structure had suffered damage and people squatted in the ruins. Preliminary investigation suggests that the re-occupation, probably of relatively short duration, occurred not long after the original structures were abandoned or destroyed.

## Decorative Plaster

Among rubble on the east side of the large courtyard, a fine moulded plaster Nestorian Christian cross in raised relief was excavated. A second fragment of decorative plaster was found nearby, with smaller crosses on a geometric background, accompanied by foliage volutes. A third plaster fragment had blind merlons in relief. The second of these plaster fragments is very similar to a fine decorative vine scroll found during the survey at

Site 9.1 in 1992, (published in *Tribulus* Vol 2.2. P. 27).

These finds also relate to a grape cluster in relief in plaster excavated from one of the trial trenches at Site 9.1 in 1993.

Provisionally, all these decorative motifs in plaster may be associated with doorways, and we suggest that they may have been attached to doorframes and lintels.

The structure to which this plaster belongs has not yet been excavated, and will be addressed in 1995. The plaster was found amongst rubble which appeared to have fallen from a wall in the unexcavated structure. Until further excavation is carried out, it is not possible to assess accurately the role of the decorative plaster and the courtyard building excavated during the 1994 season.

The discovery of Christian crosses, however, obviously has a major impact on our understanding of the building or buildings to which they relate. It seems extremely unlikely that they belonged to an ordinary domestic structure. Rather, the presence of crosses suggests the presence of a Christian chapel, church or possibly a more extensive monastic structure at Site 9.1 in the 5th-8th Century period. These points remain to be considered in forthcoming seasons of excavation.

At present, it suffices to comment that the 5th-8th Century AD date of the ceramics found on the site fits well with the suggestion of a Christian presence in the area.

There is textual and archaeological evidence of the presence of the Nestorian Christian Church in the Northern Arabian peninsula, Mesopotamia and Iran during this period. The islands of the Western Region of Abu Dhabi, like Sir Bani Yas, lay within or close to both

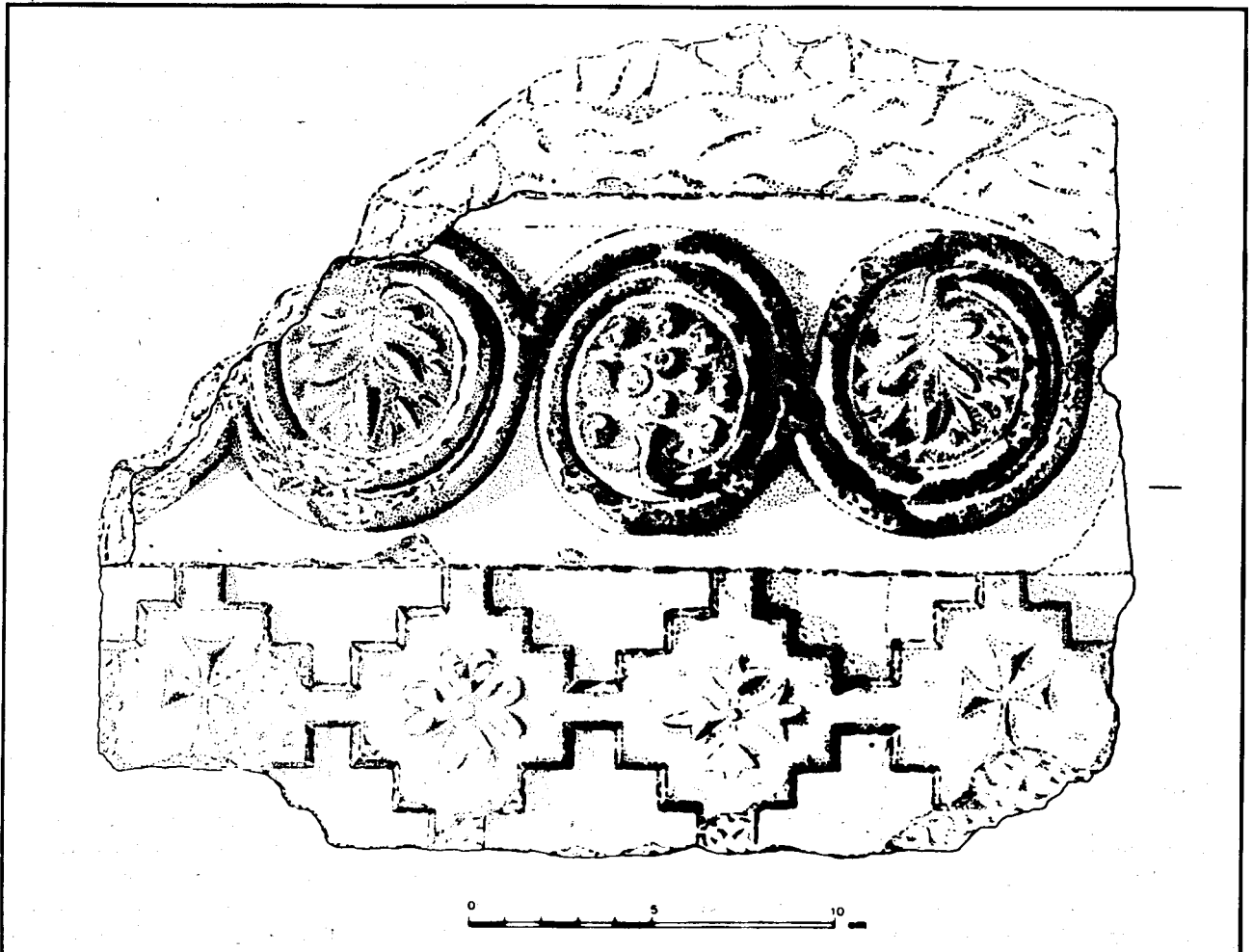
the Nestorian dioceses of Beit Qatraye covering North Eastern and Eastern Arabia, including Qatar, and Beit Mazunaye, (covering Oman and much of the Emirates). The Sir Bani Yas discovery can also be related to the discovery of a church with a fine cross at Failaka, in Kuwait, in 1990 by Vincent Bernard and J.F. Salles. Their stucco crosses are dated to the Fifth-Sixth Centuries AD. The discovery of two churches and crosses at Al Jubail and Thaj in eastern Saudi Arabia has also recently been announced (3), which are also related to the same Nestorian tradition.

The presence of Nestorian bishoprics has also long been known at Samahij (Masmahig) on Bahrain, and at Darin, on Tarut, eastern Saudi Arabia.

Although other Christian churches are known to have established a presence in Arabia in the early centuries of the Christian era, (4), from the design of the decorated plaster, including the crosses, the Christian community responsible for them was probably of the Nestorian Church, which was effectively the native church of the Arabs of Iraq and eastern and central Arabia before the coming of Islam. The most famous adherents of the Nestorian Church in the area were the Bani Lakhmid Arab Kings of Al Hirah, predecessors of the Al Kinda.

The purpose of the structures on the site has yet to be properly understood, and must await further excavation, while the relationship between the courtyard house excavated in 1993, Site 3.1, and similar structures nearby, to the main settlement equally has yet to be determined. Also unclear is the relationship, if any, with the structure excavated at Site 2.1 during the 1994 season.

At Site 2.1, the principal discovery was a *falaj* running



A drawing of one of the Nestorian plaster fragments found on Sir Bani Yas

for a distance of over 12 metres, and consisting of a rectangular stone channel faced with white plaster. It was fed from a rectangular tank, or possibly a well, on higher ground at the head of the *falaj*. The sand below the surface was still damp, which may indicate the presence of a well or tank. The point must be investigated by further excavation.

If it proves to be a well, as we currently suspect, it would be the first ancient water source that we have so far identified on Sir Bani Yas. The apparent lack of a natural water source on the island has thus far been one of the most mystifying problems encountered regarding the Sir Bani Yas sites.

A few metres to the north west of Site 2.1, a second site, 2.2, was also cleared during the 1994 season. It proved to be a large rectangular structure, with floors and walls faced with the same plaster as buildings at Sites 9.1 and 3.1, with a large doorway. The building, apparently partly robbed in antiquity, appears to be larger than the small rooms adjoining the courtyard complex at Site 9.1, and it may have had a communal or ceremonial function of some kind. Nearby scatters of potsherds can be dated to the same Fifth-Eighth Century AD period as other sites in the area, suggesting that the building is of contemporary with Sites 3.1 and 9.1, although this point requires further elucidation.

There are extant textual references to the presence of Christians in Oman, and possibly at Dibba, in the northern Emirates, in the pre-Islamic period, and through until the Seventh Century AD. There is also an uncorroborated tradition among a section of the Manasir tribe, of Western Abu Dhabi, that some of the tribe, at least, were Christians prior to the coming of Islam (5). The Sir Bani Yas discovery, however, represents the first archaeological evidence of the presence of Christians in the Emirates during the period preceding the coming of Islam.

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eral of whom are also Corporate members of the Emirates Natural History Group, including the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company, ADNOC, Emirates Airlines, the Abu Dhabi Company for Onshore Oil Operations, ADCO, British Petroleum, the Abu Dhabi Petroleum Ports Operating Company, ADPPOC, ADDCAP, computer firm ICL, Union National Bank, Emirates Insurance Company, Dhabi Contracting, New Medical Centre, Jashanmalls and Emirates PhotoMarketing, (Kodak). The spring 1994 season was organised with the support and encouragement of Mohammed Al Bowardi, the Manager of the Office of Lieutenant General Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed. To all of them, we are most grateful.

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## Results of the 1994 archaeological season in Mileiha

by Dr. Michel Mouton

During March and April of 1994, the French Archaeological mission in Sharjah continued its work in the Mileiha area. The mission's research programme is under the provision of the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, affiliated with the U.R.A. 913 of the CNRS, and is undertaken in collaboration with the University of Lyon 2, and the Department of Antiquities and Heritage of Sharjah. The team consisted of researchers from the CNRS, the Maison de l'Orient in Lyon, the Laboratory of Geochemistry and Petrography in Nancy, the Antiquities Service of Poland, as well as graduate students from various countries (France, Canada, the U.K., and Spain). Accommodation in Sharjah was provided by the Department of Antiquities and Heritage. The team also received sponsorship from the companies TOTAL and SUBTEC.

The objectives of the 1994 season were to continue the excavation of the Mileiha fort, dating to the first centuries of the Christian era, to study an area inhabited in the latest period of occupation, and to excavate and

في أوائل عام ١٩٩٤ استكملت بعثة الآثار الفرنسية عملها في إمارة الشارقة للكشف عن حصون قديمة عمرها حوالي ٢٠٠٠ سنة في منطقة مليحة بالقرب من الزيد والتي تشير إلى دلائل وجود قوة سياسية عظيمة في المنطقة من السنة الأولى من الحقبة الأولى للمسيحية.

study several metallurgical workshops. A sounding was also carried out on a building previously excavated by the Iraqi expedition in 1973 to verify the date and function of the structure. A specialist in Antique Arabian coinage (Olivier Callot, CNRS Lyon) studied the Sharjah Museum coin collection, and coins found in the Mileiha excavations. A zoologist (Marjan Mashkour-Pelle; Museum of Natural History, Paris) sampled the microfauna, and studied the camel burials excavated in Mileiha by Dr Sabah Jassem, archaeologist for the Department of Antiquities and Heritage of Sharjah.

#### The fort

Built of mudbrick, the Mileiha fort is a large structure (55 metres long), that has been worked on since 1992. It is bisected by the Dhaid-Al Madam road, and until last year only the western half of the building had been excavated. This year, the eastern half of the fort was