

A Preliminary Note on Ceramics from the island of Qarnein

by Geoffrey King and Peter Hellyer

Introduction

From 1989 onwards a number of visits have been paid to the island of Qarnein, approximately 130 km north west of Abu Dhabi, for the purpose of studying the history and natural history of the island, particularly its ornithology. The first of these study visits, in 1989, was undertaken by a small party from the Emirates Natural History Group, among whom was PH, who subsequently edited a preliminary report which appeared in the predecessor of *Tribulus*, the thrice-yearly Bulletin of the Emirates Natural History Group (1). During the course of this visit and a number of subsequent visits, undertaken primarily by Captain Maarten Verhage, Simon Aspinall and PH, a number of archaeological sites were identified on the western side of the island, including an open mosque, a rectangular hearth and scatters of pottery. These were briefly commented upon in an earlier report to Sheikh Hamdan bin Zayed Al Nahyan (2), with the permission of whom all the visits to the island were undertaken.

In his capacity as Co-ordinator of the Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey, ADIAS (3), PH recognised upon re-examining photographs of some of the pottery located but not collected during previous visits that some might be of a date earlier than the Late Islamic period (ca. 16th Century AD onwards) to which much of the pottery had been provisionally ascribed.

On July 2-4 1997, following consultation with GRDK, then on a short visit to Abu Dhabi, Simon Aspinall and Captain Maarten Verhage made a further visit to the island at the invitation of Sheikh Hamdan. During this visit,

تقدم الورقة تقريراً عن الفخاريات بجزيرة القرنين منذ القرن الأول بعد الميلاد.

a number of potsherds were collected and brought to Abu Dhabi for examination and preliminary identification by GRDK.

Methodology

In general, the methodology adopted by ADIAS is to leave artefacts, including ceramics, *in situ* prior to detailed surface survey and, where appropriate, excavation, unless there is perceived to be a need for rescue archaeology to be undertaken. On this occasion, however, the approach was adopted of collecting ceramics from a number of distinct sites on the western coast of the island, bagging them separately. This was justified on the basis that any accidental destruction of the sites, or their covering by vegetation or wind-blown sand (which is already taking place) would have left us with no knowledge of the dating of these ceramics, which previous preliminary fieldwork, both on Qarnein and elsewhere, had led us to suspect might be of particular interest.

As no archaeologist with appropriate ceramics experience has yet been able to visit Qarnein, it was, therefore, decided to undertake a selective collection of material for examination in Abu Dhabi.

Co-ordinates of the areas from where collections were made were taken with a Garmin Global Positioning System, GPS.



Pottery from Qarnein, probably from the early centuries of the First Millennium AD.

Photo by Nissar Hoath

The total number of sherds retrieved was 57. The ceramics are currently in storage in the office of Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Patron of ADIAS. They were examined briefly by GRDK in Abu Dhabi between July 5-6 1997.

Description

The overwhelming majority (in excess of 85 per cent) of the ceramics are heavy, well-levigated reddish-brown ware, with ribbing. Most were body sherds. They are of a range familiar from other sites located by the Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey on the islands and coast of Abu Dhabi, and are dated to the early centuries of the First Millennium AD. They are probably to be assigned to c. 3rd/4th C. AD., although this dating may well be further refined in the future.

Ceramics of this period have previously been identified by ADIAS at Ghagha', al-Ufzai'iya and Yasat al-Ulya' and Yasat al-Sufila', all islands in the extreme west of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi (4) and also at Ra's Bilyaryar, on the mainland near Sheleala, north-east of Abu Dhabi (5). A limited number of ceramics have also been retrieved from a site at Abu Dhabi International Airport which are attributed to the early First Millennium AD (6).

No other sites from the same period have been published from anywhere on the coast or islands of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, although there are known parallels in the northern United Arab Emirates, in particular at the coastal settlement of Ed-Dur (Ad Door) in Umm Al Qaiwain.

These sites identified by ADIAS vary in nature with those at Ghagha', al-Ufzai'iya and at Yasat al-Ulya' (North Yasat) in differing ways seeming to represent quite extensive settlements. By contrast, that at Abu Dhabi International Airport suggested a transit point or camping ground, rather than a settlement.

The c. 3rd/4th C. AD ceramics from Qarnein that are the subject of this note were recovered from amid scrub behind the beach along the western side of the island. Although in the general area of an Open Mosque (Site Q-2) and a Rectangular Hearth (Site Q-3) mentioned in an earlier report to Sheikh Hamdan (7) (both of possible Late Islamic date), the ceramics did not seem to be associated with any structural remains.

However, without further examination of the locations from where they were collected, it is difficult to draw any firm conclusion about the nature of the sites to which they relate.

This group of ceramics from Qarnein belongs to a period which was until recently unknown in the archaeological chronology of Abu Dhabi. Since the formation of the Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey in 1992, however, ADIAS has identified ceramics and other finds of the period in at least six locations on the islands and coast of Abu Dhabi, of which Qarnein is the latest to be found.

Unlike all the other sites, Qarnein is well offshore. It should be noted, however, that three other offshore islands to the northwest of Abu Dhabi island, Arzanah, Das and Zirku, have been extensively developed as bases for the oil industry in recent years. No archaeological survey was undertaken on these islands prior to development, although a Late Islamic graveyard is known to exist on Das (8) and a Late Islamic shell midden still remained on Arzanah in 1995. No sites of any kind could be identified on Zirku (9). The loss of archaeological

data from these islands, if it existed, adds to the importance of the Qarnein discovery.

Subject to the receipt of approval from Sheikh Hamdan, ADIAS plans more detailed work on Qarnein in a future season to attain a clearer idea of how this early First Millennium AD occupation relates to other contemporary sites on the coast and islands of Abu Dhabi.

Acknowledgement

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3. The Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey, ADIAS, was established on the instructions of His Highness Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, and operates under the patronage of His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. The Director is Dr. G.R.D. King, Pro-Director for Postgraduate Studies of the School of Oriental and African Studies, SOAS, University of London, while its Co-ordinator in Abu Dhabi is Peter Hellyer.
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