



Al-Ankab Fort. Courtesy of Dr Mark Beech.

THE MARVELS OF MILLENNIA

The Emirate of Abu Dhabi is bursting with archaeological wealth. Dr Mark Beech explains the fascinating history of this vast land that stretches from the islands offshore to the desert interior.

The earliest known evidence of human settlement in Abu Dhabi dates back to between 35,000 to 150,000 years ago approximately; a period known as the Middle Palaeolithic or Middle Stone Age. Characteristic stone tools dating to this time have been discovered at Jebel Barakah, located on the coast of the western region of Abu Dhabi.

Between around 9000 and 6000 years ago, during the so-called Holocene Climatic Optimum, the Arabian Peninsula received far more rainfall than today. This was due to the increased northern influence of the Indian monsoon. Lakes dotted the landscape and the communities of the Neolithic period moved around in a seasonal nomadic cycle between the mountains, the coast

and the inland oases. Important settlements from this period have been identified on the islands of Marawah and Dalma, as well as within the desert interior in areas such as Umm Az-Zamul and Liwa.

A characteristic type of ceramics known as Ubaid pottery has been discovered on the islands of Dalma, Marawah and Al-Aryam. This was originally made in southern Iraq between around 5500-3800 BC and clearly shows that there was contact with southern Mesopotamia at that time, or at least with traders in the central Gulf, who were themselves in contact with Ubaid's cultural groups.

Little evidence remains from the fourth millennium BC. Climatic deterioration may have discouraged human settlement and activities at that time in the region. The

subsequent Bronze Age is divided into a number of periods named after important key sites. The Hafit period (3200-2600 BC) is named after the well-built stone tombs present in their hundreds on the slopes of Jebel Hafit, near Al-Ain, and the Hajar Mountains of neighbouring Oman. Some time in the late fourth millennium BC, knowledge of a major technological innovation arrived in the region. This was how to mine and smelt the copper ores found in the Hajar Mountains, and this marked the beginning of the local Bronze Age.

The island of Umm An-Nar gives its name to the chronological period known as Umm An-Nar (2600-2000 BC). A large settlement and a contemporary cemetery with 50 collective graves were discovered there and the port of Umm An-Nar acted as a terminal for copper

exports to Mesopotamia. Evidence of Umm An-Nar civilisation has subsequently been discovered throughout the UAE and northern Oman. The largest Bronze Age complex in the United Arab Emirates is located at Hili, just to the North of Al-Ain. Some sites of this complex have been incorporated into the Hili Archaeological Park, designed to highlight the archaeological sites and make them more accessible to the public. This includes important settlements as well as three tombs inside the park and several others outside.

The term 'Iron Age' (1250-300 BC) is technically a misnomer, as the inhabitants of the UAE continued to use copper rather than switching to the new metal (presumably because of the ready availability of copper in the mountains). The Iron Age witnessed two important developments which dramatically helped to shape the cultural landscapes of Southeast Arabia. These were the invention of the *falaj* system of underground water irrigation channels and the domestication of the camel. *Falaj* technology permitted the extensive watering

of new areas, while the use of camels opened up new transportation and trade networks.

Some of the most important sites from the Sasanian period (300-632 AD) are located on Sir Bani Yas Island. There the pre-Islamic Christian monastery and associated settlement buildings discovered during excavations in the early to mid-1990s provide the only physical evidence yet known in southeastern Arabia of the presence of Christian communities before Islam.

Important Islamic period remains found in Al-Ain include more than 60 forts and historic buildings with associated date palm oasis gardens and *falaj* systems. Buildings from the recent historical period are rare on the coastline and islands of Abu Dhabi. Key sites include the Bayt Al-Muraykhi (a pearl trader's house) and the Al-Dawsari, Al-Muraykhi and Al-Muhannadi mosques, all on Dalma Island. The stone-walled mosques on Liffiya, Marawah and Bu Sharah, as well as a number of stone outline mosques on coastal islands, also form an important architectural group.



Hili Grand Tomb, Al-Ain.



Hafit Tomb at Mezyad, Jebel Hafit.

The Abu Dhabi Timeline

148,000 - 33,000 BC

The Middle Stone Age. Humans settle in Abu Dhabi, as shown by the stone tools found on the Jebel Barakah coast in the western region of Abu Dhabi.

5500-3800 BC

The Neolithic Period. Communities settle on the islands of Marawah and Dalma, as well as at Umm Az-Zamul and Liwa in the desert. Abu Dhabi begins trading with southern Mesopotamia, as shown by the fragments of Ubaid pottery discovered on the islands of Dalma, Marawah and Al-Aryam.

3200-2600 BC

The Hafit Period of The Bronze Age. Hundreds of stone tombs are built on the slopes of Jebel Hafit, near Al-Ain.

2600-2000 BC

The Umm An-Nar Period of The Bronze Age. The island of Umm An-Nar becomes a major settlement, exporting copper to Mesopotamia.

1250-300 BC

The Iron Age sees the invention of the *falaj* irrigation system and the domestication of the camel, which opens up new trading networks.

300-632 AD

The Sasanian Period. A pre-Islamic Christian monastery settlement is built on Sir Bani Yas Island; the only physical evidence in southeastern Arabia of Christian communities existing prior to Islam.

633-Pre-Oil Era

The Islamic Period. Over 60 forts and buildings are constructed in Al-Ain. Pearl trading begins and mosques are built on Dalma Island, Liffiya, Marawah and Bu Sharah.

Archaeological Sites to visit in Abu Dhabi

Al-Ain National Museum
Open Saturday to Thursday 9am-7.30pm,
Fridays 3pm-7.30pm. Closed Mondays.
Tel: +971 (0)37641595

Hili Archaeological Park, Al-Ain
Open Sunday to Thursday 4pm-10 pm,
Fridays 10am-10pm.
Tel: +971 (0)37845542

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