

**SIR BANI YAS &
THE CHURCH OF THE EAST**



Contents

03 FOREWORD

05 THE CHURCH AND MONASTERY OF SIR BANI YAS

12 CHURCH OF THE EAST: THE STORY OF A DISCOVERY

44 BIBLIOGRAPHY

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✪ **OPPOSITE: Stone seal with a palm tree and dates, and a scorpion on its other side, found at the Sir Bani Yas monastery.**





Three stucco fragments from the church. Panels with scrolls containing bunches of grapes and leaves appeared around the exterior of the church.



Foreword

The island of Sir Bani Yas is one of the most cherished treasures of the United Arab Emirates – a place of fascinating natural resources and wildlife that is also of major historical significance for the UAE and beyond. Located off the western coast of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, it was established as a nature reserve in 1977 by the late President of the United Arab Emirates, His Highness Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan.

Over the last twenty five years, the island has attracted increasing attention, at home and overseas, because of the discovery of numerous archaeological sites, dating from the Neolithic period, the Bronze Age and the early and late Islamic periods, covering over 6,000 years of the country's history. Of these, the most important site is a Christian church, monastery and associated settlement that has been dated to the early 7th to mid-8th Centuries CE.

The best-preserved site of its kind in the Arabian Gulf, the church and monastery, which were founded by the ancient Church of the East (or Nestorian Church), are of enormous significance for the history of the UAE and the wider region. They are also particularly important and relevant today, since they provide evidence of the continuation of a spirit of religious tolerance and co-existence in the region after the advent of Islam.

This book tells the story of Sir Bani Yas, shedding light on the Church of the East and the role the monastery formerly played within the region, and also looking at the island's future role in terms of promoting knowledge of our heritage through education and tourism. On Sir Bani Yas, archaeologists, naturalists, geologists and other specialists from many countries, including the UAE, have come together in a spirit of collaboration to make our culture and heritage relevant, meaningful and enjoyable for local residents and foreign visitors alike.

Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan



④ Stucco fragment with cross. This was the first piece with a cross to be found during the excavation.



The Church and Monastery of Sir Bani Yas

The uncovering of a Christian church and monastery on Sir Bani Yas island off the coast of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi in 1994 was a discovery of international importance. Subsequent archaeological surveys and excavations have provided us with a fascinating insight into the Church of the East within the Arabian Gulf. This book highlights some of the important and interesting finds from these excavations as well as the ongoing conservation and management of this site.

GEOGRAPHIC SETTING

The natural island of Sir Bani Yas lies at 24° 20' N, 52° 36' E, 9 km off-shore from Jebel Dhanna and 170 km south-west of Abu Dhabi, the capital of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Sir Bani Yas island spans over 87 km² (34 square miles), with a range of bare salt dome mountains in the central area rising to a height of 148 m. In 1977, the late President of the UAE, His Highness Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, established a wildlife reserve there. Thanks to decades of conservation work and ecological investment, it is now home to thousands of large free-roaming animals and to several million trees and plants. Currently a bird sanctuary and wildlife reserve, Sir Bani Yas showcases its nature to visiting tourists through such activities as adventure safaris, kayaking, mountain biking, archery, hiking and snorkelling. Cultural heritage tours are also on offer to visit the Christian church and monastery discovered on the east side of the island, as well as the remains of al-Zahr village at its northern end, including a charming walled date-palm garden with water

cistern and irrigation system, a well and a dry-stone walled mosque that date from the 18th to the early 20th century.

HISTORICAL SOURCES

Sir Bani Yas has been mentioned in European sources since 1590 when the Venetian jeweller Gasparo Balbi listed 'Sirbeniast' as an island around which pearls were found. It was described in some detail during the 1820s and 1850s by British naval officers surveying the lower Gulf waters for the East India Company. Local tradition has it that salt used to be mined on the island, as was kohl, a powder made from ground antimony ore and used as an eye-cleansing agent. Old maps suggest that there were several settlement areas on the island. Al-Zahr was the fishing and pearling settlement located to the north, the former village of al-Awafi was to the south-west, while the natural harbour area to the south-east was known as al-Dhasr.



SIR BANI YAS

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WORK

The first archaeological expedition to Sir Bani Yas island was conducted in 1975, but the results of that brief visit remain unpublished. Since 1992, Sir Bani Yas has been subject to several archaeological investigations. A systematic survey and excavations by the Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey (ADIAS), which took place between 1992 and 1996, resulted in the discovery of more than 30 sites. The earliest traces of human occupation on Sir Bani Yas date back to around 7000 years ago, with the discovery of small scatters of flint tools from the Late Stone Age or Neolithic period. In addition, evidence of settlement activities during the 3rd millennium BCE Bronze Age is provided by a very well-preserved stone structure, slag indicating metallurgical processing, and the presence of both Umm an-Nar and Barbar pottery sherds.

The most important group of archaeological sites discovered by the ADIAS team was found on the eastern side of Sir Bani Yas in al-Khawr region. It was in that location that the church and monastery were discovered, as well as an associated series of courtyard houses. These sites all dated to the mid-7th to 8th century CE.

The archaeological survey of the island also identified substantial evidence of occupation during the Late Islamic period. Traces of the former al-Zahr village were noted, including the abovementioned walled garden, mosque, three cemeteries, as well as pottery and shell scatters indicating the location of some of the former settlement activity areas. The settlement appears to have been primarily involved in fishing and pearling activities.

Further surveys and mapping have since been undertaken: in 2006-2009, by a team from the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage (ADACH); and, more recently in 2009-2011, by a team working for the Tourism and Development Investment Company (TDIC). Since 2012 all the cultural heritage sites on the island have been managed by the Abu Dhabi Tourism and Culture Authority (TCA Abu Dhabi). Further detailed mapping of all the cultural heritage sites on the island was completed in 2015, with additional archaeological excavations of the Late Islamic period at al-Zahr.

DISCOVERY OF THE CHURCH AND MONASTERY

While the site of the church and monastery was discovered in 1992, during the first campaign of the Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey (ADIAS), it was not immediately identified as a Christian place of worship. At that time, a few fine decorated plaster fragments were found but none had crosses. The site was described as a low flattened occupation mound, approximately 220 m by 160 m, reaching 1.5 to 2 m in height above the surrounding ground surface. It sloped down eastwards from the higher ground to the west. The mound was a mixture of light brown sandy soil with numerous small to medium pieces of stone, mostly grey beach rock. Occasional flint nodules and tile flint were noted. The surface appeared to have been severely disturbed by machinery during preparations for the plantations. Despite disturbance to the surface, a concentration of pottery was found and a block of decorative plaster with vine scrolls in relief was recovered from the surface.

In the following years, 1993-1996, several seasons of excavations were undertaken at the site under the directorship of Geoffrey R.D. King (with Joseph Elders as field director, and the archaeologists Mark Beech and John Martin). These excavations examined the eastern and northern dormitories of the monastery, the church, its possible perimeter wall and the associated courtyard houses (with Salvatore Garfi, Elizabeth Popescu and Jakub Czastka as archaeologists). The first proof for an identification of the structure as a church was found in 1994, when the first plaster crosses emerged. By then it also became apparent from the architectural plan of the site that the structure was indeed a church.

North of the church is a complex of rooms, which have been called the 'dormitories', and north-east is an assemblage of rooms that has been labelled the 'Abbot's house'. These room structures are connected to further architectural installations, such as two platforms and a burial east of the church, with a retaining wall around the whole complex. While the gate to the complex has been located in this eastern area, the exact course of the retaining walls and therefore the size of the courtyard around the church have not yet been fully determined.



MAP OF CHRISTIAN SITES ACROSS THE GULF REGION



The excavation suggested a relative chronology with the church being built in two phases and one later post-church phase of scattered occupation. Within the church the construction of walls in the northern nave and the building of new plastered floors relate to the second construction phase of the finished church with narthex, or antechamber. With the completion of the narthex, the church was made into a tripartite plan; there is no doubt that part of the original intention was to create a classic basilica.

A challenge to the excavation was the lack of a proper stratigraphy, given that little occupational material apart from sand has been found, and archaeological phases could only be distinguished as building phases. In 1995 and 2014, a geophysical survey was conducted at the church site which revealed that further structures are expected west, south-west as well as north of the site. The site had been disturbed by machinery during the planting of trees. The magnetometer survey carried out in 1995 demonstrated that, overall, the monastery enclosure measures about 70 m by 70 m.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL FINDS

The most common finds discovered during the excavation of the Sir Bani Yas church and monastery were pottery sherds, plaster stucco pieces, glass, marine molluscs, fish bones, mammal bones and crabs. Other finds included some bronze fragments (possibly from a lamp) and a small stone stamp seal (with a carving of a palm tree and dates on one side of it, and a scorpion on the other).

A study of the pottery was undertaken by Robert Carter from UCL-Qatar, and of the glass by St Jean Simpson and Ian Freestone from the British Museum. These studies confirmed the chronological dating of the site to the 7th to 8th century CE. A study of the animal bones and marine mollusca from the site by Mark Beech from TCA Abu Dhabi revealed that the inhabitants had a wide-ranging diet, including cattle, sheep/goat, fish, crabs and molluscs.

By far the most important finds to be discovered from the excavations of the Sir Bani Yas church and monastery are the plaster stucco fragments. These

architectural elements had originally decorated both the outside and inside of the church. A series of frieze fragments decorated the outside of the church. These featured scrolls or roundels enclosing bunches of grapes and leaves. Finer decorative plaster stucco panels were used within the interior of the church. These included cross decorations, acanthus leaves, fleur-de-lys, knobs or pearls, flower decorations and stepped bases.

REGIONAL CONTEXT OF THE CHURCH AND MONASTERY OF SIR BANI YAS

The church of Sir Bani Yas has a narthex at the west side and three aisles with inner divisions and several communicating doors (the typical tripartite spatial typology). To the east, three rooms are subdivided from the aisles, of which the southern one is divided again into two rooms with a possible bell tower.

The church and monastery on Sir Bani Yas has to be seen in the wider context of Christian networks in the Gulf during the early Islamic period. A series of contemporary sites are known throughout the region, and these were linked by trade and/or monasticism.

Churches have been found elsewhere in the Gulf region, including in Akkaz, Kuwait (Gachet-Bizollon 2011); two churches (A1 and A2) in al-Qusur, Kuwait (Bernard, Callot and Salles 1991; Bernard and Salles 1991; Salles and Callot 2013; and Bonn eric 2015); Kharg, Iran (Steve 2003); and Jubayl, Saudi Arabia (Langfeldt 1994, 32-42).

Further objects with Christian iconography (crosses) were found at Umm al-Maradim, Qatar (Al Thani 2014, 29-30); Jabal Berri, Saudi Arabia (Potts 1994); and Thaj and Hinnah, Saudi Arabia (Langfeldt 1994, 44-47, and 49).

With its narthex and three subdivided aisles, the architectural plan of the church in Sir Bani Yas is very similar to church A1 of al-Qusur, Jubayl, Kharg and (with no narthex preserved) Akkaz. They all have a similar ground plan. The church in Akkaz also has a burial, and the podium of church A2 in al-Qusur is very similar to the podia found close to the Sir Bani Yas church. Decorated plaster stucco, such as that found at Sir Bani Yas, is also attested from al-Qusur, Akkaz and Jubayl. Although from a stylistic point of view they are from different workshops, they clearly attest to a shared iconographic and typological vocabulary.

DATING AND CHRONOLOGY

There is clearly strong evidence for the presence of Christianity in the Gulf. A crucial point of disagreement in research among some scholars is the chronology. Traditionally, most of the evidence is interpreted as dating to the pre-Islamic period. This is mainly done owing to general historical observations concerning the presence of Christians in the area which can be deduced from literary sources. In literary sources, Christianity is well attested in the region until the late 7th century CE but not beyond that date; and there is also some bias in scholarship that assumes that the advent of Islam led to a decline and the end of Christianity in the region. It is therefore assumed that the Christian churches and remains must belong to the pre-Islamic period. However, this view cannot be corroborated by the archaeological findings.

Robert Carter's in-depth study of pottery from the site dates it to sometime between the mid-7th and mid-8th century CE. Examination of the two C14 radiocarbon dates from the site confirms this range, but does not narrow it significantly. St Jean Simpson and Ian Freestone's analysis of the glass fragments reveal an assemblage which predominantly dates to the 7th and 8th centuries CE, with no trace of earlier forms and types.

The finds from the Sir Bani Yas church and monastery are therefore of great importance since this site is one of the best excavated and documented across the Gulf region. Most of the other Christian sites do not have clear stratigraphy with good contexts which allows accurate dating of the beginning or the end of a site. Finds are extremely scarce from the other sites, meaning that the study of their material culture provides little chronological evidence.

The precise dating of the Christian monuments in the Gulf area has much impact on their interpretation. Specifically, did Christianity stop or thrive under Islam? There is no scholarly agreement yet on this issue. Some arguments rely mostly on general historical considerations. The latest archaeological research, however, suggests that Christianity lasted well after the Muslim conquest. Both the publication of the Kharg monastery by Marie-Joseph Steve and excavations in al-Qusur by the Kuwaiti-French Archaeological Mission on Failaka island prove the duration of Christianity after the Muslim conquest in the 7th century CE and the Islamization of the region. The presence of Christians in the Gulf at that time is not surprising if one considers the well-

known tolerance of most of the First Abbasid Caliphs, such as al-Mahdi (775-785 CE), Harun al-Rashid (786-809 CE) or al-Ma'mun (830-833 CE). Even if the situation of Christians was closely dependent on decisions made by Muslim rulers, Christians occupied important positions within the Caliph's administration and at the court, thereby testifying that Muslims and Christians used to live together. The Gulf is another example, like Egypt, Jordan or Syria, of this co-habitation during the Early Islamic period.

CONSERVATION ACTIONS

Given the site's exceptional significance, carefully planned conservation interventions have been implemented since the completion of the first archaeological excavation in 1996.

Generally, the conservation works done have been based on scientific investigation and in collaboration with experts from various fields. Interventions range from preventive conservation, site enhancements, regular maintenance, emergency measures and careful consolidation of the exposed fabric, through backfilling, erecting a protective shelter, improving rainwater drainage, cleaning, fencing, building a visitor platform, monitoring, and stabilizing walls and floors. All interventions have been documented in detail and put in the site archive.

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The church and monastery at Sir Bani Yas represent an inestimable historical asset given the physical connection with Christianity in the Gulf, offering a combination of high-quality archaeological excavation and good state of preservation. The artistic value of the material culture from the church, represented by its plaster stucco panels, are among the finest examples known from the region and are of exceptional value as they shed light on the development of religious art from the Christian and Early Islamic periods in the Gulf. The site in general is testament to the role played by the Gulf region as ambassador to social and religious tolerance and coexistence after the advent of Islam. Beyond the research value and the net contribution to the advancement of

knowledge about Christianity in the Gulf and its related stylistic progression of religious art during that period, the extended site – comprising the church, the monastery and the surrounding courtyard houses – possesses clear economic value through its incorporation into heritage and educational tourism.

THE SITE'S FUTURE

In 2015-2016, the Historic Environment Department of TCA Abu Dhabi completed a conservation management plan for the site as part of a broader management plan for the island. The plan was an opportunity to collate and synthesize the understanding of the site, assess its condition and develop policies for future excavation and research, conservation and management, as well as presentation and interpretation to be implemented within the next five years.

Future archaeological research and excavations at the site will help to respond to many current questions related to the church and monastery, and to achieve a better understanding of the site's significance and historic context. All interventions will aim to respect the special character of the site, its authenticity and its original setting. As a consequence, a different shelter will therefore be designed aimed both at ensuring the long-term protection of the archaeological remains and at enhancing the visitor's experience.

Given that the number of visitors to the island is set to increase in the near future, high-quality interpretation and presentation amenities will be installed on-site to convey the significance of the location, enhance visitor experience and connect the site to the island's other significant cultural heritage landmarks.

Dr Mark Jonathan Beech

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© TOP: Photogrammetric plan of the church and its shelter, 2015.

ABOVE: View of the church and its shelter after the recent phase of conservation work, 2015.

RIGHT: Excavating and planning the walls of the monastery, 1995.



**Church of the East:
The Story of a Discovery**





Remains of shark and ray bones provide archaeologists with important evidence about the food habits of the occupants of the monastery.



③ Stucco panel with row of four scrolls with alternating crosses and palmettes. This was discovered in the rubble of the chancel east wall.



Ⓒ Undertaking the magnetometer survey of the monastery, 1995.



④ LEFT: Stucco panel with crosses and fleur-de-lys, probably part of the interior decoration of the church.

NEXT PAGE: Excavating and conserving the eastern 'dormitory', 1995.





Ⓜ ABOVE: Stucco with palmette inside a scroll, probably part of the interior decoration of the church.

OPPOSITE: Stucco fragment with flower petal enclosed within a stepped base.





Ⓢ LEFT: Remains of crabs eaten at the monastery. These were mostly swimming crabs from the Portunidae family.

NEXT PAGE: Excavating the church on Sir Bani Yas, 1995.





Ⓒ LEFT: Stucco fragment with grapes and leaves inside scrolls. Such panels appeared around the exterior of the church.

NEXT PAGE: View of the eastern 'dormitory', 1995.





④ Remains of fish eaten at the monastery. These include grouper and emperor jaws, as well as parrotfish teeth.



Ⓢ OPPOSITE: An archaeologist from TCA Abu Dhabi explains the discoveries at the church to UAE Minister of State for Tolerance, Chairman of TCA Abu Dhabi and guests.

TOP: The UAE Minister of State for Tolerance and Chairman of TCA Abu Dhabi examine stucco plaster from the church.

ABOVE LEFT: An archaeologist from TCA Abu Dhabi discusses the site with UAE Minister of State for Tolerance, Chairman of TCA Abu Dhabi and guests.

ABOVE RIGHT: An archaeologist from TCA Abu Dhabi shows stucco finds at the church to the UAE Minister of State for Tolerance and the Chairman of TCA Abu Dhabi.

RIGHT: Archaeologists inspect part of the monastery.



⑩ Discovering a stucco fragment at the church, 1995.



Ⓜ ABOVE: Stucco fragment with grapes inside scroll, probably from the exterior of the church.

OPPOSITE: Remains of sea bream fish eaten at the monastery. These are teeth which survive due to their hard calcareous composition.

NEXT PAGE: Stucco panel found in the rubble of the chancel east wall, featuring a series of alternate crosses and palmettes.





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④ Fish otoliths (inner ear stones) discovered in the monastery. These are from groupers, emperors and sea bream, demonstrating that the occupants consumed a variety of fish.