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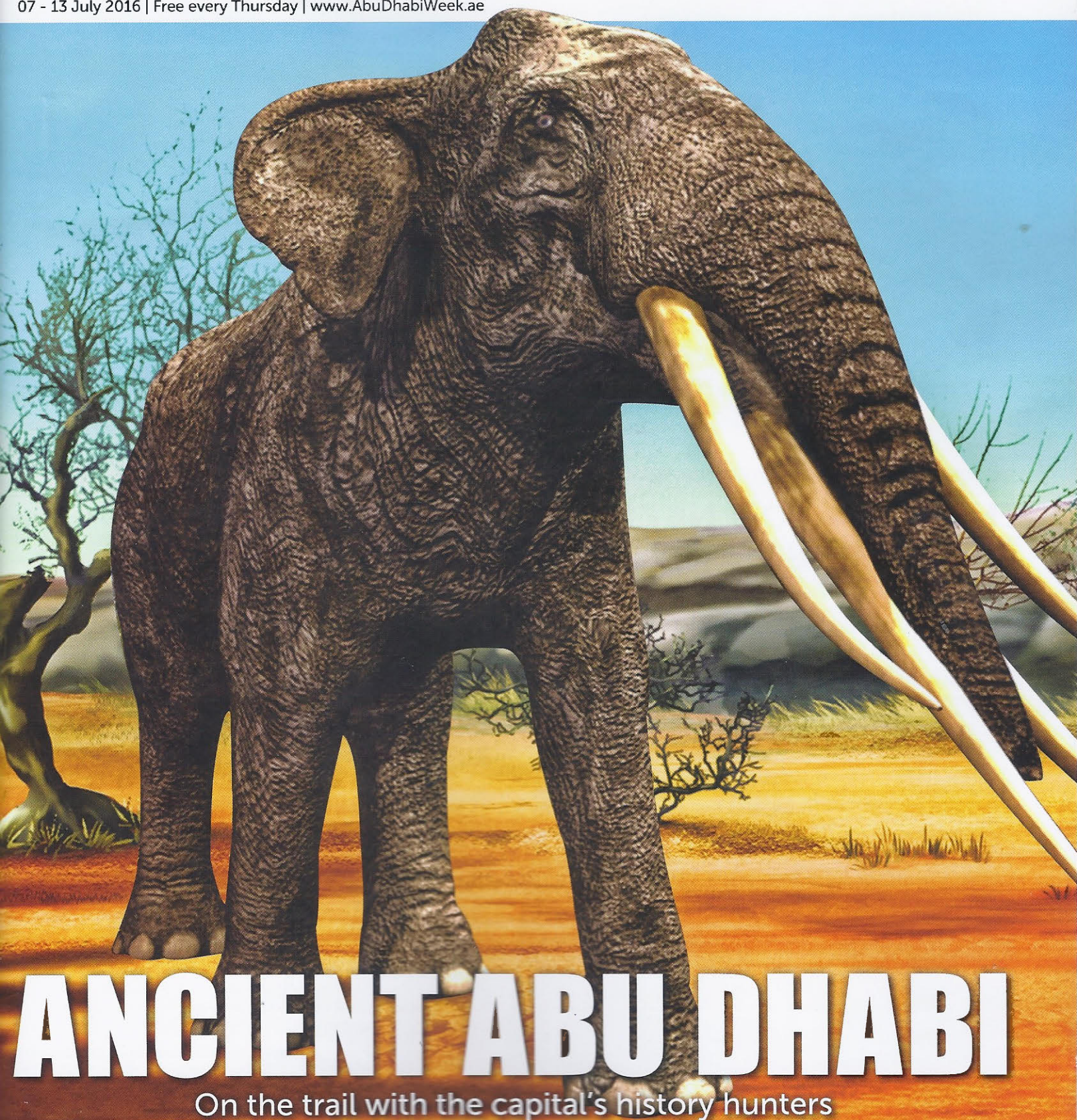
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ANCIENT ABU DHABI

On the trail with the capital's history hunters

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The recent discovery of Abu Dhabi's earliest known inhabitants has brought to light the area's rich history.

Far from being solely a young, oil-rich capital, Abu Dhabi has gone from an underwater land to a vast grassland with roaming animals, to a vital trade route in the Gulf.

The recent find was part of ongoing efforts from a team of archaeologists, directed by Dr Mark Beech, head of Coastal Heritage and Palaeontology at Abu Dhabi Tourism and Culture Authority (TCA Abu Dhabi).

After nearly three years of research and excavations, the team uncovered evidence of a Late Stone Age village on Marawah Island, 100km west of Abu Dhabi island. Their findings included 200 flint arrowheads, a 7,500-year-old stone building and a partial human skeleton.

The work carried out on Marawah Island is just a tiny piece of a much larger puzzle that presents a picture of Abu Dhabi's history. It's a puzzle that Dr Mark is keen to piece together for residents.

SOMETHING FISHY

No stranger to archaeological digs, Dr Mark has been in the UAE for 22 years, and was part of the 1994 excavation team that discovered the Christian church and monastery on Sir Bani Yas Island.

The Sheffield native's love for local archaeology was cemented when he did his PhD at the University of York.

"When I came in 1994 I became interested in the material here," he recalls. "No one had done regional studies of coastal archaeological sites so I did a four-year PhD research investigating the history of fishing in the Gulf from 7,000 years ago to the Islamic period. This was done by looking at 26 different archaeological sites and studying the fish bones from the excavations, which is a crazy thing to do, but no one had done it before."

"I used to go down to the fish market every day and buy fish and prepare these skeletons to help us identify the archaeological material we were digging up from the sites."

Now, Dr Mark has moved on from fish to bigger things like 2.5m-long elephant tusks – more on that later.

Today, TCA Abu Dhabi is tasked with researching and preserving the emirate's archaeological and palaeontological sites, historic buildings and modern heritage sites, and maintaining an inventory of their findings.

They oversee more than 100 historic buildings across the emirate – including the newly restored birthplace of Sheikh Khalifa, Qasr Al Muwajji, and UNESCO World Heritage Sites like Al Ain Oasis – as well as hundreds of archaeological and palaeontological sites throughout

Abu Dhabi emirate.

"By paleontological sites I primarily mean from the late Miocene period, fossil sites dating between six to eight million years ago, where we find ancient fossils of animals that are now extinct that used to live in Abu Dhabi. We find elephants, giraffes, crocodiles, fresh water fish, hippopotamus and ancient horses."

"Abu Dhabi between six and eight million years ago resembled East Africa today; there was a wet season and a dry season, the vegetation was lush and green, giant river systems went through the area so there was no Arabian Gulf at that time. The Gulf was a shallow river basin; you have to imagine large rivers going through the landscape with savannah style grasslands between."

But these eight-million-year-old finds are not the most ancient of discoveries: "The oldest fossils we deal with are from around the Jebel Hafeet area, which are around 65 million years old. They're ancient marine fossils, because the whole UAE was under the sea during the Permian-Cretaceous period."

When it comes to archaeology, the earliest evidence of people in Abu Dhabi has been made through the discovery of stone tools from the mid-Stone Age around 130,000 years ago. Other discoveries on Delma and Marawah Islands date from between 7,000 and 7,500 years ago.

Dr Mark explains, "That's our earliest evidence of skeletons of humans, of houses, it's also our earliest evidence for people having domestic animals because it's at that time that people begin using goats, sheep and cattle; they're not native to this area so they have to be traded in from Iraq, Mesopotamia or the Iranian side of the Gulf."

LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

We know what you're thinking: Abu Dhabi is a vast, barren landscape. Where do you even start in uncovering such tiny relics as bone fragments?

"Most of our sites are found by field surveys, it literally means walking backwards and forwards in lines," Dr Mark explains. "We can use satellite images and maps to target particular areas; even Google Earth is helping us to target particular outcrops where it's more likely to find sites."

"If we're doing an archaeological survey of a particular area, we use remote sensing of satellite areas and aerial photographs we have of the area. Everything in our authority is mapped using Geographic Information Systems (GIS), which means we do digital mapping online using satellite imagery."

"Literally you find the site because you find a scatter of material on the surface. What we're looking out for is traces of fossils in the case of the Miocene material, so you have small white pieces of bone visible on the reddish sands."

"Archaeological sites we find by concentrations of pottery. Also an indication is collections of marine shells and if the sand is discoloured and burnt it's from where the prehistoric people were cooking and had fireplaces."

"So it's easier than people might think, you just have to be able to interpret what you're seeing on the ground. Obviously you have to be able to distinguish between original geology and something that's been bulldozed. But there's a lot still to be discovered because it's a huge area with huge desert and we're still discovering new things all the time."

ANCIENT ABU

IENT DHABI

from four-tusked elephants to a
Christian monastery, we take a trip
through the capital's rich history

WORDS Rachael Perrett



So a site has been identified, now what?

"Our first thing is mapping it, then we put it in our GIS, which is then shared with all the government departments," Dr Mark continues. "Abu Dhabi is very fortunate in that it has a centralised GIS system. We share all the information on that so that it gives warning to future

developers and planners that there is heritage in these particular areas."

Sites considered of high value are protected immediately with fencing, signage, and sometimes security patrols. Not every site is excavated due to time and financial constraints, so before deciding to break ground, the team investigates the mapped area using non-invasive techniques like drone photography and geophysical surveys that use ground-penetrating radar and magnetometry.

"This [technique] is used by a lot of archaeologists because the ground-penetrating radar helps you see what's beneath the ground without digging. It doesn't work perfectly but it can be helpful because it tells you what potential there is below the ground."

If a survey shows promise, the team sets up the excavation trench and gets to work. As Dr Mark explains, it's a meticulous process: "The general rule for archaeology is that if you do an excavation for two or three weeks, that generates work for about one year afterwards."

"You cannot do archaeology in a hurry; doing an excavation you have to carefully document everything.

"Each layer we record with special sheets; we draw plans, sections, do photography of each level, so it's a very painstaking process. It's not just finding treasure, digging it up and putting it in a museum. This is just a tiny part of what we do; the actual process of surveying, excavating, identifying, documenting, is very time consuming."

After making a find, archaeologists are obliged to publish their findings for future researchers to access. And eventually, that small bone fragment may find its way to a museum.

TCA Abu Dhabi hopes to include a handful of Dr Mark's plethora of findings in the upcoming Saadiyat galleries, particularly within the Zayed National Museum.

"We cherry pick the important things that tell the story of the history of the UAE," Dr Mark explains. "One of the things about having them on display in the museum is that it'll make this information available to people, and we'll have computer reconstructions of what the site looked like so people will have an understanding of the context."

PRESERVING HISTORY

When such a small relic takes years to make its way to that glass display case, you may wonder why so much effort is put into the process, but Dr Mark explains the importance of learning from history: "People in the past used to live more sustainably and they were more in tune with their environment than we are today. We're overpopulated and have too much pressure of building and development. So it's very important to preserve this heritage.

"Many people are not aware of the prehistoric heritage of Abu Dhabi and the UAE so we're trying to do something about that. We're working with the education authority on updating schoolbooks, and gradually more material is becoming available in Arabic, English and other languages.

"People have quite a traditional view, which is a misguided view, that people were just Bedouins here – they discovered oil, got rich and built lots of towers," explains Dr Mark. "But in actual fact, this country has prehistoric heritage routes that go back thousands of years. This country is in a very strategic location, prehistoric trade routes passed through this area and people who lived in this area utilised everything from the stone quarries that were used to make the Stone Age tools to the rich marine resources of the Gulf.

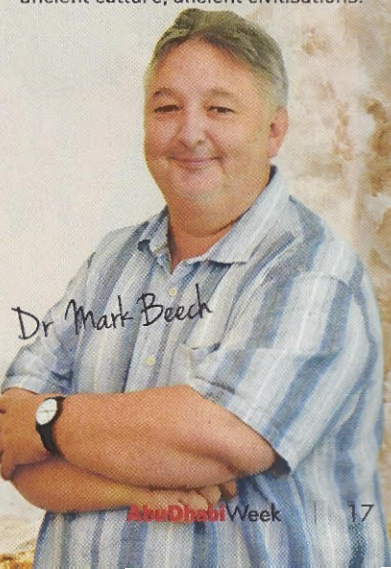
"While people think about Jebel Ali and Khalifa Port today as being major trading ports, the trade has always gone on in the past, it just happened thousands of years ago, and people were trading different goods."

BROUGHT TO LIFE

Over the years, Dr Mark and his team have made some remarkable finds in the western region of Abu Dhabi, including fragments of 7,000-year-old Ubaid pottery from southern Iraq, an ancient irrigation system in an Islamic period date palm garden on Sir Bani Yas Island and a 2.5 metre-long tusk from a four-tusked elephant known as *Stegotetrabelodon* (our cover star!), which roamed the emirate between six and eight million years ago.

While Dr Mark still gets excited about new finds 22 years on, he stresses that it's the information it provides that's really vital.

"The important thing for us is not discovering treasure, it's not discovering things that are valuable; for us what's valuable is the information. We're excited when we discover something that gives us a new idea about ancient people, ancient culture, ancient civilisations."



Dr Mark Beech