

New finds at Tell Abraq

by Peter Hellyer

The third season of excavations at the ancient site of Tell Abraq in Umm al Qaiwain in January and February 1992 yielded important new information about the site's tower structure, according to Professor Daniel Potts, of the University of Sydney, in Australia.

The Tell Abraq site is centred on a mound that rises from the surrounding plain to a peak of around ten metres above sea level, in the form of a typical 'Tell' or artificial mound, similar to those found in Mesopotamia. Apart from a smaller tell at Khatt, in Ras al Khaimah, that at Tell Abraq is the only one known in the Emirates, and, says Potts, is the most important site of its period in the whole of the Southern Gulf.

The surrounding area seems to have been occupied as early as around 3,800 BC with substantial shell-mounds nearby along the ancient coastlines, some of which may be of this early date, although no pottery of the early Ubaid period has yet been discovered. The peak of occupation at Tell Abraq seems to have begun around the middle of the Third Millenium BC, or 2,500 BC.

This period coincided with the building of the tombs and settlement at Umm an Nar, near Abu Dhabi, and those of the Umm an Nar civilisation at Hili, near Al Ain, better known for their stone towers. The centrepiece of the Tell Abraq site is just such a tower, still standing massively within the mound, and probably rising to a height of at least 7.5 metres above the surrounding plain. The walls of the tower were first discovered during the first season on the site three years ago, but this season, further excavations have clarified a number of points.

First of all, it now appears that the tower wall was rebuilt or strengthened at some stage in the Second Millenium BC, (2,000 BC to 1,000 BC), with bench-like structures being built to buttress it.

The tower itself has a diameter of around 40 metres, making it by far the largest Umm an Nar type tower to be found anywhere in the Emirates or Oman. Most others that have been found so far, such as at Bidiya, in Fujairah, or at Hili 8 in Al Ain, have diameters ranging between sixteen and twenty five metres. The only other historic building of a comparable size is the great round fort at Nizwa in Oman, which was not built until around the seventeenth century over four thousand years later.

The Tell Abraq site is the only one in the Southern Gulf to show continuous settlement from around 2,500 BC until the middle of the First Millenium BC, about 500 BC, making it of crucial importance in understanding the evolution of life in the area throughout that period.

"Many of the types of pottery sherds we have found are not known from elsewhere in the region," says Potts, "and because they are being found in the excavation, it means we are able to prepare a sequence of the pottery types used throughout the period."

Among items to have been turned up, both in 1992 and in the two earlier seasons, are sherds of painted pottery from Baluchistan and the Indus Valley, which can be dated to around 2,200 BC. Many of these have been found in the remains of a large fireplace, still being cleared, which has also yielded two stone weights from

تعد هضبة تل أبرق بامارة أم القيوين احدى أهم المواقع الأثرية في دولة الإمارات العربية المتحدة حيث يضم الموقع القلعة الشهيرة التي تم تشييدها قبل حوالي ٤٥٠٠ سنة.. يتناول هذا المقال نتائج أعمال التنقيب التي جرت هذا العام.



the Indus Valley, in present day Pakistan, dated to around 2,200 BC, a complete soft-stone vessel with two compartments, and an unusually-shaped copper-bronze spatula.

Also of importance are sherds of Barbar pottery from Bahrain, dated to the period from 2,000 BC to 1,700 BC.

"These are from a time when the records on cuneiform tablets in Mesopotamia no longer mention the name Magan as a source for copper," says Potts. "Magan was the name given to the copper-producing area of the Hajar Mountains, but at this time the name disappears from the texts, although the city of Ur, in Mesopotamia was still importing copper from Dilmun, (Bahrain). These Barbar sherds prove that even if there was no mention of Magan in the texts, the trading link between Bahrain and the UAE still continued."

Another find from near the base of the mound was four goat skeletons, all of which seem to have been slaughtered and then flung into a pit at the base of the tower wall, perhaps, speculate Potts and his colleagues, as part of a sacrificial ritual when the wall itself was rebuilt and strengthened in the middle of the Second Millenium, around 1,500 BC.

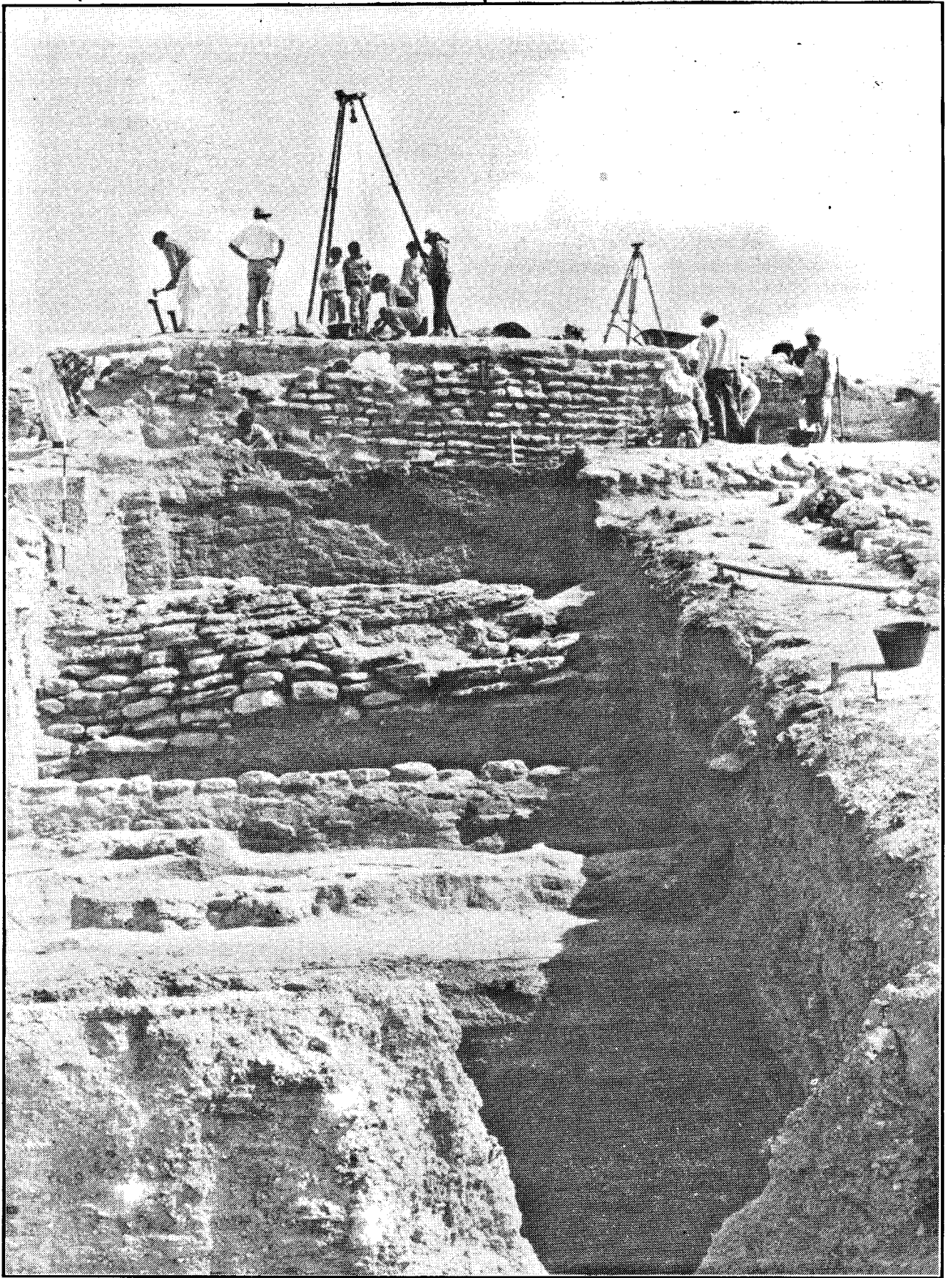
During the 1992 season, a lot of effort went into expanding the excavation of the interior of the tower, which again yielded a lot of important structural information.

"This is the first time that the interior features of a tower like this have ever been uncovered," says Potts. "Other towers, like those at Hili and Bidiya, have had only their foundations preserved, but here we have a virtually complete tower."

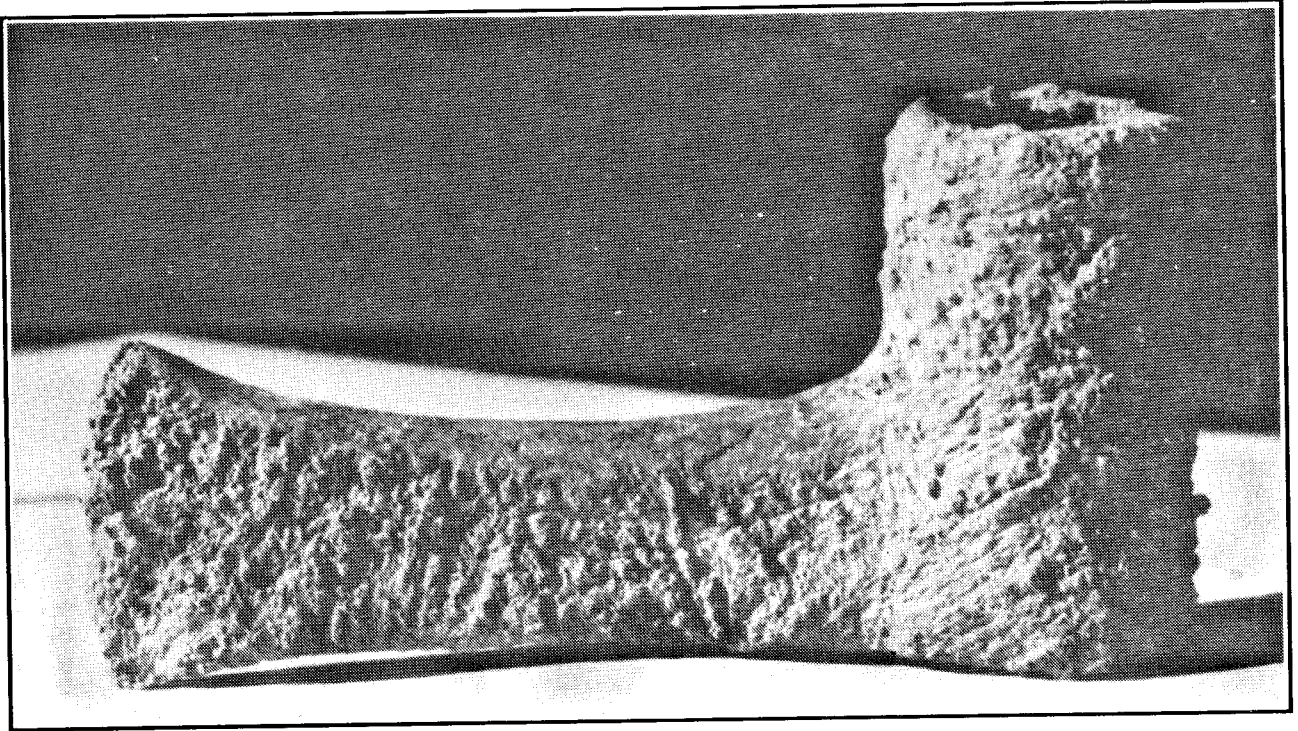
Indeed, the top of it has also been preserved, and is covered over by an Iron Age platform, probably built during the latter years of occupation of the site, between 1000 BC and 500 BC.

The platform, built of dried mud-brick, was partially cleared in previous seasons, but this year, Potts and his team have cleared much more, showing that it covers virtually all the top of the mound.

One particularly interesting feature is a stone-lined well. It runs from the top of the mound, and, speculates Potts, it was probably the original central well for the tower, and had its walls raised as the mound itself grew over the centuries.



A view of the mound at Tell Abraq. Top, the derrick over the well. Centre, the two phases of the early Bronze Age wall. (P. Hellyer)



A bronze axe-head from the Tell Abraq site. (P. Hellyer)

Also inset into the platform and the surrounding area are at least a dozen small graves dating from about 100 AD. All were robbed or damaged in antiquity, but enough remains for them to be identified as being of the type known from the nearby settlement of Ad Door, which flourished at that period. There is also some evidence of settlement around the base of the mound at the same time.

The earliest evidence of man at the Tell Abraq site is provided by a fine flint knife, which is exactly like other knives known from Egypt in the period before the Pharaohs, around 3,800 BC.

Then, says Potts, from around 2,500 BC to 500 BC, the site seems to have been permanently occupied. A gap of around five or six hundred years followed, during the Hellenistic period best represented by the important sites at Mileiha and Madam in Sharjah, before the Ad Door-type tombs were constructed around 100 AD.

"This continuous occupation makes the Tell Abraq site of unique importance," says Potts. "Not only does it give us the opportunity to study the construction and adaptation of the great Umm an Nar-style tower, but it also allows us to study the development of man in the area over at least two thousand years."

Professor Potts, who began work at Tell Abraq in 1989, while he was working at Denmark's University of Copenhagen, was accompanied this year by a team including archaeologists from the Universities of Sydney, in Australia, Aarhus in Denmark and Gottingen in Germany.

The team was supplemented by German specialists, who studied an ancient shell-mound on the edge of

Umm al Qaiwain town, which has been dated from Ubaid potsherds and flint finds to the Fifth Millennium BC, between 5,000 BC and 4,000 BC.

The excavation received support and sponsorship from General Motors, who loaned two vehicles to the archaeologists, and provided financial backing, and from other local firms and institutions, including Emirates Photomarketing, M.A.H.Y. Khoory, Cosmoplast, and the Emirates Natural History Group.

Potts also pays tribute to the support received from the Government of Umm al Qaiwain, including Supreme Council Member and Ruler Sheikh Rashid bin Ahmed al Mu'alla, Crown Prince Sheikh Saud bin Rashid, and the Director of the Emiri Diwan, Sheikh Khaled bin Rashid.

"Sheikh Rashid and his sons have been very supportive of our work," he says. "Tell Abraq is one of the most important pre-Islamic archaeological sites in Arabia, and their support for our work here has been invaluable."

Professor Potts has now published the results of his first two seasons on the site:

"A prehistoric mound in the Emirate of Umm al Qaiwain, UAE: Excavations at Tell Abraq in 1989," and "Further excavations at Tell Abraq — the 1990 season," published in 1990 and 1991 respectively by Munksgaard of Copenhagen.

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