

## 2. History of investigation

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Archaeological explorations in Abu Dhabi were initiated in 1958 when P.V. Glob and T.G. Bibby were invited by the Ruler, Sheikh Shakhbut Bin Sultan Al Nahyan, to conduct an archaeological survey (Glob 1959a). At that time the Danish Gulf expeditions had spent four years investigating the archaeology and documenting the vanishing traditional cultures of Bahrain and Qatar. The operational base in Denmark was the provincial museum in Aarhus, later to become Moesgaard Museum. Professor P.V. Glob was Director of the museum, and he was assisted by T.G. Bibby, who had previously worked in Bahrain. The museum also acted as the Chair of Archaeology under the University of Aarhus. This was a most fruitful arrangement that provided a framework for the ongoing projects in the Arabian Gulf.

Sheikh Shakhbut Al Nahyan had described the existence of ancient structures and idols or imagery on the island of Umm an-Nar and through a liaison with the local oil company invited the Danes that were excavating on Bahrain to come for a survey in 1958. Sheikh Shakhbut encouraged the archaeologists to take a closer look at Umm an-Nar (Glob 1959a, Frifelt 1991, Højlund 2013). By the following year excavations had commenced on the island. Glob asked Harald Andersen to be in charge of the fieldwork. He was a meticulous excavator who at the time had a reputation for developing excavation methodology (Glob 1959b, Thorvildsen 1962, Frifelt 1991, 1995).

When members of the ruling family came to see the excavation of the first uncovered tomb at Umm an-Nar, Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan, then governor of the Eastern Province of Abu Dhabi, invited Glob and Bibby to come to Al-Ain (fig. 2). Sheikh Zayed wanted them to see places with even more mounds than the already impressive mound field at Umm an-Nar (Bibby 1969).

A week later Glob and Bibby with an experienced driver advanced through the sand tracks and dunes to Al-Ain to visit the legendary governor. In the early morning the Sheikh took them out to the prehistoric grave-mounds. Sheikh Zayed's interest in the country's ancient past and his strong personality left a deep impression. Both Glob and Bibby have vividly described the significant event (Glob 1968 p. 174, Bibby 1969 p. 211).

*"...promptly at seven two open jeeps roared up before (the guest house), with Zayid himself, looking spruce and wide awake, driving the leading vehicle. We climbed into our two land-rovers and followed behind, along the steep-sided wadi which skirts Al-Ain, and out on the rough track along the valley leading toward Jebel Hafit.*

*On our left rose steep crags, and on our right a gentler rocky slope led up to a bluff overlooking the green valley. And as we approached the bluff we could see that the whole slope was covered with burial-mounds, steep-sided cairns of stones clustering most thickly along the very edge of the bluff. Zayid's jeep turned up the slope and stopped in the middle of the largest group of mounds. We dismounted and looked around.*

*Zayid's boast of hundreds of mounds was not idle. Around us on the ridge stood quite that number and as our eyes accustomed themselves to the landscape we could see mounds on every crag and crest and spur, all the way to Mount Hafit itself. Zayid turned to us with a lift of his eyebrows. "Yes", we said, "gravemounds, from the Age of Ignorance." (Bibby 1969).*

The archaeologists loosely counted some 200 stone burial cairns at a first glance (fig. 3). They noted a diameter of roughly 12 m for the largest (a very preliminary measurement) and a height of more than 2 m for the tallest. It was immediately obvious that the as yet unexplored structures looked quite different from the tombs at Umm an-Nar, which were constructed with an outer cladding wall of well hewn or pecked ashlars. These tombs were constructed from un-worked, but somewhat selected stone blocks. They were seemingly situated or had mainly been preserved in more stony terrain. The first impression was that they lay exposed on raised plateaus, on hillocks and on the adjacent mountain slopes. The tombs were soon named after Jebel Hafit, the very prominent mountain raising its silhouette almost like a whaleback some ten kilometres south of Al-Ain and representing a notable marker in the landscape (Glob 1959b) (figs. 4-5, 9 and 12).

The excavations on the island of Umm an-Nar, especially the tombs, were given first priority until 1961. Afterwards the work was concentrated on the large settlement on the island, as well as investigations of the interior of Abu Dhabi. In these years an identification of the Umm an-Nar culture was



Fig. 2. The Ruler, Sheikh Shakbut Bin Sultan Al Nahyan, Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan, and other members of the ruling family with their retainers visit the excavations on Umm an-Nar in 1959.









Fig. 3. The northern plateau as it looked in 1961 seen from the north, with “mounds on every crag and crest and spur, all the way to Mount Hafit”.

established, and it was tentatively placed within the early part of the third millennium BC on the basis of a range of grave pottery either imported from the Iranian plateau or imitating such pottery (Thorvildsen 1962, Tosi 1989). Later these dates were modified to the middle of the millennium. The next challenge lay within the Hafit tombs at Al-Ain.

During the next two campaigns, 1961/62 and 1962/63, the excavation team started digging on Umm an-Nar and at the end of the winter season moved up to Al-Ain, where the climate was cooler and less humid.

At the time of their archaeological recognition, half a century ago, many of the prehistoric tombs of Abu Dhabi were already well known to local people. For generations they had observed them while riding by or when grazing their animals on the shrubs among them. The ruined mounds looked like no more than a heap of stone blocks and rubble and were considered to be ancient ruins or graves from a time before Islam.

In those years new materials began to replace traditional mud-brick architecture. A small scale production of cement for new housing, channels and roads had begun in Abu Dhabi as a consequence of a growing economy and a rising population. An increased need for limestone blocks to use in this

industry started to take a heavy toll on monuments built from un-worked stones that most people could move and handle (fig. 6). The introduction of small trucks and the first low price pick-ups, which could drive almost everywhere, similarly made it easy for the local villagers in need of foundation stones to fetch them in still more distant areas where suitable stones were easily accessed. In consequence, the early excavations in the Hafit area were carried out not just as research but also as rescue investigations.

For the first ten years, beginning in 1958, the excavations were supported by *Abu Dhabi Marine Areas Ltd* and the *Abu Dhabi Petroleum Company*. Moesgaard Museum also provided its own budget money and the Gulf investigations were supported from a range of institutions and foundations in Denmark, with the Carlsberg Foundation as the major supporter. At the end of the 1960s the Department of Antiquities & Tourism was established by a decree from the Ruler, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, who closely followed the archaeological research. From then on the fieldwork received additional support from the Government of Abu Dhabi and logistically by the new department.

During the early years the results of the excavations were mainly reported in *Kuml*, yearbook of the

Jutland Archaeological Society. The discoveries from Abu Dhabi and other Gulf countries at the same time reached a wide international audience with the release of Bibby's *Looking for Dilmun* in 1969. The book

became a bestseller and was translated into many languages, including Arabic. Two chapters, from one of which the above excerpt is taken, were devoted to the archaeology of Abu Dhabi.

## The excavation campaign 1961/62

Knud Thorvildsen was in charge of the two major excavation campaigns on Umm an-Nar in 1960 and 1961 (fig. 7). At the end of the second season, the team moved up to Al-Ain, where they arrived shortly before New Year. Thorvildsen was an experienced archaeologist and conservator, an efficient excavator and a specialist on monumental stone tombs of the north European Neolithic. He was on secondment from the Danish National Museum and on behalf of Glob and Bibby was sent to the more unexplored part of the Gulf after excavating for a few weeks in Bahrain. The small excavation team in Abu Dhabi furthermore consisted of Arne Thorsteinsson (a Faroese archaeologist) who had worked previously in Kuwait and Bahrain and already had spent a season on Umm an-Nar. Vagn Kolstrup was in the Gulf for the first time. Elise Thorvildsen, the wife of Knud, herself an experienced excavator and organizer, had left before Christmas to take care of the family back home.

Over the course of 12 days, based in a small hotel in Al-Ain, the team excavated Hafit tombs and carried out surveys in the northern Hafit area and at

Hili where Thorvildsen made the first description of a ruined structure, Site 1059, which was later to be known as the Hili Grand Tomb.

It was a short but efficient campaign. A handful of local men assisted with the practical work. The mission charged to the team was to excavate some typical tombs, investigate the burial structure and the context of possible finds.

*"Five mounds were excavated and proved to be of a completely different structure from the round sepulchral buildings of Umm an-Nar. They consisted of cairns of stones built up around a central corbelled chamber approached by a narrow entrance passage through the thickness of the mound, a length of up to two meters. The graves appear to have been plundered, but two large bronze pins were found, together with fragments of steatite bowls and two complete pottery vessels. These latter were completely different from those of Umm an-Nar, being small round-bodied vases of biscuit-colored ware with flat collar-rims. No conclusions could at this stage be drawn concerning the date of these tumuli."* (Bibby 1965 p. 104-105)

## The excavation campaign 1963

The following year another excavation team arrived in Abu Dhabi after briefing and acclimatization in Bahrain. The task was to commence excavation in the settlement layers on Umm an-Nar and at the end of the season to continue the excavation of Hafit tombs.

The investigations south of Al-Ain took place in January 1963 (fig. 8). Excavation was based on the rather simple strategy of rescuing as many finds and recording as much information as possible from the tombs which were being damaged by increasing stone robbing for building purposes. Finds that could provide dating evidence and comparisons to the Umm an-Nar burials and their grave furniture were

of high interest. Also further surveys, now mainly of the eastern and western sides of Jebel Hafit formed part of the work (Bibby 1965 p. 109). The team set up their tent camp with a couple of conspicuous Scandinavian frame tents in blue and orange on the plain at the southern fringe of Al-Ain in the vicinity of the tombs they intended to excavate (fig. 9).

The young team was headed by Jens Aarup Jensen with earlier experience from Kuwait and Qatar. He was joined by Vagn Kolstrup from the previous campaign and Jørgen Lund (fig. 10), a newcomer but already a competent excavator, trained by Harald Andersen, who headed the first excavations on Umm