



# Journal of Social Affairs

Volume 18 | Number 72 | Winter 2001

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A Refereed Quarterly Journal Published  
by the Sociological Association of the UAE  
and the American University of Sharjah  
P.O. Box: 26666 Fax: (971-6) 5585066  
E-mail: nmourtada-JSA@aus.ac.ae  
www.aus.ac.ae/media/jsa

## Nestorian Christianity in the Pre-Islamic UAE and Southeastern Arabia

Peter Hellyer

*Excavations by the Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey (ADIAS) have identified two pre-Islamic Christian monasteries west of Abu Dhabi, on the islands of Sir Bani Yas and Marawah. The former seems to have been abandoned in the mid- to late Seventh Century AD, while the second, on Marawah, may have been abandoned at approximately the same time, and before completion. The two sites are the first archaeological evidence of the presence of Christianity in the United Arab Emirates, and, indeed, in southeastern Arabia. The majority of the pre-Islamic Christians in the area were from the Church of the East, formerly known as the Nestorian Christians. In southeastern Arabia, Christianity rapidly disappeared after the coming of Islam, probably as a result of conversion or dispersal. For a period of time in the middle of the First Millennium AD, however, Christianity was an important part of the historic culture of this part of Arabia.*

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• Executive Director, Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey. The Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey, ADIAS, was established on the instructions of President His Highness Sheikh Zayed in 1992 and operates under the patronage of His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. It is charged with responsibility to survey, record, and, where appropriate, excavate archaeological sites (and, since 2001, palaeontological sites) on the coast and islands of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi.

An early version of this paper was delivered as a lecture at the American University of Sharjah on October 28, 2001. The description of the sites on Sir Bani Yas and Marawah derives to a very considerable extent from previously published work by colleagues in ADIAS, viz. Dr. Geoffrey King, Reader in Islamic Art and Archaeology, School of Oriental and African Studies, SOAS, University of London and ADIAS Academic Director; and Dr. Joseph Elders, Archaeological Officer, Council for the Care of Churches, Church of England, who directed the excavations at both sites. Any additional information and any variation from their interpretations are the responsibility of the author. Additional information is derived from the unpublished archives of ADIAS in Abu Dhabi. Permission for ADIAS work on Sir Bani Yas was granted by President His Highness Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, and on Marawah by UAE Chief of Staff Lt.-General His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. Dr. Emma Loosley, SOAS, provided useful insights into the history of the Church of the East and commented on a draft of the paper.

## 1. The Sites

The islands of Marawah and Sir Bani Yas are in the Western Region of Abu Dhabi, lying, respectively, approximately 100 km. and 170 km. west of the city of Abu Dhabi. The two islands were first surveyed by a team from the Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey (ADIAS) during April 1992.<sup>1</sup> The sites that later proved to be the monastic settlements were first identified during this survey. The presence of late pre-Islamic or early Islamic pottery in the vicinity of one of the Sir Bani Yas sites had been noted by members of the Emirates Natural History Group in early 1991,<sup>2</sup> and this is what prompted examination of the location by the ADIAS survey.

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Nine sites (numbered SBY-1 to SBY-9) were identified on the coastal plain in the al-Khor district on the eastern part of Sir Bani Yas. These included mounds with visible fragments of plaster and associated ceramic shards, the corner of a plastered building that was visible above current ground level, and a large disturbed area over which were scattered ceramic shards and fragments of decorated plaster. During the period from 1993 to 1996, several seasons of excavation were undertaken. These revealed the presence of six courtyard houses, a large building on a raised plateau to the west of the main group of sites, and the monastery complex itself (SBY-9), which was located in the disturbed area referred to above. In 1994, a plaster fragment with a fine cross in raised relief was recovered. This made it possible to identify the monastic complex as a Christian settlement. Further work in 1995 and 1996 identified the remains of a church, together with a large complex of associated buildings.<sup>3</sup> Numerous additional plaster fragments were also recovered. These were decorated with Latin and Greek crosses, vine scrolls and geometric designs, palmettes, and flowing floral designs, and indicated the presence of a combination of influences — Christian, Classical Roman and Sasanian.<sup>4</sup> Excavation of the

1. GRD King, *Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey, Season One* (UK: Trident Press, 1998), pp. 17-27; 67-80; P. Hellyer, *Filling In The Blanks: Recent Archaeological Discoveries in Abu Dhabi* (Dubai: Motivate Press, 1998a), pp. 12-13; P. Hellyer, *Hidden Riches: An Archaeological Introduction to the United Arab Emirates* (Abu Dhabi: UNB, 1998), p. 118.

2. GRD King, *Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey* (1998), p. 16.

3. GRD King and P. Hellyer, "The Pre-Islamic Monastery on Sir Bani Yas," in Hellyer, *Filling In the Blanks* (1998), pp. 42-49.

4. J. Elders, "The Nestorians in the Gulf: Just Passing Through?" Unpublished Paper Presented at the First Conference on the Archaeology of the United Arab Emirates, Abu Dhabi, April 2001.

main complex has not yet been completed, but the extent of the complex has been estimated. (This was done through a combination of contour survey, magnetometer survey, test trenching, excavation and surface observation.) The complex seems to have extended over an area of approximately 90 metres east-west and 70 metres north-south. Additional buildings remain to be excavated. For example, although its probable location has been identified, the complex cemetery also has not yet been excavated.

The church itself is aligned east-west, with dimensions of approximately 14 metres by 5 metres, and is conventional in plan. The central nave is flanked by aisles divided from the chancel and side chambers at the east end by a wall. Access is through a wide east door in the centre of the east wall, outside of which is a paved area, in the centre of which a single disturbed burial was found. Because of its important location, it has been suggested that this burial may be that of the founder of the monastery or one of its abbots, although no finds were recovered to confirm this hypothesis. In the vicinity of the east wall, collapsed material was found which indicates that the wall was richly decorated on the outside with moulded stucco of high quality, and with designs forming a frieze that, perhaps, framed the main doorway. Similar designs have been found on churches of the same period in Kuwait and eastern Saudi Arabia.<sup>5</sup> In the southeast room adjacent to the chancel, there is structural evidence suggesting that there may here have been a second story to the building, perhaps a bell-tower from which the faithful were called to prayer. Rather than bells, clappers (*Naqus*) may have been used. This practice was recorded by the pre-Islamic poet Labid, who described their presence in villages through which he passed on his way from Yamama, southwest of Qatar, to the coast.<sup>6</sup>

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Adjacent to the church and its courtyard were several blocks of buildings, typically with four to five small rooms, which had little occupational material and have been interpreted as cells for the monks. Intervening

5. See J.A. Langfeldt, "Recently Discovered Early Christian Monuments in Northeastern Arabia," in *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 5:1 (1994), pp. 32-60.

6. Cited in J.S. Trimmingham, (1979). *Christianity Among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times* (Beirut and London: Longman, and Librarie du Liban, 1990), reprint by Librarie du Liban, p. 282.

spaces serving as internal courtyards were left open to the sky. In the general vicinity of the church, five of a total of six small courtyard houses have been completely or partially excavated. All were similar in form and building technique, with the technique, including the plastering, closely resembling that of the church itself.

On a raised plateau to the west, and overlooking the coastal plain where lay the monastery and courtyard houses, excavation of site SBY-3 was undertaken. Here, the corner of a plastered building was still visible above the current ground level. Excavation uncovered a large building with four rooms, two of which retained well-plastered floors, and a large entrance leading out onto a courtyard. The plaster floor of the courtyard survived only in fragments, with the remainder evidently having been stolen. Close by was a large plastered water cistern, leading out of which was a stone channel that was lined with plaster. Several scatterings of ceramics were also in the vicinity. These, as well as the surviving structures, show that this group of sites was of the same date as those of the monastery complex on the plain below.<sup>7</sup> Stylistically, the stucco from the monastery has been dated to the 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> century AD,<sup>8</sup> a date that is supported by the sparse finds of pottery and glass, as well as by two radiocarbon dates, which will be referred to below.

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During the course of the excavations at Sir Bani Yas, it became apparent that the buildings of the monastic complex (including the church) and the courtyard houses had both simply collapsed following their abandonment. This was best shown during the excavation of the smallest of the courtyard houses, where the walls of the house and of the surrounding wall had simply fallen outwards, lying in such good order that it was possible to determine the exact number of courses in each wall and the precise dimensions of the doorways and windows. Although rather disturbed by surface bulldozing, the site of the church indicated that a similar process had taken place. Much of the stucco plaster from the exterior of the east wall, for example, lay face down, as it had originally fallen.<sup>9</sup>

7. GRD King and P. Hellyer, "A Pre-Islamic Christian Site," p. 48; P. Hellyer, *Hidden Riches*, pp. 118-119.

8. J. Elders, "The Nestorians in the Gulf."

9. GRD King and P. Hellyer, "A Pre-Islamic Christian Site," pp.118-119.

Architectural evidence suggests that this process of collapse may have occurred because of a lack of maintenance of the buildings and a consequent rising of salts from the surrounding land surface, which weakened the base of the walls. Remains of roofing were found inside some of the structures. In some cases, rooms in the monastery complex had evidence of squatter occupation, such as fires and other occupational debris. This squatter occupation presumably occurred not long after the complex had been abandoned by its original occupants and before the collapse of the walls took place.

From the ceramic evidence, which includes typical wares of the period of the Umayyad Caliphate (which ended in 750 AD), as well as from the later of the two C14 dates (644-863 AD),<sup>10</sup> the abandonment of the complex appears to have occurred by the late 7<sup>th</sup> century AD or early 8<sup>th</sup> century AD. As will be seen later, this date correlates to textual evidence of the decline of Christianity in southeastern Arabia and, indeed, elsewhere in the broader region.

The second monastic complex is on the island of Marawah, and the site (MR-11) featured a group of stone-covered mounds. It lies on a promontory that is today several hundred metres inland, but which overlooks a silted *sabkha* embayment that may well have still been a tidal inlet at the time that the complex was in use.<sup>11</sup> Identified during the first season of work by the Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey in 1992,<sup>12</sup> the site was not excavated until spring 2000, when a mound on the south side of the group was investigated.<sup>13</sup> The mound proved to conceal a building with an apsidal end that was, in other respects, identical in dimensions and layout to the church on Sir Bani Yas. The south chambers of both buildings, for example, had a partition wall that, on Sir Bani Yas, has been interpreted as the foundation for a bell-tower.<sup>14</sup> Externally, the Marawah church showed signs of attempts at more sophistication, such as the construction of large buttresses. This might possibly indicate that the structure was intended to be grander than that on Sir Bani Yas, and suggests

10. ADIAS, found at [www.adias-uae.com/radiocarbon.html](http://www.adias-uae.com/radiocarbon.html). (Radiocarbon Archive, 2001).

11. Professor Graham Evans (personal communication: August, 2001).

12. GRD King, *Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey* (1998), p. 79.

13. J. Elders, "The Nestorians in the Gulf."

14. *Ibid.*

that construction of the Marawah church may have begun later than that on Sir Bani Yas. No floors were identified within the Marawah structure, and no decorated stucco was found during the first (2000) season of excavation. This could indicate that construction of the Marawah church was never completed, a hypothesis that will be further tested in due course by excavation of the other stone-covered mounds in the vicinity, on some of which undecorated plaster fragments can be identified.

As a result of the levelling of land for tree planting, on Sir Bani Yas the site of the church and its adjacent complex were subjected to extensive surface disturbance in the late 1970s or early 1980s, and the church walls survive to a height of less than a metre. On Marawah, in contrast, the site appears to be completely undisturbed, with the mounds surviving in places to a height of over two metres. Further excavation here may well reveal much more detailed evidence about the elevations of the structures than survives on Sir Bani Yas.

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Although virtually no finds were located during the Marawah excavation, fragmentary ceramic evidence from the vicinity suggests occupation in the early to middle of the First Millennium AD. Further excavation may provide more evidence for dating. To the west of the monastery and close to the shoreline, two lime-kilns (Site MR-6.1), presumably for the production of plaster, have been excavated and have produced radiocarbon dates of 640-851 AD and 679-891 AD.<sup>15</sup> The earlier end of the date range, in both cases, is closely correlated to the later of the two dates from Sir Bani Yas, and falls within the presumed time frame for the construction of the monastic complex on the island. Since no remains of plastered structures dating to the early Islamic period have been identified on Marawah or on neighbouring islands, with the exception of the monastery site, these kilns may be related to the complex, even if they continued in use for some time afterwards. If, however, the abandonment of the Sir Bani Yas monastic complex occurred during the middle or late 7<sup>th</sup> century AD and the Marawah complex was incomplete when abandoned, it is reasonable to suggest that the two events may have occurred at about the same time.

To summarize the archaeological information, it seems that the Sir Bani Yas site was founded sometime before the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD and became

15. ADIAS, Radiocarbon Archive (2001).

well established. Shortly before this complex was abandoned, work appears to have commenced on construction of the Marawah complex, perhaps as a sister community, but this work was never finished. Instead, both complexes were abandoned around the middle or late 7<sup>th</sup> Century AD, with no sign of destruction being evident. This indicates that their occupants had simply moved out when the buildings, at least in terms of their original functions, were of no further use. The fact that this date is within a few decades of the arrival of Islam in the Emirates seems unlikely to be a coincidence, although other factors may also have contributed to the decline of Christianity in the Emirates. There is evidence, for example, of a decline in Syria at around the same period, although that area was not conquered by the Moslem armies until the Umayyad period.<sup>16</sup> On the basis of the available archaeological information, therefore, it appears that Christianity was established in the UAE, at least on the islands of Abu Dhabi, in the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. At about the time that it was engaged in a process of expansion, at least in terms of physical structures, it was overwhelmed, peacefully, by the arrival of Islam. Since then, the UAE's history can be firmly placed within an Islamic context. Further evidence of pre-Islamic Christianity in the Emirates may yet be identified. Certainly, given the size and sophistication of the Sir Bani Yas and Marawah complexes, as well as the fact that the former was occupied over a considerable period of time, it is unlikely that the religion gained a foothold on only these two islands. Off the coastline of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, there are several other islands that may have been suitable for this type of occupation. On the island of Dalma, which is located in the far west and approximately 20 km. northwest of Sir Bani Yas, there is evidence of substantial occupation during the centuries immediately prior to the coming of Islam.<sup>17</sup>

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Such, then, is the archaeological evidence. It is appropriate now to attempt to place this physical evidence within its historical context, and attempt to determine when Christianity may first have arrived, and when and how it finally faded away.

<sup>16</sup> Dr. Emma Loosley (personal communication: November 2001).

<sup>17</sup> GRD King, *Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey* (1998), pp. 55-57; 63-64.



## 2. Historical Context

The presence of Christianity in Arabia in the centuries before the Prophet Mohammed is well recorded,<sup>18</sup> and the existence of Christians in the peninsula at the time of the Prophet is testified to in the Holy Quran itself. The faith appears to have first entered the peninsula from the Roman Province of Arabia, to the north, which stretched from south of Damascus to the vicinity of today's Jordanian border with Saudi Arabia. It later spread to Yemen, where, in around 350 AD, the King of Himyar was converted by Theophilus "the Indian," a missionary born in the Maldives.<sup>19</sup> Christianity's presence in eastern Arabia, however, is less well documented. The apostle St. Thomas is believed to have reached India during the early- to mid 1<sup>st</sup> Century AD, founding a Christian community that still survives today. Presumably, St. Thomas and his successors, who followed the well-documented maritime trade routes from Mesopotamia and down the Arabian Gulf to the East, made contact with the inhabitants of Eastern Arabia. However, if they succeeded in introducing Christianity to the area at this early period, no archaeological evidence of it has yet been found.

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Until the early 4th century AD, Christianity in the region may well have spread partly as a by-product of mercantile activity. In both the Sasanian Empire, which commenced in the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century, and the eastern Roman Empire, the religion had no official status. While it was stronger in the Roman Empire, the presence of its adherents in Rome's eastern rival, the Sasanian Empire, was not perceived as being of major political significance. In 312 AD, however, Christianity was adopted by the Emperor Constantine as the official religion of Rome, and its adherents were then, not surprisingly, viewed with some suspicion by the Sasanian authorities. Encouraged by followers of the Sasanian state religion, Zoroastrianism, repression followed, particularly between the period from 339 to 410, and then again between 420 and 438.<sup>20</sup> The Sasanian repression of Christianity,

18. GRD King, "The Coming of Islam and the Islamic Period in the UAE", in I. Al Abed, and P. Hellyer, eds., *The United Arab Emirates: A New perspective* (UK: Trident Press, 2001), pp. 70-97.

19. D.T. Potts, *The Arabian Gulf in Antiquity, Vol. II: From Alexander the Great Until the Coming of Islam* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 330-333, and J.S. Trimingham, *Christianity Among the Arabs* (1979), pp. 291-292.

20. D.T. Potts, *The Arabian Gulf in Antiquity, Vol. II* (1990), p. 242, and Catholic Encyclopedia (Persia), found at [www.newadvent.org/cathen/11712a.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11712a.htm).

both in Mesopotamia and Persia, may well have led to an exodus of Arab Christians into the Gulf. Certainly, the presence of Christians in the Gulf is known from the late 4<sup>th</sup> Century (*see below*). In 410, seventy years of repression were ended at the Council of Seleucia, which was held in Mesopotamia under the patronage of the Sasanian emperor Yazdagird, during the patriarchate of Mar Isaac. This Council declared the Church in the Sasanian dominions, including the areas under their influence on the Arabian coastline of the Gulf, to be self-governing. This decision was confirmed at the Synod of Markabta in 424, where Dadisho "the Aramean," *Catholicos* of Seleucia, was recognized as "Patriarch of the East."<sup>21</sup> The Church later became known as the Church of the East, and was later described as Nestorian, after the teachings of the Patriarch Nestorius, although it did not fully follow the approach of Nestorius, whose teachings were condemned at the First Council of Ephesus, in 431. Although subsequently much depleted and divided, the Church survives today in the form of the Assyrian Orthodox Church.

The earliest reliable historical work of relevance to Christianity in the lower Arabian Gulf is the *Vitae Ionaë*, a work that describes the life of a monk who lived in the middle of the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD. The *Vitae Ionaë* provides evidence of the extension of Christianity to the eastern Gulf. It mentions, for example, the existence of a monastery in Bet Qatraye, "on the borders of the black island."<sup>22</sup> This island has not been identified. Although the geology of several of the islands of the UAE, including Sir Bani Yas, is such that they appear dark from a distance, the date is too early for either of the UAE monasteries. According to the Nestorian Chronicle of Seert, a monk named Abdiso, who founded many monasteries during the Patriarchate of the *Catholicos* Tomarsa (363-371), is said to have established one on an island called Ramat. This island has been tentatively identified with the area of Abu 'Ali island, which is just north of the Saudi Arabian coastal town of Jubayl, where a church has also been identified.<sup>23</sup>

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21. J.S. Trimingham, *Christianity Among the Arabs* (1979), p. 243; D.T. Potts, *The Arabian Gulf in Antiquity* (1990), Vol. II, p. 333; D.T. Potts, "Before the Emirates: An Archaeological and Historical Account of Developments in the Region ca. 5000 BC to 676 AD," in I. Al Abed, and P. Hellyer, *The UAE—A New Perspective* (2001), pp. 59-60.

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 59-60.

23. D.T. Potts, *The Arabian Gulf in Antiquity*, Vol. II (1990), p. 245.

Records of the Synod of Mar Isaac, in 410, specifically mention the establishment of a diocese of "Ardai and Todor," with a Bishop Paulus being named. Ardai is another name for the island of Darin [or Tarut], which is located off the eastern coast of Saudi Arabia. By 585, the diocese also included the islands of "Ruha Yateba" and "Talwan,"<sup>24</sup> neither of which can now be identified, and the mention of these two islands presumably suggests that churches or monastic communities had been established on them. By 410, a diocese also existed at Masmahig (Muharraq, one of the islands of Bahrain). Its bishop, Batai, was excommunicated and deposed at the 410 Synod because of his disagreements with changes in the church. He was replaced by Elias.<sup>25</sup> Bet Qatraye, sometimes also called "The Isles," was the ecclesiastical province covering Kuwait, eastern Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Qatar. Several other Christian settlements, both monasteries and churches, have now been found within the province, including two in Kuwait, two more in Saudi Arabia, and at least one in Qatar.<sup>26</sup> To the south of Bet Qatraye was the province of Bet Mazunaye, a Syriac name derived from Mazun, the Persian word for Oman and the UAE. The border between the two provinces appears to have been somewhere in the region of the Qatar peninsula and the western UAE, perhaps in the vicinity of the Sabkhat Matti, an extensive coastal and inland *sabkha* that provides an effective barrier to movement by land between Qatar and the UAE. It is not yet possible to determine into which province the Sir Bani Yas settlement fell. It is slightly to the east of the Sabkhat Matti, but it is, nonetheless, fairly close to the Qatar peninsula. Presumably the Marawah settlement, further to the east, was in Bet Mazunaye.

Christian communities were certainly present in southeastern Arabia by the early 5<sup>th</sup> Century AD. This is shown by the attendance at the Markabta Synod in 424 AD of a Bishop Yohannon, a delegate from Bet Mazunaye, the province covering the UAE and Oman. The acts of Markabta Synod provide the first evidence of the province of Bet

24. J.S. Trimmingham, *Christianity Among the Arabs* (1979), p. 281.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 281.

26. GRD King, in I. Al Abed and P. Hellyer, *The United Arab Emirates—A New Perspective* (2001), p. 78.

Mazunaye,<sup>27</sup> and one can presumably assign the establishment of Christianity in the UAE and Oman roughly to this period. This, it should be noted, predated the emergence of the divisions that led to the establishment of the Church of the East and, of course, of the First Council of Ephesus in 431, at which the teachings of Nestorius were condemned. Although it may later have been dubbed "Nestorian," the form of Christianity that reached southeastern Arabia owed nothing to Nestorius.

One key feature of the Church of the East was monasticism, which had originally been introduced into Mesopotamia in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century AD. This took two forms: the establishment of formal monastic (cenobitic) communities, and the adoption by some monks of an eremitic or "hermit" life. The latter are said to have lived "in caves and rude huts. These were influential enough among the Qatrayi (the Nestorian province that broadly covers current day Bahrain, eastern Saudi Arabia and Qatar), ... to call for a separate letter from the Patriarch Ishuyabh I (582-595)."<sup>28</sup> No evidence of their presence in Bet Mazunaye has yet been identified, although it is reasonable to assume that they, as well as larger, monastic communities, may also have been present.

A key factor in the spread of Christianity through Eastern Arabia may have been the influence of the Bani Lakhm tribe, whose base was at al-Hira in southern Iraq. Emerging as a semi-autonomous client state of the Sasanians and performing the task of a useful buffer between the Sasanians and the Eastern Roman Empire, the Bani Lakhm had many Christians amongst them. From about 450 to c. 530, they were supplanted in much of eastern Arabia by the Kinda, allies of the Himyarite rulers of Yemen, but the Bani Lakhm recovered their power in approximately 530. The Sasanian emperor Khusraw I Anosirwan (531-579) then named the Lakhmid king al-Mundhir III bin Nu'man III, whose wife was a Christian, as "king of the area of Oman, al-Bahrain, al-Yamama as far as Taif and the rest of the Hijaz."<sup>29</sup> During and just after the period of Kinda supremacy in eastern Arabia, there was a lapse in the attendance at synods by delegates from Bet Qatraye, with Bishop David of Mazun being the only one from the region present at the synod of Mar Aba I in 544. There then fol-

27. D.T. Potts, *The Arabian Gulf in Antiquity, Vol. II* (1990), pp. 246-247.

28. Catholic Encyclopaedia (Persia), found at [www.newadvent.org/cathen/11712a.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11712a.htm)

29. D.T. Potts, *The Arabian Gulf in Antiquity, Vol. II* (1990), p. 249.

lowed, however, an apparent revival, with Bishop Samuel from Bet Mazunaye being present at the synod of Mar Ezekiel (Hazqiyal) in 576 as well as bishops from Bet Qatraye.<sup>30</sup> It is tempting to suggest that this revival may have been reflected in the ground with the establishment of more monastic settlements on some of the UAE's islands. Of the two radiocarbon dates so far obtained from the Sir Bani Yas settlement, the earliest is 432-678 AD. The second, as will be seen below, postdates the arrival of Islam.<sup>31</sup>

Ezekiel was *Catholicos* from 569-581 and is recorded as having made a patriarchal visitation to some of the coastal churches in the Gulf. He also reported to the Sasanian ruler, Khusraw I, on a survey of the pearl fisheries, an indication of their economic importance at the time.<sup>32</sup> The fact that the Nestorian *Catholicos* was chosen by the emperor to conduct the survey may indicate that the Christian communities along the Arabian Gulf coast were involved in the pearl trade in some way, although no archaeological evidence has yet been uncovered to support such a suggestion.

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The last Bani Lakhm King, Nu'man IV bin Mundhir (583 to c. 602), himself became a Christian. The details of the conversion are unclear. Some reports suggest that the event may have occurred c. 593,<sup>33</sup> but whatever the precise details, the event is likely to have provided a boost to Christianity along the coast and islands of the Arabian side of the Gulf. Approximately in 602, al-Numan had a falling out with his Sasanian patrons. He was imprisoned, died soon after, and the virtual independence of the Bani Lakhm state came to an end. It is tempting to suggest that when the forces of Islam arrived a few decades later, Bani Lakhm support for the Moslem armies may well have been driven in part by their desire to take revenge on the Sasanians.

As has been noted earlier, there were two separate ecclesiastical provinces of the Nestorian Church in eastern Arabia: Bet Mazunaye, which included Oman and the United Arab Emirates, and Bet Qatraye, which extended from the Qatar peninsula in the south up to Kuwait in the

30. *Ibid.*, p. 338, and D.T. Potts, "Before the Emirates," p. 60.

31. ADIAS, Radiocarbon Archive (2001).

32. J.S. Trimmingham, *Christianity Among the Arabs* (1979), p. 281.

33. D.T. Potts, *The Arabian Gulf in Antiquity*, Vol. II (1990), p. 253.

north, and encompassed eastern Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. Both were officially subordinate to the Metropolitan of Rev-Ardasir, near Bushire on the Persian side of the Gulf, rather than directly to the *Catholicos* at Seleucia-Ctesiphon, which was just south of Baghdad. Indeed, it has been suggested<sup>34</sup> that from the time of its founding in about 415, Rev-Ardasir did not accept the authority of the *Catholicos* until a settlement was reached between its Metropolitan, Simeon, and Iso'yahb, after the coming of Islam. Shortly after the Muslim conquest of Persia, the province of Bet Qatraye followed Rev-Ardasir in rejecting the authority of Seleucia-Ctesiphon.<sup>35</sup> Bet Qatraye also rejected the authority of the Metropolitan of Rev-Ardasir, opting for a completely independent provincial status and electing one of their own bishops, Thomas, as Metropolitan, the only time that this title was ever used in this province. Its reconciliation with Seleucia did not take place until 676. This schism probably also extended to Bet Mazunaye, although the evidence from the historical record is unclear.<sup>36</sup>

The precise details of the internal dissensions that led to the breakaway of Rev-Ardasir and then of the southeastern Arabian provinces require further study. It is reasonable to suggest, however, that with the collapse of Sasanian political authority, the Christian community in southeastern Arabia was no longer prepared to accept the ecclesiastical authority of a Metropolitan on the Iranian side of the Gulf. The *Catholicos* Iso'yahb III (647-658) is recorded as having written a series of letters to the bishops, monks and people of Bet Qatraye, criticizing them for having separated from the rest of the Church, for unlawfully ordaining priests and bishops, and, significantly, for conversions to Islam from amongst their number.<sup>37</sup> He is also recorded as having sent two bishops to the province c. 650 to try to effect a reconciliation, although this prompted a complaint from the bishops of Rev-Ardasir to the new Muslim authorities, seeking their support. Although Bet Mazunaye is never specifically mentioned as having been a party to the divisions in the church, the problem of conversion

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34. J.M. Fiey, *Dioceses Syriens Orientaux de Golfe Persique* (Louvain, 1969), p. 184, cited in Potts, D.T., *The Arabian Gulf in Antiquity*, Vol. II (1990), p. 260.

35. D.T. Potts, *The Arabian Gulf in Antiquity*, Vol. II (1990), p. 261.

36. *Ibid.*, pp. 261-262.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 261.

clearly extended to Bet Mazunaye, for, in a letter to the Metropolitan Simeon of Rev-Ardasir, Iso'yahb specifically lamented the conversions of "your people of Mazun," suggesting that they had followed this course not because they had been forced to do so, but because they were unwilling to surrender half of their property for the right to retain their faith.<sup>38</sup>

The fate of the Christian communities of southeastern Arabia in the decades after the coming of Islam is unclear. In Bet Qatraye, further north, there is textual evidence of Christian communities surviving well into the new era. Christian Arabs in this area are recorded as having been employed in the new Government, as tax-collectors, for example, until late in the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD, and the presence of Christians is attested to until at least the late 9<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>39</sup> To the southeast, the continued survival of Christian communities is indicated by the presence of a Bishop Stephen from Bet Mazunaye at a synod held in 676 under the aegis of *Catholicos* Mar George I (661-680) on the island of Darin (Tarut), in eastern Saudi Arabia.<sup>40</sup> By this time, the secession of the southeastern Arabian provinces had clearly come to an end. The synod was preceded by a tour of several Nestorian communities on islands in the Gulf, where problems of declining flocks and conversions to Islam continued to be reported.<sup>41</sup> Although it is not possible to identify the islands, it is certainly plausible that island communities in Bet Mazunaye as well as Bet Qatraye were visited, and amongst them, perhaps, was Sir Bani Yas. The excavations on Sir Bani Yas indicate that the monastic community was abandoned around this time. The later of the two radiocarbon dates from the site, from the squatter occupation that followed the abandonment of the complex, provides a date of 644-863 AD,<sup>42</sup> while the ceramic record from the site indicates occupation only into the period of the Umayyad Caliphate.

At the Darin synod, bishops from Darin, Hajar and Hatta were present, although Bishop Abraham of Masmahig, in Bahrain, refused to attend. The agreement of these bishops to abandon their secession from the rest of the Church may indicate their recognition of the need for external support at a time when the Church throughout the region was affected by a

38. *Ibid.*, p. 346.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 262.

40. *Ibid.*

41. *Ibid.*

42. ADIAS, Radiocarbon Archive (2001).

wave of conversions, as well as by the new political order.<sup>43</sup> Also present, as noted, was Bishop Stephen of Bet Mazunaye. This was the last time that a bishop from the UAE and Oman, or from Bet Qatraye, is recorded as having attended a Nestorian synod, and it is reasonable to assume that the Christian community in Mazunaye disintegrated shortly thereafter, although it held together further north.<sup>44</sup> Thus by the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD, Christianity in the Emirates seems to have vanished, although it continued, in a much truncated form, further up the Gulf. The only surviving echo is a tradition among a sept of the Manasir, one of the *Bedu* tribes of Abu Dhabi, that they had been Christian before the coming of Islam, although they themselves may then have been primarily resident in eastern Saudi Arabia rather than in the UAE. Curiously, as the church in eastern Arabia fell into decline with the coming of Islam, the greatest successes of Nestorian missionary endeavour also took place. In 635, the first Nestorian mission reached China, and over the course of the next couple of centuries, Nestorian Christianity became well implanted in Central Asia and Western China, surviving in Central Asia for even longer, where it was briefly adopted by some of the Mongol rulers.

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The presence of Christianity in the UAE and northern Oman in the pre-Islamic period is now well documented. The monastic settlements on Sir Bani Yas and Marawah, however, are the only archaeological evidence that has yet come to light, although the names of several bishops from Bet Mazunaye are recorded among participants at Synods from 410 to 676, and there are historical references to a church at Sohar on the Batinah Coast of Oman, the seat of the most important bishop of Bet Mazunaye. Unlike Bet Qatraye, there is no literary evidence of the presence of large numbers of Christians among the Arab tribes, or in the coastal towns. It may be the case, perhaps, that while Christianity was certainly known to the people of the Emirates, it never established a strong foothold and, with the coming of Islam, it rapidly and completely disappeared.

There remains the question of why Christianity vanished so quickly in the Emirates, while it survived much longer in northeastern Arabia and, of course, in Mesopotamia and Iran. Little research has yet been done on this topic. A study of the Nestorian records, however, reveals two factors

43. D.T. Potts, *The Arabian Gulf in Antiquity*, Vol. II (1990), p. 262.

44. *Ibid.*.



that may be of some significance. First, although the headquarters of the *Catholicos* of the Nestorian Church was at Seleucia-Ctesiphon in Iraq, and the church had many Arab adherents in northeastern Arabia, the province of Bet Qatraye was, apart from its brief secession in the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD, dependent upon Rev-Ardasir, in southern Iran, rather than being directly subject to the *Catholicos*. Did this, perhaps, indicate that it became more influenced by the Persian Christians than other areas? That this may have been the case is shown by evidence that the Persian, as well as the Syriac language, was used in its liturgy.<sup>45</sup> Thus it is certainly conceivable that some of the occupants of the monasteries on Sir Bani Yas and on Marawah may have used Persian rather than Arabic as their main language. Although this does not necessarily mean that local Arabs were not amongst their number, such a linguistic connection with the defeated Sasanian Empire would certainly not have proved a source of strength once the Arab Muslim Caliphate had been established and the Sasanian yoke had been thrown off. Indeed, perhaps the secession of the south-eastern Arabian Christians from the authority of the Persian Metropolitan at Rev-Ardasir was related, directly or indirectly, to these important political changes.

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May one suggest, then, that the reports of large-scale conversions to Islam represented a process in which Christian Arab monks of Bet Qatraye and Bet Mazunaye, as well as other Christians among the wider population, adopted the new faith for reasons of cultural identity with the now-dominant Muslims? This would have left a rapidly declining rump of Persian-speaking monks who eventually gave up the struggle, suspended the construction of the Marawah monastery, and let that on Sir Bani Yas fall into decay.

Whatever the fate of the inhabitants of the monastic communities, occupation of the islands of Abu Dhabi and of the rest of the Arabian Gulf coastline of the United Arab Emirates certainly continued into the early Islamic period. The archaeological record from this period is still fairly scant, due partly to the fact that a full survey of the islands of Abu Dhabi has yet to be completed, and the extensive development of recent years is likely to have obliterated evidence of many sites. The continuation of pop-

45. D.T. Potts, *The Arabian Gulf in Antiquity*, Vol. II (1990), pp. 244-245.

ulations on the islands, however, is attested to by the squatter occupation of the (presumably abandoned) buildings of the Sir Bani Yas complex (King 1998). On the nearby island of Dalma, Site DA7 has produced ceramics of typically late Sasanian/ early Islamic type.<sup>46</sup> A number of sites, tentatively dated from ceramic evidence to the early Islamic period, have also been identified on other islands, including Abu al-Abyadh, between Marawah and the island of Abu Dhabi,<sup>47</sup> and Jubayl, to the northeast of Abu Dhabi. Ceramics from the 9<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries have also been collected on the island of Abu Dhabi itself.<sup>48</sup> Further north, the settlement of Kush, at the village of Shimal in Ra's al-Khaimah, continued to be occupied throughout the period from around the 4<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, while by the 9<sup>th</sup> Century AD, a large settlement had been established at Jumeirah, southwest of Dubai.

It is noteworthy, however, that evidence for the occupation of the Arabian Gulf coastal areas and islands of the United Arab Emirates during the early Islamic period is considerably rarer than evidence for occupation in the late pre-Islamic period, covering, broadly, the first half of the First Millennium BC. The reasons for this apparent decline in population have yet to be identified. Settlement on the coast and islands of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi has, however, always been at a low level.

As far as the disappearance of Christianity from the islands (and the mainland?) is concerned, one possibility, as yet unproven, is that a significant proportion of the population of the monastic communities simply left. There is circumstantial evidence for such a suggestion in the remaining archaeological evidence. Apart from the short-lived squatter occupation of parts of the Sir Bani Yas settlement, there is little sign that the buildings, whether the churches or others, continued in use, and, as has been seen, the Marawah complex may never even have been completed. This may suggest that the monastic communities themselves, although located on each island in places that were close to the coastline, and, therefore, likely to have been in regular contact with the coastal fishing and pearling communities, may have maintained themselves in a manner that was

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46. GRD King, *Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey* (1998), pp. 55-57.

47. P. Hellyer and D. Hull, "The Archaeology of Abu Al-Abyadh," in *The Natural History and Archaeology of the Island of Abu Al-Abyadh* (Abu Dhabi, ERWDA, in press).

48. R.A. Carter, "New Evidence For the Medieval Occupation of Abu Dhabi," *Tribulus*, Vol. 10.1 (Abu Dhabi, ENHG, 2000), pp. 10-11.

clearly distinct from these communities. Extensive surveys of Sir Bani Yas and Marawah, although identifying numerous archaeological sites, have failed to identify any evidence of settled, non-monastic, communities, such as have been found in the island of Dalma, northwest of Sir Bani Yas, and, more widely, on the eastern littoral of Saudi Arabia.

Occupation of the islands of Abu Dhabi during the Late Islamic period (c. 15<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century), except a few like Dalma, with good supplies of fresh water, appears to have been semi-nomadic, with communities moving from place to place depending on the timing of the annual pearling harvest and the availability of resources, such as dugong herds and nesting turtles. The archaeological evidence which has been identified thus far suggests that a similar pattern of life prevailed during the late pre-Islamic, early and mid-Islamic periods. Although suitable stone is present on most islands, such communities do not appear to have constructed substantial stone buildings, with the exception of the occasional rough stone mosque, of which several Late Islamic examples survive, including one each on Sir Bani Yas and Marawah, although these are well away from the monastery sites. Therefore, it may be that the buildings of the abandoned monastic complexes were largely neglected by the fishing and pearling communities because they were unsuited to their lifestyles. This, if indeed it were the case, lends weight to the suggestion that some of the inhabitants of the monasteries simply moved away. Perhaps some joined monks at other declining communities in larger centres elsewhere that survived longer, and others, having adopted Islam, had no further use for the buildings. At any rate, the apparent abandonment of the buildings of the monastic complexes does suggest that their inhabitants had followed a lifestyle that was not closely integrated with that of the nearby fishing and pearling communities, perhaps indicating that the monks were themselves not drawn from these communities but from elsewhere.

Finally, it is appropriate to try to address the issue of the economy of the monastic communities, particularly that on Sir Bani Yas, which clearly thrived for a century or more. Although only a limited number of artefacts have been found during the excavations, mainly from the courtyard houses rather than from the church itself, these include items that indicate a relatively well-to-do lifestyle (albeit one that would, no doubt, have been influenced by the constraints of monasticism). One of the houses, for

example, has produced high quality imported glass vessels, including a small goblet and a much larger vessel, and the location of the finds suggests a domestic rather than a liturgical use. The fine quality of the plaster work also suggests considerable sophistication.

It has been noted above that during the late 6<sup>th</sup> century, the Nestorian *Catholicos* Mar Ezekiel undertook a patriarchal visitation of the coastal and presumably island churches of the Gulf and, at the same time, carried out a survey of the pearl fisheries for the Sasanian emperor. Does this, perhaps, suggest that the monastic communities were involved in the profitable pearling trade? If so, Sir Bani Yas and Marawah would both have been useful points of contact with the pearl fishermen. Both islands lie close to the best pearling banks in the Southern Gulf, and have numerous middens of oyster shells, indicating that their inhabitants were extensively involved in the pearl industry. Further investigation of this aspect is required, but it is certainly possible that the network of Nestorian settlements on the coast and islands of the Gulf may have played a role in the late pre-Islamic pearling industry, acting perhaps as intermediaries. In the period immediately after the arrival of Islam, the collapse of the Sasanian Empire and the advance of the Arab-Muslim armies to the east would have severely disrupted the pearl trade and the communities that depended upon it. By the time that relative tranquillity returned, the monasteries, in the United Arab Emirates at least, were gone, and other merchants had moved in to fill the gap ■

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