

# A Dilmun temple in Bilad al-Qadim, Bahrain: A preliminary indication?

Excavations and surveys completed in the putative former Early Islamic capital, Bilad al-Qadim in Bahrain, uncovered a variety of structural remains of seemingly pre-Islamic date. These, an altar, ashlar and column drums recorded at the disused spring of Abu Zaydan, are conceivably from a Dilmun period structure, perhaps a temple. This idea is briefly explored and the relevant material described.

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## Introduction

During the course of archaeological research completed in the area of Bilad al-Qadim in the northeast of Bahrain in 2001, trial excavations and survey were undertaken at the spring of Abu Zaydan (N26° 12' 24.5" E050° 32' 50.7"). The focus of this research project was to investigate the Islamic period on Bahrain, hence the remains recorded at Abu Zaydan were unexpected, comprising as they did substantial limestone ashlar, an altar table reused upside down and column drums of seemingly pre-Islamic date.

## Abu Zaydan

Al-Idrisi in his book *Nuzhat al-Mushtaq* refers to the spring of Abu Zaydan in the mid-twelfth century (1). As attention within the 'Early and Middle Islamic Bahrain' project was focused upon all possible settlement components in Bilad al-Qadim (2), the putative Islamic capital on Bahrain during these periods, water sources were obviously included. Fortunately, the spring of Abu Zaydan survives, although it is now dry. However its recent use is reasonably well attested. Belgrave, for example, refers to the 'Abu Zaidan Mosque' built over the spring of the same name being repaired (1960s?) by the Government of Bahrain, and to it being 'much used by the Shia people of Manama, especially by

the women during weddings' (3). Lewcock also provides a recent brief description of the architecture of this 'most beautiful mosque' (4), whilst Durand provides the earlier historical perspective in describing the spring as serving 'as the foundation of part of the walls of a small mosque' (5).

Unfortunately the ruinous and dangerous state of the mosque meant that this structure could not be planned as originally envisaged and thus attention was shifted to the pool itself. This is lined on three sides and over some of its base by a covering of white ceramic tiles, many now cracked and dislodged, with the fourth, northern end being formed by the natural spring mouth itself (Fig. 1). Also incorporated within the pool, in fact providing support to a central pillar holding up the floor of the overhead mosque from the bed of the spring itself, are four stone drums. These are sizeable pieces of masonry as the dimensions given in Table 1 indicate.

Moreover, it can be seen in Figure 2 that the second from the top is in fact an upturned altar or libations table complete with channel to allow sacrificial material to flow off. A more prosaic function, that it had formed part of a grinding mill, seems much more unlikely because parallels for such a function are unknown. Durand seems to describe this column when he refers to 'a stone pillar with 2 circular stones as a basement rising from the



Fig. 1.  
View of the Abu Zaydan pool. Note ashlars to the left of the column in the pool wall.

Table 1. Dimensions of Abu Zaydan column drums.

Drum	Circumference	Height
1 (top)	297 cm	46 cm
2 (with spout)	366 cm	40 cm
3	475 cm	35 cm
4	Similar to 3 but impossible to measure owing to it being partially embedded in the ground	30 cm



Fig. 2.  
Close-up of the upturned altar table.

water supports part of the superstructure' (6). However, four drums now clearly support the column and he does not refer to the spout on the second drum (the altar); an omission which is uncharacteristic, unless it was actually under water

at the time, which seems likely, and he did not venture in for a personal investigation. Further substantial ashlar are embedded in the eastern wall of the pool. Parallels for both the altar tables and the ashlar are most easily drawn from pre-Islamic structural remains, the former specifically with the circular altar blocks described recently by Andersen and Højlund from Barbar Temples I and II (7).

This suggests a Dilmun period date for these structural remains. Unfortunately, contextual support for a Dilmun presence in Bilad al-Qadim is lacking, although it is highly unlikely that this fertile area of the island, assuming continuity of fertility, would have been ignored then, as now. McNicoll and Roaf refer to Bilad al-Qadim as one of the main Dilmun sites on Bahrain, although they mention that the 'Barbar period Tell' had been destroyed by the time of their research in the mid-1970s (8). Durand



Fig. 3.  
The spring mouth after excavation.

also describes the noticeable large mounds in 'Bilad-i-Kadim', the residue of 'the ancient city, where, probably from time immemorial, building has been piled upon building' (9). He also refers to a stone, possibly the foot of a large statue which he bought from a mosque in Bilad al-Qadim, the 'Madrassah-i-Daood' (10), a structure since destroyed, as indeed is the sculptural fragment (11); however, a replica of the latter exists in the Bahrain National Museum, complete with its well-known inscription in cuneiform referring to a builder of a palace who describes himself as the servant of the god Inzak.

Excavation of the deposits within the pool and spring mouth at Abu Zaydan provided no information as to occupation surrounding or use of the spring during this or any period earlier than the Islamic era. The material removed from Abu Zaydan was treated stratigraphically in the hope that some dateable evidence might be forthcoming. However, the layer which was given context number AZ01-1, and which varied in depth between 20 and 80 cm, contained predominantly modern material: coke bottles, plastic, modern glass, a child's marble, cloth and a newspaper from 1993. AZ01-2, the context encompassing the spring mouth (Fig. 3) seemed more promising, being a dark silt deposit lacking the obvious contamination of the layer above. Nevertheless, this deposit, though sieved in its entirety, yielded only a handful of water-worn sherds of ceramic, of indeterminate age. This is

perhaps to be expected on two grounds. Firstly, the context, a spring mouth, would suggest that any material therein would suffer perturbation and consequent erosion, and secondly, a spring, including its mouth, would be kept clean to ensure the smooth flow of water and hygienic bathing conditions. Hence any archaeological material, except the most elusive sherds, would have been removed, as was proved to be correct.

### Conclusions

Whether the ashlar and altar table/column bases indicate the presence of a Dilmun period temple in situ in Bilad al-Qadim, or the reuse of building material, potentially of Dilmun period date but brought in from elsewhere, is unclear, based upon the currently available evidence. Frifelt has suggested that the extensive stone robbing evident at Barbar Temple was potentially for reuse in Bilad al-Qadim, perhaps in the Al-Khamis mosque (12). The material in Abu Zaydan is conceivably from this source as well. However, it might conversely be evidence for the elusive Dilmun presence in Bilad al-Qadim. In order to settle this issue, further excavation is needed to the southeast of the pool in an area currently overgrown and strewn with rubbish but otherwise not utilised, and this is planned for the near future.

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