Archaeologists discover one of the earliest Christian buildings in Bahrain

July 12 2024, by Kerra Maddern

The building survived as it had a later mosque built on top of it. Credit: University of Exeter

Archaeologists have uncovered one of the earliest Christian buildings in the Arabian Gulf—the first physical evidence of a long-lost community.

Christianity today is not something usually associated with the Gulf, but the Church of the East, sometimes referred to as the Nestorian Church,
thrived there until large-scale conversion to Islam began to occur after the religion was established in 610 CE.

Radiocarbon dating indicates the building, in Samahij, Bahrain, was occupied between the mid-4th and mid-8th centuries when it was abandoned after the population converted to Islam.

The excavations, by British and Bahraini archaeologists, under a mound in a village cemetery revealed a large building with eight rooms surviving. These included a kitchen, a refectory or dining room, a possible work room, and three living rooms. It had survived as it had a later mosque built on top of it.

It is possible that the building was the palace of the Bishop of the diocese of which Samahij was part, called Meshmahig or Mašmahig in the historical sources, and a corruption of "Samahij." Records indicate that the relationship between Meshmahig and the central church authorities was not always smooth, with a bishop there excommunicated in 410 and in the mid-7th century another bishop condemned for challenging the unity of the Church.

Previously, the handful of Christian buildings—churches, monasteries, residences—dotted around the Gulf were found in small remote locations in Iran, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates and eastern Saudi Arabia, the majority later in date. Samahij is different because it is in the heart of a modern settlement.

The building was very well-constructed with stone walls, plastered inside, and with plaster floors. Sockets and holes indicated where doors and benches had been fixed internally, and the kitchen contained several hearths made from the bases or tops of amphorae like storage vessels.

The occupants had a good standard of living, eating pork, which ended
after Islamic conversion, fish, shellfish, and various crops which are in the process of being analyzed.

The discovery of carnelian semi-precious stone beads and numerous broken sherds of pottery of Indian origin indicates they were involved in trade, particularly with India.

The community also used glassware, including small wine glasses, a habit which ended in the Islamic era. The dozen copper coins recovered by archaeologists suggest they used coins minted in the Sasanian Empire.

Spindle whorls and copper needles were found in the building, so textiles may have been produced there for use in worship.

The Christian identity of the inhabitants is shown by three plaster crosses found, two that would have decorated the building, and one that could have been carried or kept as a personal memento, and by graffiti scratched into the plaster that includes part of what appear to be a Chi-Rho and a fish, both early Christian symbols.

The building was excavated between 2019 and 2023 as part of a project jointly led by Professor Timothy Insoll of the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies at the University of Exeter and Dr. Salman Almahari of the Bahrain Authority for Culture and Antiquities.

Professor Tim Insoll said, "We were amused to find someone had also drawn part of a face on a pearl shell in bitumen, perhaps for a child who lived in the building.

"This is the first physical evidence found of the Nestorian Church in Bahrain and gives a fascinating insight into how people lived, worked and worshiped."
A museum is now being developed at the site to preserve and present this remarkable survival and is planned to open in 2025.

Provided by University of Exeter

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