

The island of Dilmun

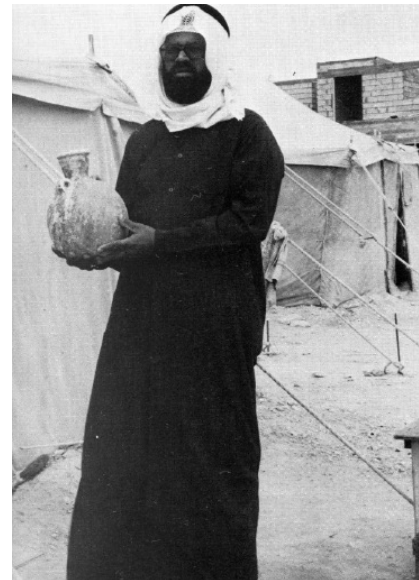
*In Dilmun the raven utters no cry,
the wild hen utters not the cry of the wild hen,
the lion kills not,
the wolf snatches not the lamb,
unknown is the kid-devouring wild dog,
unknown is the grain-devouring boar.*

Enki and Ninhursag

(Sumerian poem c 4000 BC)

Anyone who has read Geoffrey Bibby's *Looking for Dilmun: The search for a lost civilization* must yearn to visit the island of Dilmun, 'the place where the sun rises'. For me it was not only the Arab culture that beckoned, but there was also one more ancient, one dating from the early Bronze Age of the third millennium, which had chosen the island of Bahrain as a paradise, a land of beauty for immortals, an island that was to become the largest prehistoric cemetery in the world, sealing in stone and sand the mortal evidence of a bygone age in 170,000 burial mounds. Here, I believed, was to be found another *Tir na nOg*, a land of peace and beauty, of legend and myth, an island of potsherds, passage graves, raths and tumuli, the chastening evidence that greatness existed before our time, that man's mind has always soared on a dream and that the heights attained are dependent only on how high above the clouds the dreamer's fantasy reaches. Bahrain was all of this and much more.

The College of Surgeons in choosing Bahrain for the historic occasion of its first overseas meeting, chose wisely. Bahrain, though an Arab country espousing the Islamic religion, has acquired by virtue of its unique role as host over many centuries to traders and visitors from all parts of the world, a sense of hospitality which accepts the customs and traditions that are foreign to its own, while at the same time retaining the Arabian tradition that imparts to the island its own unique character. This balance is difficult to attain and other Moslem states have found it necessary to take measures, in varying degrees, to protect their culture. It would be well for visitors to the Middle East to recognize that there are some extremely undesirable attributes to the ethos they bring with them, not least of which is the discourtesy of propounding on Islamic religious customs without having taken the trouble to try to understand their complex origins and



Abdulaziz Ali Sowaijeh. Superintendent of Archaeology. holding a piece of recently excavated pottery

development, and to which the greatest threat must be the influence of the awesome banality of American television. However, surely the greatest disservice by western civilizations must have been the attempted exploitation of the Arab's hospitality and relatively new-found wealth without any thought for the consequences of such avarice on the development of this strategic part of the world. It would be disingenuous in this regard to fail to observe that the medical profession has not always behaved with the decorum commensurate with its perceived role as one that espouses humanitarian ideals and from which a certain spirit of altruism might not be inappropriate. The past tense is, hopefully, apt, as there is ample evidence to indicate that the Arabian countries have come to terms with the problems that beset all bounty.



An opened burial mound with two skeletons curled in the customary posture. A pottery vase is present at the head of the grave.

It may be well to note that the Arab's memory is not short. Friends are fondly cherished, the charlatan is soon recognized and, in time, expropriated. It would be the wish of the College to rank among the former, for its influence has been considerable and constructive. In medical education, the College and Ireland have played a substantial role in Kuwait, Iraq, Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Oman and Sudan, but it is through the undergraduate and post-graduate alumni of the medical school that the College will exert a lasting and beneficial impact on the health of these and neighbouring countries. The Minister for Health, Mr, Jawad Salem Al-Arayed, in acknowledging the influence of over forty Irish trained doctors and nurses in Bahrain, paid tribute to the College for holding a conference which exemplified one of the College's major attributes, namely a forum whereby countries of diverse cultures were brought together to exchange knowledge in the education of doctors for the treatment of mankind, and in the achievement of which race, nationality, religion and status should be of no concern. If all educational endeavour embraced these values, the essence of Islam 'peace be with you' would be acknowledged.

The meeting in Bahrain served as an opportunity for surgeons from the Gulf States to exchange ideas relating to the development of surgery in their countries with their Irish colleagues, and this exchange of views is of sufficient interest to merit publication (see p. 63), if for no other reason than to illustrate for us the enormous health-care problems that must be dealt with in the Middle East. The social highlights of the meeting are outlined elsewhere in this issue. I nurture three memories that shall endure. First, I had the good fortune to be introduced casually in the Souk to the Superintendent of Archaeology for the State of Bahrain, Abdulaziz Ali Sowaileh, who on hearing of

my interest in the Dilmun dynasty took a small group of us around the more recent excavations. We were privileged to experience the remarkable sensation that accompanies the gentle dusting away of the last layer of sand to reveal a piece of pottery or an exquisite ring with an agate set in silver dating from 3000 years. Such is the stuff of archaeology and how enlightening it was to see a policy of excavation that obliged the bulldozers of commerce to stand by while the archaeologists, under the experienced and watchful eye of Abdulaziz, painstakingly excavated and carefully archived their historic treasures for later display in a museum presently being built. Would that our philistine city fathers who permitted the desecration of Wood Quay might take note of the policies being enacted on another small island with a rich historic legacy.

My second lasting memory is of the hospitality shown to me by Essa Amin in his home and that of his mother where I glimpsed, hopefully not for the last time, the magic of a culture quite foreign to my own. Such is the essence of travel and herein lies the importance of meetings such as this first overseas meeting of the College in that the visitor is afforded the opportunity to give but more can be received than is ever given in that the traveller's perception of the unfamiliar, of the hitherto unknown, is enriched by a deeper understanding and a broadening of outlook.

I left Bahrain pondering the future of the land of Dilmun with a degree of pessimism, not because of anything obviously perceptible in the island now but because of the vulnerable honesty of an Arab taxi-driver, who in restoring to me my sunglasses, which I had assumed lost when I left them in his car the day earlier, assured me that nothing was ever stolen in Bahrain. To emphasize the point, he told me how a road-sweeper some months earlier had found, in the course of his labours, a packet containing some thousands of dollars by the kerbside of a bank where a wealthy foreigner had dropped it, and he had taken this precious trove representing more than he could hope to amass in two life-times to the bank. I, too, remembered a day when doors needed not locks and the old could live on their holdings in the countryside without fear of molestation. If one island culture had lost all this and much more in what might be euphemistically termed its emancipation, why not another? And yet there is something about the resilience of the Arab personality that leads me to think, to hope, that this will be otherwise. The world will be the poorer if it is not so.

Eoin O'Brien

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