
Molluscs beyond subsistence: The mollusc assemblages from Dibba al Hisn (Sharjah, UAE)

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Abstract

Molluscs play an important role within human societies that dates back to the Middle Palaeolithic. Subsistence has not been the sole cause for shellfishing as shell ornaments and tools appear in archaeological sites the world over since early times evidencing cultural practices that range from the economic to the symbolic spheres of society. This presentation provides a preliminary overview of the mollusc assemblages retrieved on the ancient (1st BCE-1st CE) port city of Dibba Al Hisn in the United Arab Emirate of Sharjah. The presence of imported pottery from Mesopotamia and India as well as Roman ware have already highlighted the strategic commercial role of the city as a trade outpost during Classical Antiquity. The shells derive from a complex multi-purpose building close to the shore postulated to represent a warehouse. This may partly explain the taphonomically diversified mollusc assemblage that, along with edible molluscs, includes a substantial collection of pearl shells (*Pinctada margaritifera* L. 1758 and *P. (imbricata) fucata/P. radiata*). Many pearl shells bear hints of manipulative traces and are concentrated in a room postulated to represent a workshop area. The dominance of non-food taxa, including species used as currency items, stresses the commercial context of the assemblage and lends weight to the hypothesis that Dibba al Hisn may have constituted a key outpost in the pearl trade routes of Classical Antiquity.

Keywords: Molluscs, Classical Antiquity, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, pearl shell, pearl trade

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