

# Human History & Neolithic Settlements

**D**ue to the enormous attention Petra as the antique capital of the Nabataean Kingdom got from over one million visitors per annum, various Neolithic sites in its vicinity have been excavated and preserved for visitors.

But let us take a step back and reflect over the development of human civilization and population in Egypt and the Near and Middle East.

New global DNA analysis has proven that the DNA of all races is to over 90% identical and if we like it or not, we all are descendents from the same African female as mother of the Homo Sapiens line.

We also know that different forms of the human race developed in the fertile African Rift Valley, which extended from today's South Africa

via Malawi, Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya to Egypt with the Eastern Rift Valley branching off to Ethiopia ending in the Red Sea at Djibouti. The African Rift Valley includes many lakes such as: Malawi, Tanganyika, Kivu, Edward, Albert, Victoria and Turkana.

We also learned that human civilization only developed close to water sources where humans and animals met for drinking and where hunting and gathering was easy. So the Nile and Jordan River plus the Euphrates and Tigris were key development areas of human civilization. This is why we find many Neolithic sites in these areas.

## First Settlements in Egypt

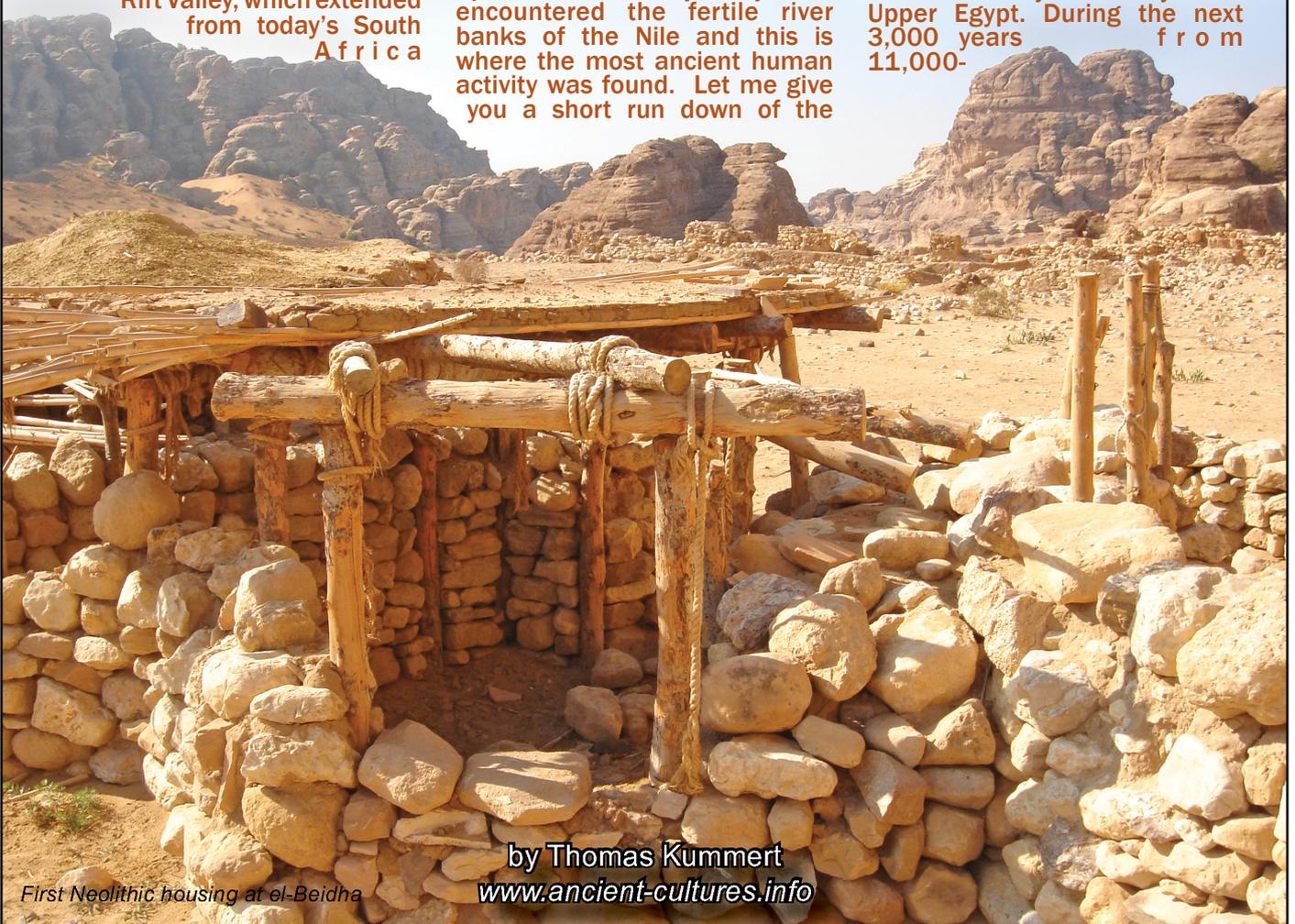
As Homo Sapiens moved up the Rift Valley they first encountered the fertile river banks of the Nile and this is where the most ancient human activity was found. Let me give you a short run down of the

different Paleolithic periods.

The Early Paleolithic Period lasted from 200,000-100,000BC and various Acheulean tools were found at Naga Ahmed el-Khalifa near Abydos on the banks of the Nile. Thereafter followed the Mid Paleolithic Period from 100,000-50,000BC with wide spread flint mining done between Asyut and Qena.

The first production of real flint blades happened at Nazlet Khater near Qaw during 50,000-21,000BC in the Late Paleolithic Period with the very first known underground mining in the world done during this period in Egypt around 33,000BC.

Thereafter developments happened much faster in the period 21,000-12,000BC during the Final Paleolithic Period with a wide variety of lifestyles in Upper Egypt. During the next 3,000 years from 11,000-



First Neolithic housing at el-Beidha

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8,000BC are archeological wise a blank page with no remains of any cultures found because of extreme Nile floods during this period.

Around 8,000BC the so-called Elkabian Culture developed in southern Upper Egypt at Elkab and the Qarunian Culture in Lower Egypt in the oasis Faiyum south of Cairo. From 7,000-4,000BC two different lifestyles developed parallel to each other: the Epipaleolithic hunter and gatherer lifestyle and the Neolithic farming and herding lifestyle, the latter was also called Pre-dynastic.

Before the ancient Egyptians formed real state structures headed by a king and later pharaoh, Egypt still had various independently developing local cultures such as the Badarian Culture around 6,500BC at Asyut which farmed emmer, barley and

flax and domesticated sheep, goat, pig and dogs.

During this period we find early clay modeling, jewelry, pottery, female figurines, as well as the earliest copper items. From 4,000-3,500BC the Amratian Culture also called Naqada I developed at Amrat and Hierakonpolis domesticating donkey and were the first to use bricks for buildings.

We also find war maces and, ladies please listen up, the first use of cosmetics!

Pottery during this period was a red ware with geometric patterns and white paint, occasional with simple depictions of animals and people. A few hundred years later the Gerzean Culture or Naqada II from 3,500-3,100BC produced a buff-ware pottery with brown or purple paintings including figures, ships and people.

Thereafter the Egyptian history started in 3,200BC with the Pre-dynastic Period, about which I have written eight various articles in earlier Sandladder issues.

### First Settlements in Levant

Levant is the ancient cultural area along the eastern Mediterranean coast line including the southern part of East Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine.

It might be true that, due to the enormous wealth of ancient Egyptian archeological sites, more pre-historic remains have been discovered in Egypt so far. But the first major settlements in Anatolia in Turkey can be dated back to 15,000BC and the first known man made place of worship with seven stone circles covering 25ha, was erected by hunter-gatherer tribes around 10,000BC in Göbekli Tepe.



Neolithic settlement possibly Natufian Culture with round & square houses in south Jordan



*Cluster of Neolithic huts*



*Group of round & square houses*

The first permanent settlements in West Jordan were found at Wadi an-Natuf dating back to 12,500-9,500BC. The Natuf Culture became dependent on wild cereals because of climate change forcing them to develop true farming with plants such as einkorn wheat, millet and spelt and breeding dogs, goats, sheep, pigs and cows.

This culture extended into Palestine, Jordan and Syria. Very similar cultures were also found at the time in southeast Anatolia and northeast Iraq.

Latest research dates Neolithic beginnings to around 10,700-9,500BC at Tell Qaramel 25km north of Aleppo. At the same time, the first round stone houses were excavated at Ain Gev on the east border of lake Tiberius, where mill stones and half moon shaped flint stone knives have

been found.

The final step to permanent settlements with farming and breeding of domesticated animals was taken in 10,000-6,000BC.

Figs were possibly the first cultivated crop as figs are of a mutant variety that cannot be pollinated by insects and therefore the trees can only reproduce from cuttings. This occurred in Jericho, the first known city with 3,000 inhabitants in 10,000BC and centuries before the first cultivation of grain.

Ruin hills with multi-level settlements were built on top of each other reaching heights of up to 30m. These ruin hills called in Arabic tell or tall, in Persian tepe and in Turkish höyük.

When reading archeological literature on the subject you certainly

will find references to the Hassuna and Samarra Culture both famous for their pottery found in Iraq around 6,000-5,000BC. In addition the Halaf Culture produced polychrome pottery in northeast Syria, which spread from Turkey to Iran around 5,000-4,000BC and the Obied Culture was differentiated into four phases around 4,500BC.

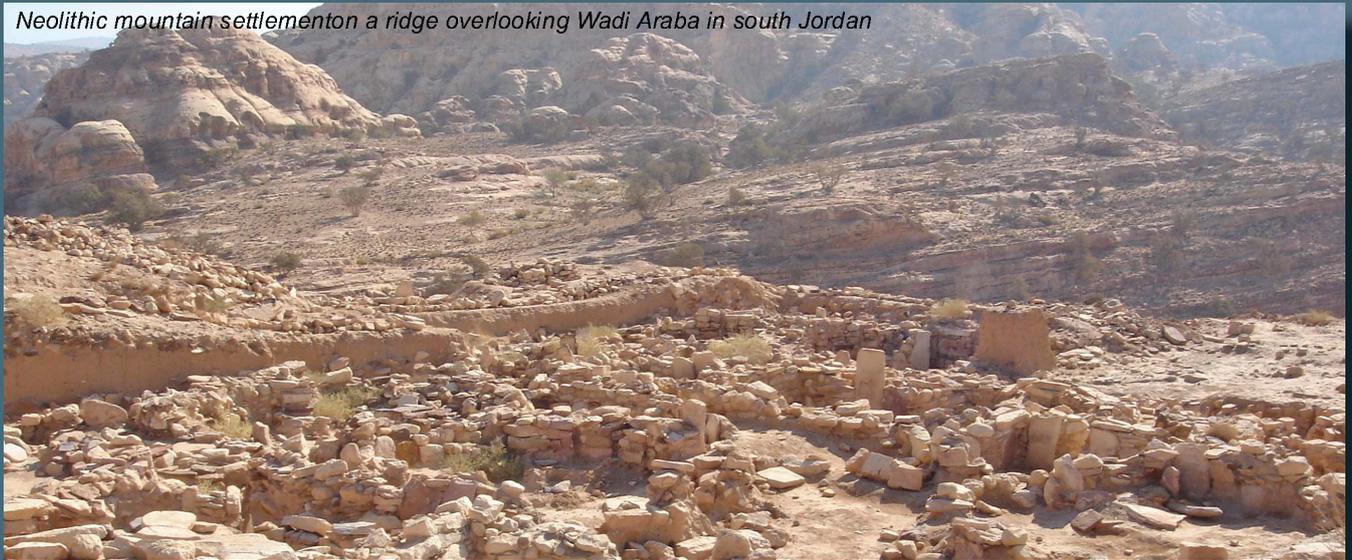
#### First Step to a Written Script

Once pottery was in wide spread use and trading started to take place covering ever longer distances, a simple way of identifying goods was necessary. To bridge the gap of different languages and dialects used around 7,000BC, the first clay or stone tokens called calculi were used in different forms with carvings representing goods or numbers. Those tokens were sealed in hollow clay balls also



*Second phase of housing at el-Beidha consisting now of square houses*

Neolithic mountain settlement on a ridge overlooking Wadi Araba in south Jordan



called bulla and were a simple symbol system to define good types and amounts.

At first they did not contain information of the origin of goods, their destination, time of transport or production and detailed product description plus transporting persons. All this information was added later, when the cuneiform script was developed in Ugarit, pressed with wooden sticks into wet clay platelets.

For the next 3,000 years they became the only means of communication with thousands of clay platelets found in Egypt and ancient capitals such as Babylon, Mari, Qatna and Ugarit.

Many of these detailed letters addressed from one ruler to another head of state give us deep insight into the ancient political and social environment and are, together with the few rock inscriptions, an excellent source of information from this period.

Please take note that human remains in the form of bones have been found in all these areas dating back hundreds of thousand years. But what we are focusing on

in this article is the development of human civilization with its first settlements and tool making. This was the point in history when hunter and gatherers started to become farmers settling down and starting to build houses.

I was fortunate to be able to visit two excavated ancient Neolithic settlements close to Petra - one is called el-Beidha or Seyl Aqlat and is situated only 1km away from the so-called Little Petra or Siq el-Barid.

#### El-Beidha in Jordan

El-Beidha is the oldest settlement in the southern Jordan area with a total of six different Neolithic settlements identified as dating back from 9,000-6,500BC. The two settlements that I visited were very differently positioned in the landscape.

El-Beidha was erected in a narrow side valley leading down to Wadi Musa and further into the open plains of fertile Wadi Araba between the Dead Sea and the Red Sea Gulf of Aqaba.

The settlement was built in a very strategic position on one side of the valley at the foot of a

vertical mountain rock face and on the edge of a steep cliff with excellent views down the valley. Water resources were near and fertile ground stretched behind the settlement. As seen in the pictures accompanying this article, the first simple round huts were dug one third into the ground with 1m high stone walls leaving the upper part open for free air flow.

Wooden poles were holding a flat roof covered with palm leaves, small stones and mud for run off rain water. The wooden poles were held in place by shallow holes in the ground and recesses in the stone walls. Various huts were built in semi-detached formations to house extended families and clans. The first structures of this kind in el-Beidha are dated 6,800BC.

Only 500 years later first free standing rectangular or square houses were erected in el-Beidha next to the round huts. The village at that time must have had a population of 300-500 people. Surprisingly around 6,000BC the Neolithic settlement was abandoned due to climatic changes. Recent excavations



Mortars at el-Beidha



These mortars were used to mill grains

indicated nine different levels of occupation from the Middle to the Young Stone Age.

It was a big surprise to archeologists when they found obsidian tools in el-Beidha from Çatal Höyük in Turkey dating back to 7,000BC in the Pre-Ceramic Period. At this time the area was partly covered by oak trees and juniper bushes with roaming animals such as gazelle, goat, jackal and wild pigs. The first inhabitants of el-Beidha were hunter and gatherers, who later became farmers and breeders.

Close to el-Beidha a necropolis was discovered giving proof of the typical burial ritual practiced at the time by various Neolithic cultures, which included the beheading of the deceased and preservation of the skull for an ancestor cult. Burials were done outside the settlement and bones were brought back later after the decay of the body and buried again below the main room in the house.

The living conditions in the second Neolithic settlement I visited were certainly very different to el-Beidha based on its position. This site is seldom visited by tourists as it lies close

to a side road only used by locals. Due to the narrow and very steep road with many hairpin bends, only passenger cars and 4x4s are allowed, with no access to tourist buses.

Following the tip of a local I took a rental car and drove down this very scenic road, which passes through very ragged mountains of different colors with obvious surface mining going on here in ancient times. It is said that the famous King Solomon mines are still to be found somewhere in this area.

I stopped at various points to take a closer look at the amazing landscape with blackish, and at times close to purple-red, rock faces. This was when I first saw the Neolithic village situated on a small platform on the back slope of a vantage point with excellent views down into Wadi Araba lying 1,000m below.

Again the settlement featured the same style semi-underground round stone huts and I assumed that up to 300 hunter and gatherers must have lived here, as there was a water source, but no space for farming.

The round huts were bigger as in el-Beidha and had a center

stone built pillar to support the roof structure. Here the huts were interconnected with various smaller side rooms. Some huts also had stone stairs, as they were dug deeper into the ground. It is possible that this might have been a mining village, as close by surface copper deposits were found.

### Dilmun Culture

This ancient culture is mostly related to Bahrain and existed by trading between the Indus Valley and Mesopotamia and is mostly known for it's thousands of burial mounds still visible today.

Dilmun settlement traces were also found in Failaka Island and in Saudi Arabia at Yabrin, south of Haradh in the northern part of Rub al-Khali.

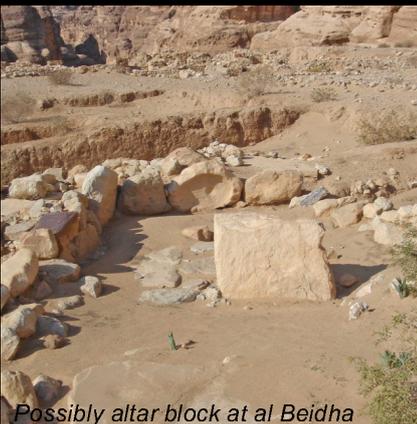
Dilmun was first mentioned in Sumerian texts found in Uruk dated 3,300BC and in Lagash dated 2,300BC. Qal'at, a trading port in Bahrain, was the ancient Dilmun capital with various layers of settlements built on top of each other. This 12m high tell has an extension of 300-600m and finally a Portuguese Fort was built on it about 2,000 years later.



*Quite elaborate double skin wall structure at al Beidha*



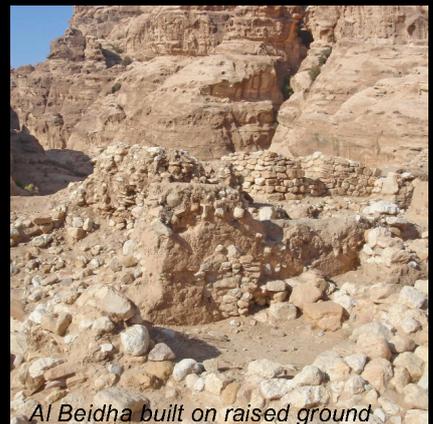
*For protection al Beidha settlement was built against cliff*



*Possibly altar block at al Beidha*



*Huge stone flattened for grain processing*



*Al Beidha built on raised ground*

The burial mounds or tumuli have a central stone built crypt with an alcove. The deceased were placed with their heads in the alcove and grave furnishings included pottery, ivory objects, stone and shell made seals, copper weapons and baskets sealed with bitumen.

There was normally only one burial per mound, but multiple burials in one crypt have been found on occasions. The mounds normally are 2-3m high and have a diameter of 4-9m on average.

### Southern Arabian Settlements

Next to the often mentioned Fertile Crescent spanning from Mesopotamia via northern Syria to the ancient Levant area, there was a lesser known fertile crescent in the south of the Arabian Peninsula spanning from Oman to Yemen called in antiquity Arabia Felix.

Here, already in 40,000BC during the Upper Paleolithic Period, 40 small settlements were

identified at various Pleistocene rivers in Oman.

The hunting methods in the period from 8,000-2,500BC were very primitive with Neolithic pastoral nomads constructing V-shaped walls to trap animal in a coral and kill them at short distance taking cover behind the walls.

And around 6,000BC the first Neolithic settlements were found in southern Oman around major lakes. During winter time, the khareef monsoons delivered ample rain falls to the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula forming many small lakes between sand dunes, even in the Rub al-Khali, allowing donkey caravans to transport the best quality so-called silver frankincense from the Omani Dhofar mountains close to Mansura or modern day Salalah to Dilmun in Bahrain via Yabrin.

Yes - you heard right. Donkey caravans were in ancient times

the only means of transport, as camels only were domesticated around 3,000 years ago. It is said that this happened first in the Dhofar Mountains with over 70 different breeders producing small camels with small hoofs to be able to manage dangerous mountain trails and bigger camels with wide hoofs to be able to cover long distances in sand.

This was a natural development as around 2,000-1,000BC the climate changed with lesser rainfalls and the regional habitat becoming more arid.

Camels were also more economical with loads of 300kg and being able to travel over 50km per day and going without water for two weeks. With a camel load of frankincense ancient Arab traders could make as much as \$4,000 in today's monetary terms. In Rome good quality incense-resin was very expensive and prices of up to \$2,000 were paid for a single kilogram.



Various round huts at al Beidha

