

Interesting Neolithic ceremonial sites reveal new secrets. Is there a cult connection to European sites like Stonehenge?

It is astonishing how human beings followed similar rituals and created comparable structures in antiquity around the world. The Rajajeel stone pillar site is no different. These huge stone stele were erected for cultural purposes and are believed to represent anthropomorphic humans possibly depicting the deceased, but no burials were found at this site.

The Rajajeel site is a Chalcolithic semi-sedentary site about 10km south of Sakaka close to the Garah village in northern Saudi Arabia. Rajajeel is an important ceremonial site with about 50 groups of vertical standing stone columns up to 3.5m high and is around 6,000 years old.

Different Groups of Stone Pillars

Of these 50 groups, to date 34 groups were researched and documented. The stone pillars are erected on higher ground and more or less on a north-south axis covering an area of

300x500m. The pillars are facing east towards the sun with up to four pillars serving as a front. Behind small "C" shaped enclosures were erected of smaller slabs.

Archaeologists discovered three pits on three sides except in front of the pillars, which have served as fire pits for ceremonial purposes. As no burials were found also no grave goods were present neither.

Some of these columns have Thamudic inscriptions and tribal signs co-called wusums and some rock art with carved ibex and caprids, all of which were added later.

The number of stone columns in each group varies greatly from 2 up to 19 monolithic stone pillars. Archaeologists also found small pits in front of some stone pillars, which have served as fire places.

This site has been in use over a long time and the latest historic visitors were Nabataeans attested by their unique eggshell thin, but hard potsherds found on site. The Nabataean trading empire expanded

about 2,000 years ago and included the northern kingdoms of Adumatu today's al-Jawf and Midian with its capital Qurayyah.

Excavation Items Found

Items found on site include: lithic tools, potsherds, sea and ostrich shells, donkey, cattle and gazelle bone fragments, which were possibly left over's from ceremonial meals on site.

The potsherds found include: simple bowls, whole-mouth jars and small vessels with ledge handles. These featured variable buff yellow to light brown slip and micaceous fine sandy tempered ware of dull brown to reddish color, all from the Chalcolithic period dated between 4,000-3,000BC.

Stone tools unearthed include: tabular flint scrapers, fan and side scrapers, micro and normal-size awls, prismatic blades, denticulates, serrate blades, retouched flakes, but surprisingly no arrow heads.

A Look Back Into History

But let's take a step back helps to understand the way of life of ancient men and the possible reasons for erecting stone pillar sites.

RAJAJEEL CULT STONE COLUMNS



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Ancient human civilizations only developed close to water sources, where humans and animals met for drinking and where hunting and foraging for food was easy.

So the Nile and Jordan rivers plus the Euphrates and Tigris were the key development areas of human civilization once hominins started to move out of Africa. This is why many Neolithic sites are found in these areas and on the Arabian Peninsula, which at the time was covered by more vegetation.

As Homo erectus, which was later replaced by two other hominins Homo sapiens sapiens and Homo sapiens

neanderthalensis, moved up the African Rift Valley he first encountered the fertile river banks of the Nile and this is where the most ancient human activity was found in the Arab world.

At this time Homo sapiens and Homo neanderthalensis lived on the Arabian Peninsula next to each other following different life styles until 50,000 years ago the more primitive Homo neanderthalensis disappeared.

The Early Paleolithic period lasted from 200,000–100,000BC and various Acheulian tools were found on the banks of the Nile. Thereafter followed the Mid-Paleolithic period from 100,000–50,000BC with wide spread flint mining being done by ancient men.

The first production of real flint blades happened during 50,000–21,000BC in the Late Paleolithic period

with the very first known underground mining in the world attested during this period in Egypt around 33,000BC.

Thereafter developments happened much faster

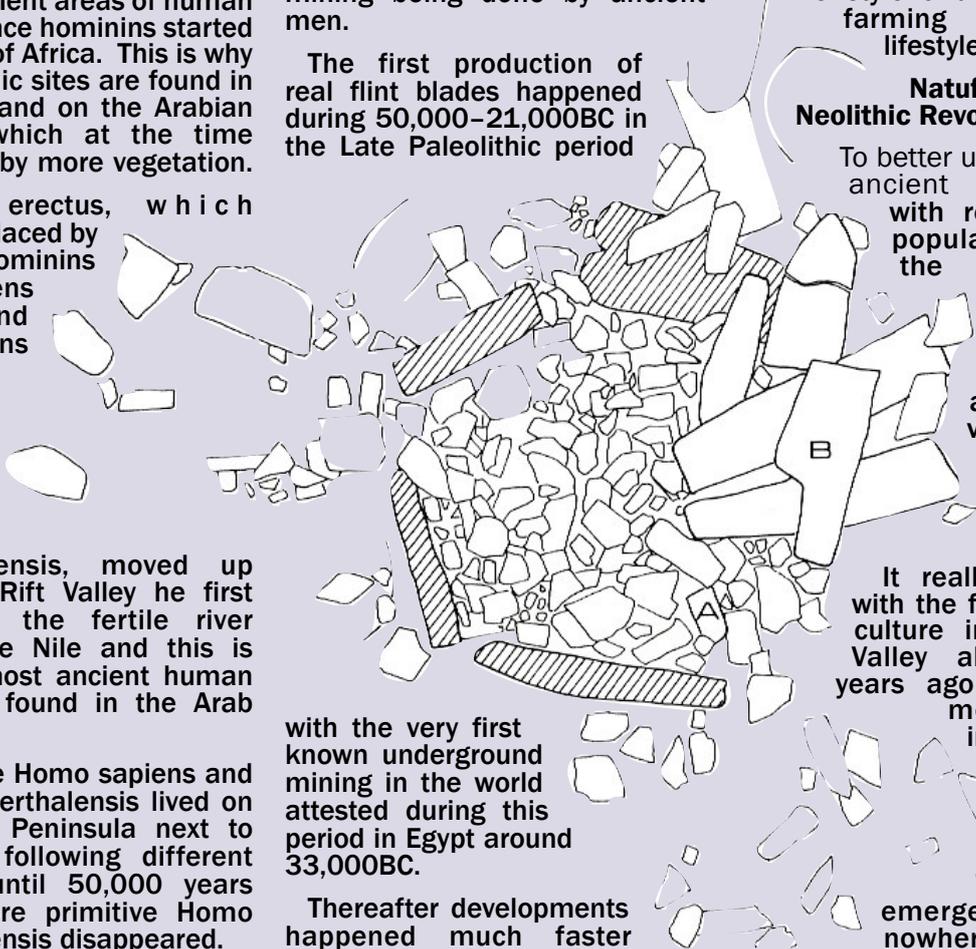
between 21,000-12,000BC during the Final Paleolithic period with a wide variety of life styles. From 7,000–4,000BC two different lifestyles developed parallel to each other, the Epipaleolithic hunter-gatherer life style and the Neolithic farming and herding lifestyle.

Natufian Culture & Neolithic Revolution

To better understand the ancient environment with regards to its population, firstly the development of settlements and evolving agriculture, and the various cultural periods need to be examined.

It really all started with the first developed culture in the Jordan Valley about 15,000 years ago and quickly moved south into the fertile parts of the Arabian Peninsula.

This culture emerged out of nowhere and was



unusual for the fully nomadic hunter societies at the time.

The Natufian people were a semi-sedentary and quickly became a fully sedentary culture and the interesting point here is that this actually happened before the introduction of agriculture with real farming activities. They erected the first permanent settlements and these were possibly the first Neolithic settlements built worldwide.

After taking this step, Natufians were also the first to start organized agricultural domestication of wild grains called the "Neolithic Revolution". But let's have a look at the different life styles using various foraging and subsistence strategies with annual schedules at the time in the region.

The big picture is rather mixed with small groups of semi-sedentary foragers permanently on the move in Egypt, Libya, Mesopotamia and eastern Anatolia, and with mobile hunter-gatherer societies roaming the Arabian Peninsula, Persia and western Anatolia.

The territory necessary for hunter-gatherer societies to survive was about 300-500km², but steppe foragers needed a much bigger sustainable territory of 500-2,000km². The Early Natufian phase was still based on a hunter-gatherer life style living in caves and rock shelters.

The first permanent settlements were villages of different sizes, small 15-100m², medium 400-500m² and large settlements expanding over 1,000m² with 300-500 and more inhabitants. But the larger settlements were only established in the steppe belt during the Late Natufian phase with semi-subterranean round huts with one or more round or square fire places.

Rajajeel Surrounding Ancient Settlements

When the surroundings were inspected closer the importance of Rajajeel became apparent with various new discoveries of Chalcolithic tumuli and settlement sites. To the south of Rajajeel various tumuli are situated. They consist of simple piles of stones or were built with semi-prepared rough stones with a diameter of three meters maximum.

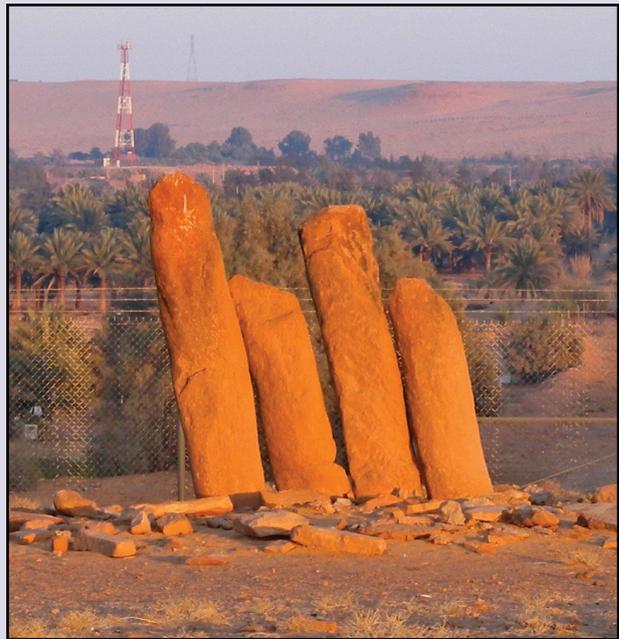
Southwest of Rajajeel more circular tumuli with occupational debris were discovered. On the hills 3km east of Rajajeel four smaller settlements with residential stone circles were found. Some circles were well built with slabs bonded in horizontal rows, other were erected just by piling of stones with diameters from 3-5m to a maximum of 25m.

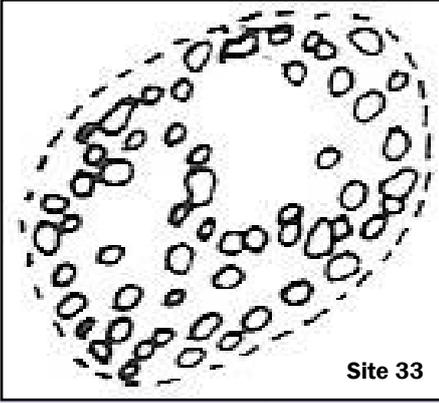
Some residential units stand alone, but complexes of a number of circles with connecting walls forming closed units were also found. Here some flint stone tools and potsherds similar to the Rajajeel finds were unearthed.

This settlement area also offers some very well constructed tumuli. And only 1km to the west of Rajajeel stone lined wells with rope marks were discovered. Further away in the northeast of Rajajeel in Wadi Sirhan and Wadi Arar, large number of stone circle complexes have been found with some circle complexes reaching a length of up to 3km. Here also tumuli occur in numbers which are all proof of active Neolithic hunter-gatherer settlements.

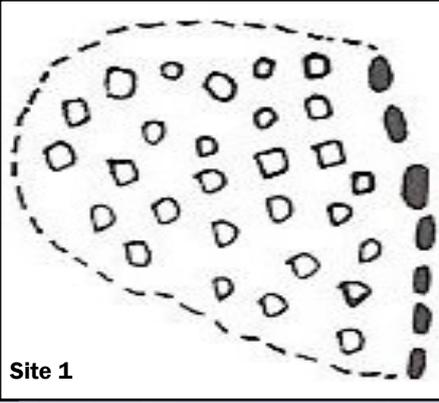
Other Stone Pillar Sites in Saudi

Similar sites were discovered in Saudi Arabia also at Majira in the al-Dawadami region with

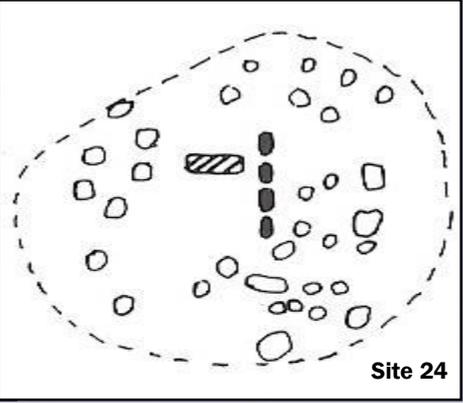




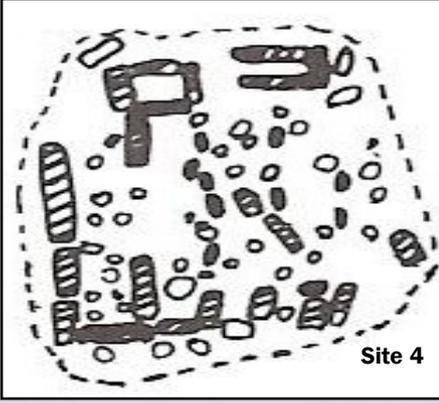
Site 33



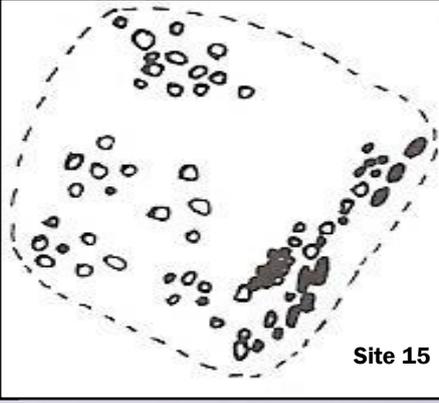
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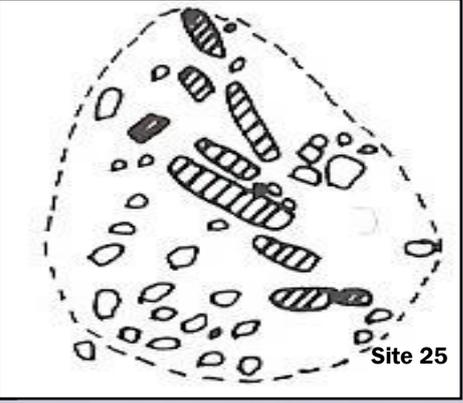
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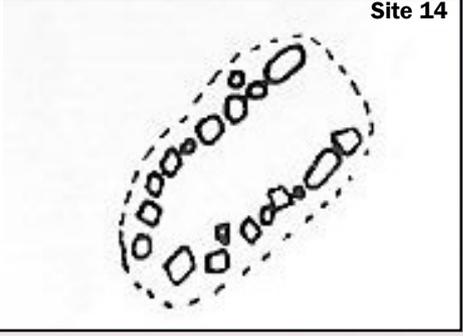
Site 4



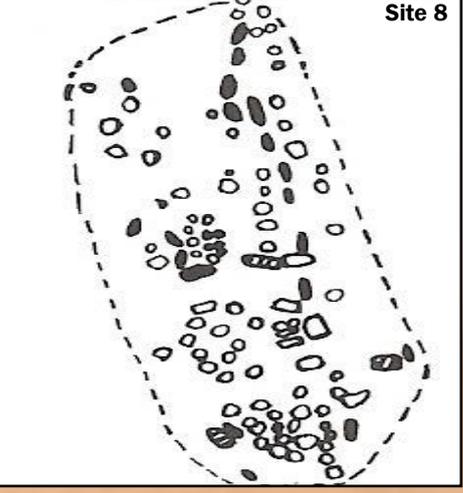
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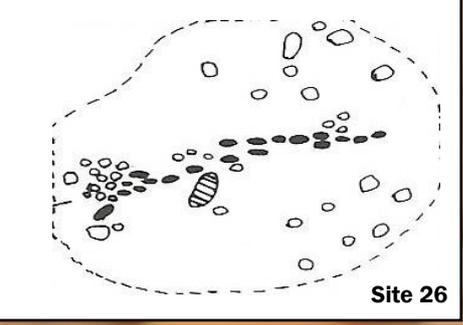
Site 25



Site 14



Site 8



Site 26



approximately 15–17 groups of mid-sized pillars up to 1.5m high. Here the north-south axis is also used like at Rajajeel. Smaller slabs are erected to form a “C” shape structure. In addition at al-Milh west of Quwayiyah in the Durma area a large concentration of small slabs only 40cm high has been found and dated around the same time. These were erected in long lines on a north-south axis again with two sub-units to be distinguished.

Another pillar site was discovered in the Durma area. This site is rather small measuring only 4x4m with three rows of low slabs again only 30cm high and this site is dated to between 5,000–3,000BC. These structures are also called troughs by some scientists.

Many Questions Still Open

There are some interesting questions and theories still unanswered. With the recent research results pointing to a high level and wide spread activity of Homo neanderthalensis on the Arabian Peninsula and the fact that the world was populated out of Africa, the following question needs to be answered. Where did Homo neanderthalensis first evolved? Was it in Europe, where the first skeleton finds were excavated in the

Neanderthal Valley near Düsseldorf in Germany, giving this hominid it's name? Or did they first evolve along the Jordan Valley and on the Arabian Peninsula, following the natural migration path?

As organized burials only started to happen around 15,000 years ago, the first burial cults evolved with it. More important rituals were developed with the evolution of agriculture and permanent settlements which included shrines and later temples for praying for good harvests and resulting thanksgivings.

This went in hand

with astrological observations and the development of first calendars and ritual stone sites to mark the points of the annual sun eclipses. For the same purposes the famous Stonehenge site in England was erected about 1,500 years after our Rajajeel site.

