

# Saudi Arabia's Paleolithic Past



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This is one of the most intriguing topics for archaeologists worldwide. From time to time, we hear about new discoveries across all continents with rather interesting research results. These research findings often change our opinion about the development and way of life of our ancestors. Over the years it became clear that homo sapiens was already at a very early stage far more intelligent and developed than we have imagined so far. Let me give you some examples of these mind changing discoveries.

### ***First Hunting Spears***

Only ten years ago the oldest hunting spears were found by coincidence during mining activities in Germany. But guess how old they were? It surprised everybody an astonishing 300,000 years and they were carved by another human species from which we developed called homo heidelbergensis. Two facts are mind boggling. First these wooden spears are close to identical to modern Olympic spears with regards to lengths, weight, point of gravity and flight path.

The surprise is that 300,000 years ago the perfect spear was already developed and could not really be further advanced with any technology we have at hand today. And secondly our ancestors buried the spears with the hunted wild horse skeletons in a kind of ritual, which points clearly to early religious beliefs. For more information see my

article on this website.

### ***Sculptures and Cave Paintings***

So far, we know that homo sapiens arrived in Europe about 50,000 years ago and left his first traces in southern Germany and France. In France he created sophisticated and rather natural animal cave paintings in Chauvet and in the caves on the Swabian Alb he skillfully carved over fifty beautiful animal figures out of mammoth ivory with flint stone tools.

The unique lion man is one of the most outstanding sculptures of them. For more information see my three different articles on Chauvet, Aurignacian Culture and Lion Man on this website.

### ***Amazing Arabian Peninsula***

Until a few years ago the Arabian Peninsula was a white area on the map for archaeologists with regards to early paleolithic sites. The only knowledge they had concerned a dozen ruined oasis cultures going back about 3,000 years.

These included sites called al Ukhoud, al Faw, Thaj, Tayma, Dedan and the adjacent Nabatean Mada'in Saleh. But these do not even fall into the Neolithic Period. Was this peninsula twice as big as United Kingdom, France and Germany together not populated before? Now, let's take a step back in time.

When the first human species left their native Africa 1.8 million years ago, they first roamed as hunters and gatherers the region of the Middle East along the Mediterranean coast and the fertile Jordan river valley. They also spread out on the Arabian Peninsula as their archaic stone tools finds of the Olduvai type from Africa proves.

But only much later they developed into more sophisticated beings with more defined stone tools and hunting techniques as well as first stone-built structures. Lately research results suggest that this region might have served as a kind of development incubator for our ancestors.

#### **Rajajeel Stone Stelae**

It is the only such site on the peninsula and makes me think of Stonehenge. Only it is a few thousand years older. About fifty groups of up to twenty hewn stone stelae are scattered across an open area. It was not a funeral site as no bones were found. Experts suggest it was an important ritual site where fires were lit. For more information, please see the article on this website.

#### **Rock Art and Paleolithic Structures**

Do they have anything in common? So far this was difficult to prove, but in Saudi Arabia this might now have become a possibility. Let us look first at prehistoric rock engravings of which we find an enormous amount spread all over the rock surfaces in the vast desert areas. These depictions of animals and humans were

created over a very long period of thousands of years and the first creations are about 10,000 years old. So, they fall into the same time horizon than the various paleolithic structures we are going to talk about.

#### **Famous Jubbah Rock Art**

Jubbah is situated today at the southern border of the Nafud Desert. But at the time the desert did not already exist and there was a huge lake here instead and extensive cattle breeding was the key economic activity then. Numerous life size images of men and cattle with what is believed to be tribal markings on their bodies cover the rock surfaces.

And again, we look at a time horizon of 10,000 years. It is assumed that paleolithic structures still lie beneath the vast sand dunes. If we move further west this is different because we enter the volcanic harrat area. For more information, please see the Jubbah article on this website.

#### **First Horse Domestication**

At that time hunter and gatherer clans roamed the peninsula as nomadic pastoral shepherds. And we have to remember that the climate then was wetter and the region was not a desert, but more a green landscape with trees, bushes and rivers fed by regular rain fall.

As animal domestication just had taken place further north, animal breeding and herding was possible. The early rock art depictions of cattle are well proof of that. And with the latest





sensational research on the first horse breeding of mankind at al Magar, we can date the horse rider images carved in stone now 4,000 years earlier. For more information please see the al Magar article on this website.

### **Desert Kites**

Let's look at one of the extraordinary paleolithic structures the so-called desert kites. They are rather large hunting traps, which were named as such by pilots who saw them first in the 1920ties. The long V shaped stone walls let via a small opening into a large corral where gazelle chased by hunting dogs were finally killed. Eighty percent of the hunted animals were gazelle at the time. At first their purpose was not clear, but two rock engravings found in the area showed their specific use as hunting traps.

Desert kites were erected in northern Saudi Arabia, Jordan and parts of Syria. Alone around Khaybar a high density of 240 desert kites were found, that is one per three square kilometer. And, their shapes differ much from round, triangular, square, cruciform or irregular. For further information please see the desert kite article on this website. Therefore, I will not go into more detail on this intriguing paleolithic structure.

### **Other Structures**

Most other paleolithic structures have a ceremonial or burial reason. About a dozen different types have been identified, some even with sub forms. Just to name some of them: wheels, rings, cairns, pendants, keyholes, needles, tails and gates or mustatils.

The different forms can be found combined or seen alone. Often, they appear in clusters of the same form or in groups of mixed forms and they can be defined to certain areas on the peninsula. Some of these forms and structures will be explained

in more detail further on in this article.

### **Example of Distribution**

Experts have taken a certain area of 1,250 square kilometers and found the following distribution out of a total of 2,000 structures, that are 1.6 structures per square kilometer: wheels and rings represent here only three percent, burial cairns make up forty percent, pendants are the majority with over fifty percent.

But the mix and percentage can differ from region to region. And these forms have various sub forms such as: wheels appear in nine different forms, junctions in five, tails have eight and pendants seven. Junctions are circles or wheels with attached lines.

### **Principal Areas**

Paleolithic structures are more present in the north of the peninsula and found in the volcanic harrat areas such as: ash-Sham, al Brk, Harrah or Khaybar. The latter is an interesting area because you find there all forms and in huge





numbers close to the town with the same name. And you can see them yourself zooming in on Google Earth. I suggest you try and do your own desktop archaeology. It is amazing and you will be more than surprised what you will see.

When I traveled for the first time through this area, I was surprised not to see anything. And I knew from Google Earth they must be here my GPS can't be wrong. It needs a trained eye to recognize these structures. With a vertical view you recognize them at once, but horizontally seen it is totally different.

The color and stone do not differ at all from the ground and the piles have flattened over time. Often it needs only to walk up

a small slope to have a slightly higher angle. Now let's look at the different forms and their purpose in more detail.

#### ***Impressive Khaybar Area***

During the Paleolithic Period Khaybar must have been a meeting hotspot of various hunter and gatherer clans. The high density of various types of ancient stone structures here are proof of intense human activity. Next to desert kites and huge camp sites with animal enclosures there are vast areas used as burial grounds.

Over ten so-called tomb roads can be seen still today, some up to twenty five kilometers long. They are lined on both sides with over one thousand of multiple forms of burial structures such

as cairns including so-called bull eye cairns, pendants, key holes and various tails.

#### ***Burial Cairns***

The most typical cairn form with sixty percent is the so-called bull eye with an outer ring and central cairn which was topped with an idol. The open circle between the cairn and surrounding wall was possibly used for ceremonial circumventions. Some cairns are neatly built with flat stones others are just wild piles. It seems that the neater erected structures are older.

The typical size has diameter from five to sixty meters. First cairns on the peninsula were erected about 9,000 years ago and this practice was kept for 7,000 years. But cairns were also used as symbolic tombs possibly when clan members died far away. For more information, please see the article on this website. This refers to other burial structures such as tumuli in al Faw, burial mounds in Dilmun, Hili circular tombs, Dedan rock tombs, Palmyra tower tombs as well as Mada'in Saleh and Petra palatial façade tombs.

#### ***Keyholes or Pendants***

These are burial structures either true or symbolic. Normally a pendant consists of a bull eye



cairn with a triangular bird like tail. If the burial cairn in the top circle is missing it could represent a symbolic burial place. The bird tail could even be divided by short straight lines looking like a ladder. The reason for this is yet unknown.

The tail could also just be a straight line of close stone piles. Small pendants measure five meters and the tails of larger ones are up to hundred meters long. They are also known as keyholes as they look very similar.

### **Tails or Lines**

There is an interesting theory about single tail lines. First it was thought that each stone pile in a tail line was a later burial of a family member. But no burial remains were found. So, it is assumed that each pile might have been erected each year for con-memorial purposes. Only one third of cairns have tail lines. They may be straight or bent or slightly curved like a snake.

### **Wheels**

These ring structures build of stones have normally thicker walls and internal partitions like spokes which led to their name. Some are simply cross barred and others have only three or more than four



spokes. Wheels do not seem to have served any burial purpose. Despite various theories their true cause of existence is still unknown. They are also not a common structure and the pictures also give no clues.

### **Needles**

They are a special form with no obvious indication of their purpose. They can be straight, bent or even curved. But always they are a close line of small piles. Were they erected first before they were topped by a bull eyed cairn? Possibly not, because we can assume the more important structure was built first. And then there is the theory of the annually longer growing tails line.

### **Triangulars**

They are rare structures and again their purpose so far is unknown. I have only seen small

triangles of few meters with equally long sides. Very rarely they feature a tail. Even in prehistoric rock engravings I can't remember having seen a triangular form. This is surprising as all spear and arrow heads were made out of flint stone having a triangular shape.

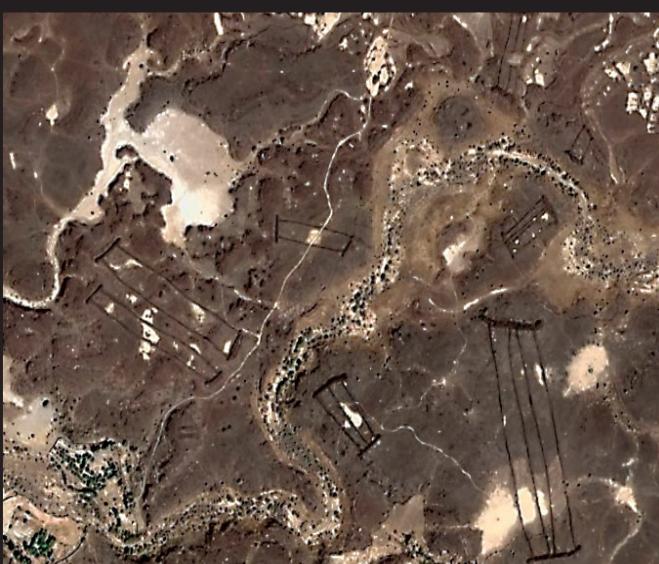
### **Rectangulars**

The opinions on this structure differ. Some experts believe these are small mustatils, others think they are a form of its own with a different purpose. Whereby their purpose is not clear. Are they funeral structures or used for certain ceremonies? Most are rather small and their walls are not very high often maximum half a meter tall.

And their walls are not formed like most of the mustatils. Their walls consist of larger flat stone plates as they are found a plenty in these harrat areas. And they are found also in circular form which differentiates them further from mustatils.

### **Gates or Mustatils**

These are the most intriguing form with no obvious





explanation. Alone around Khaybar there are over one hundred of them. Some are rather small with a length of only ten meters, others are up to hundred meters long. They are rectangular and look from the air like farm gates.

And some are divided into three or four long partitions and even look more like a gate. Most end walls are even thicker. Latest research indicate they were erected about 6,000 years ago.

Recent excavations near al'Ula have shown interesting results. This mustatil was a large one and gave the impression to be older than others. And its position was unique ending up with one end against a vertical fifty-meter-high solitary sandstone outcrop typical for this area.

First the archaeologist found huge fire places and deeper on numerous horns of various animals such as cattle, ibex, gazelle and goat. The walls were certainly high enough to serve as a save animal enclosure.

### **Commonalities and Differences**

All structures have commonalities and specific features. Most funeral structures such as cairns are found on

higher ground overlooking the landscape in all directions. They make up seventy percent of these structures. As they were spread more or less across the whole peninsula, it could be assumed that the entire area was part of the territory of various clans roaming the vast region.

When searching paleolithic structures with Google Earth it surprised me not to see any directional orientation of these structures. Were they not at all used for ceremonial practices and lined out to the sun rise as is common in most other paleolithic and Neolithic cultures?

There were some areas such as Khaybar where a seasonal conglomeration of nomadic or semi-sedentary people led to first cemeteries with numerous burial structures side by side. But one thing is intriguing. These clans

created a variety of detailed rock engravings including animals and human figures. But why did they not leave any images and carve the different shapes of their holy stone structures on rock surfaces?

### **Funeral Rituals**

It is surprising that today's burial practises on the Arabian Peninsula have not changed much from prehistoric rituals. Bedouins still bury their family members in the desert with a simple stone as grave marker.

Neanderthalers buried their deceased stretched out lying on their back in a sleeping position. Homo sapiens burials were laid to rest in a shallow circular grave in a fetus position. Both were singles graves with out funeral gifts.

Only later the skull removal cult started. They were preserved and decorated for ancestral ritual purposes. The facial features were reconstructed with clay and the skulls kept at home. Only later they were reburied.

First collective burials became common about 10,000 years ago during the Natuf Culture. Here the first burials with domesticated animals





such as dogs happened. And shortly after a new funeral ritual was introduced with broken mortars and later first grave gifts were added.

Our paleolithical funeral practices a few thousand years later seemed to have added a few more rituals like annual con-memorative meetings of family members with certain ceremonies and possible circumventions and sacrifices might also been part of it.

### **Summary**

This is really an intriguing subject with many questions still to be answered. We can be happy that there are so many paleolithic structures left undisturbed in the harrat areas. And many more might be lying today underneath huge sand dunes which converted this fertile region into a huge desert area starting 4,000 years ago.

One thing is certain the Arabian Peninsula was an area where an important step in human development happened already 10,000 years ago and possibly served as an incubator for new ideas in hunting techniques as well as animal domestication and breeding. Unfortunately the first script was not developed yet and the engravings on rock surfaces focus on animal and human depictions.

I am certain that the numerous ancient rock engraving from the same time period will help international and Saudi archaeologists to solve the unanswered questions soon. They have just started to investigate their paleolithic past and we certainly can expect further research results and possibly surprises such as al Magar.

