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## Discovering ancient al-Yamâma

Jérémie Schiettecatte

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**BFSA**

British Foundation  
for the Study of Arabia

المؤسسة البريطانية لدراسة الجزيرة العربية

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Applicants are advised to apply well ahead of the May and October deadlines. Full details on p. 4.

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*Front cover: A Kuwaiti tawwash, or pearl trader, singles out a fine example on board a dhow on the pearl banks, photographed by the Australian seaman and writer, Alan Villiers, in August 1939. From Sea of Pearls: Seven Thousand Years of the Industry that Shaped the Gulf (London: Arabian Publishing, 2012. ISBN 978-0-9571060-0-0). © National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London (NMM PM5082-04).*



Excavations in the Early Iron Age complex of Area O revealed a row of small rooms on the inner side of the northern part of the enclosure. The former entrance to the area may have been located in the eastern wall. For the first time, architectonic remains, possibly of the same date, have been discovered outside the enclosed area.

In the central, north-eastern part of the site (Areas E and F) various observations suggest a former occupation of the middle, if not early, Iron Age, as indicated by an increasing amount of pottery sherds. Earlier than large building E-b1, most probably a temple, is a construction of massive stone blocks (Building E-b5), with associated deposits of the above mentioned red burnished pottery, as well as mid-1st millennium BC painted Sana'iye pottery. The exact date of this complex remains to be established.

Possibly of a mid-1st millennium BC date is also a fourth building level of E-b1, which employs large standing monoliths. Clearly belonging to a different and earlier building level are remains of a different orientation from E-b1, detected beneath its perimeter wall in the south-west. Excavations in the well, east of the building and connected to it by a tunnel, revealed pottery comparable to the Late Roman material from the residential quarter south of E-b1. Stratigraphic analysis suggests that the tunnel was built when E-b1 was already standing, probably during Late Antiquity.

From subsurface deposits, a further fragment with a cuneiform inscription by King Nabonidus (556-539 BC) was found. It mentions, for the first time at Tayma, the city of Harran, where the famous sanctuary of the moon-god, E-hul-hul was located.

The Nabataean to Late Antique levels of the residential quarter were further investigated. We concentrated on the room fills and the identification of possible two-storey buildings, as indicated by remains of several stone-built stairs as well as by protruding stone-slabs which may have supported floor constructions.

Hydrological-archaeological research, conducted by a team from the University of Applied Sciences at Lübeck, focused on the channel system in the southern parts of the walled settlement (Area H, located in Compound A). Numerous channels were investigated by soundings, and geophysical

prospection was applied for identifying a major water source within the compound.

The investigation of ancient landscapes and environment focused on the analysis of cores sampled in 2011. This resulted in plans for a further season (scheduled for 2013) aimed at sampling micro-stratigraphic deposits from the *sabkha* in order to obtain material for a fine-tuned dating of lacustrine deposits suitable for establishing a chronological sequence of palaeoclimatic events.

As in earlier seasons, conservation activities focused on architectonic remains in Areas E and F, using a modified mud-mortar for consolidating building remains exposed by archaeological excavations. In Berlin, conservation of artefacts continued in cooperation with the University of Applied Sciences. Furthermore, we began to develop a long-term storage programme for the finds from Tayma. Numerous objects from Tayma are part of the exhibition 'Roads of Arabia', which started its North American tour in autumn 2012 at the Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.

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### **Discovering Ancient al-Yamâma**

Writing of his ventures into Central Arabia in 1917–1918, H. St J. Philby concluded his account by these words: "I trust that I have said enough to show that there is much in Southern Najd to encourage further investigation, and to show that in Kharj and the Aflaj (...), and possibly other buried cities of the southern sands, there lies open a fruitful field for the archaeologist of the future" (1920. Southern Najd. *The Geographical Journal* 55). Recent research carried out in the Kharj oasis proved him right.

Central and Southern Najd is one of the most arid regions in the world. Nevertheless, it is peppered with green havens where specific environmental features made it possible to settle and crop. At al-Kharj, the geological configuration of the area led to the convergence of subterranean and surface waters, to the activation of artesian springs and to the formation of karst sinkholes, which provided important perennial water sources. Thus, as one of the rare fertile areas, the Kharj oasis appears as an obvious stopping place



and as a main crossroad on the trading routes linking Yemen and Hijaz to the Gulf.

Predictably, more than 50 archaeological sites have been pinpointed in the surveys carried out by the Saudi-French mission during two field seasons (2011-2012) (Fig. 22). Half of the sites belong to a single period of human history: the Middle Palaeolithic. These occupations characterized by lithic industry were found near quartzite deposits, never far from the actual wādîs. These sites yielded quartzite artefacts, which have been identified on the premise of the Levallois Technique (Fig. 23), and dated between 150,000 and 50,000 years ago.

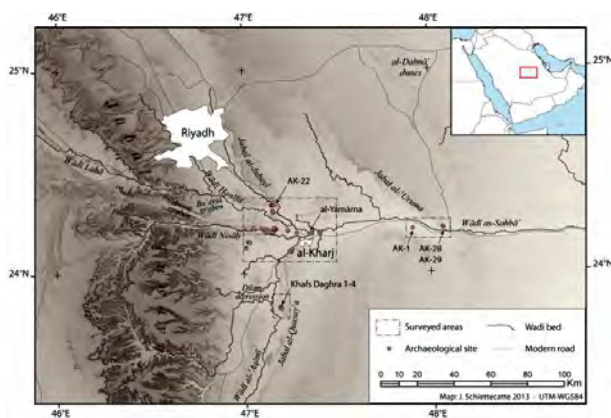


Figure 22. Location of the oasis of al-Kharj (© French-Saudi Archaeological Mission in Yamâma).

The second significant phase of occupation of the oasis dates to the Bronze and Iron Age. It has been recognized through the presence of several clusters of tumuli (Fig. 24). In two cases, these necropoleis exceed a hundred tombs. They are all located either on the edge of the escarpments or on rocky outcrops. All these necropoleis are overlooking old watered areas, either former lakes, dried up today, or wādî beds. This feature might be indicative of wetter environmental conditions or the proximity of underground water at least until the early Bronze Age. The dry-stone turret graves and the tumuli fields clearly show different architectural traditions reflecting either different chronological periods or different cultural practices.

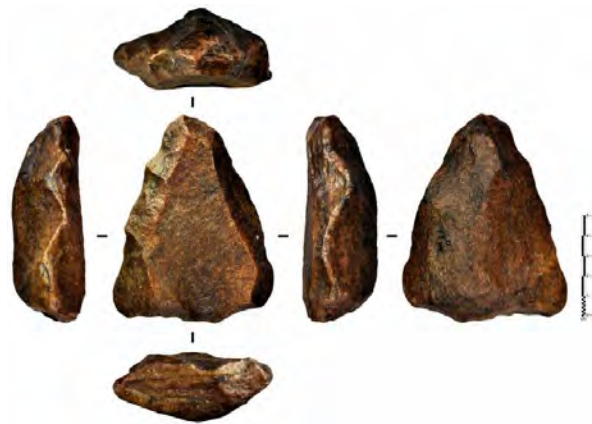


Figure 23. Site AK22: Levallois core in quartzite (© French-Saudi Archaeological Mission in Yamâma).



Figure 24. Aerial view of the tumuli field at 'Ayn al-Dila' (© Th. Sagory, French-Saudi Archaeological Mission in Yamâma).

Finally, of great interest are the Late Pre-Islamic and Early Islamic periods, whether from a historical or archaeological point of view. As the setting of memorable events, the region, then named al-Yamâma, has been vividly described in the early Islamic sources. The most outstanding episode is without doubt the rise among the Hanîfa tribe of the prophet known in the Arabic tradition as Musaylima the Liar, who constituted a serious threat to the incipient Muslim community.

Through these accounts, the valley of al-Kharj appeared as being densely populated. If only a few settlements have been found on the field, this scarcity can be put down either to a permanent occupation of most of the fertile areas of the oasis, thus hiding earlier occupation, or to the modern urbanization process that has led to the rapid disappearance of many sites.



However, one site is long known and well preserved: al-Yamâma, the ancient Jaw al-Khadârim. Located in the very heart of the oasis, the ruins of this former regional capital began to be investigated two years ago. Surface pottery sampling and a 7-m-deep sounding showed a long-lasting occupation of the site, from the beginning of the Christian era to the 18th century, and a hiatus of 300 years from 1200 AD onwards.

Moreover, when the sounding was extended, the corner of a monumental building appeared. Its extensive excavation in 2012 led to the discovery of the great mosque of the site (Fig. 25). If its attribution to the Abbasid period proves to be correct, it will provide valuable data on the religious architectural tradition in Central Arabia at that time.



Figure 25. Aerial view of the mosque at al-Yamâma (© Th. Sagory, French-Saudi Archaeological Mission in Yamâma).

During two seasons of work, many fields have been investigated that still require further development. They are as diverse as Bronze Age funerary practices and Islamic religious architecture. This will be the aim of next season's work.

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#### **DISPERSE: Dynamic Landscapes, Coastal Environments and Hominin Dispersals**

DISPERSE is an Advanced Grant awarded by the European Research Council (ERC) for a 5-year programme of research (2011–2016) involving collaboration between Geoff Bailey at the University of York and Geoffrey King at the Institut de Physique du Globe, Paris.

The project will develop systematic methods for reconstructing landscapes associated with active tectonics and sea level change and assess their impact on patterns of human evolution and dispersal. The research will focus on the western Arabian escarpment and the now-submerged territory of the southern Red Sea, including use of remote sensing techniques and field survey on land and underwater, and will also draw on comparative data from adjacent regions in Africa and the Near East. Other collaborators include specialists from the National Oceanography Centre Southampton, the Institut de Physique du Globe Paris, the Hellenic Centre for Marine Research Athens, and King Saud University Riyadh.

The overall working hypothesis is that conditions of geological instability, despite the potentially destructive risks associated with them, have played a powerful and dynamic role in the development of human society, exercising selection pressures in favour of the early human evolutionary trajectory, and creating potentially attractive conditions for human settlement and dispersal. For more information see: [www.york.ac.uk/archaeology/research/current-projects/disperse](http://www.york.ac.uk/archaeology/research/current-projects/disperse)

## **YEMEN**

### **Iraqi Mud-Brick Architect Wins Prestigious Sustainability Award**

Iraqi architect Samar Damluji was last year awarded the Global Award for Sustainable Architecture for helping to renovate mud-built towns of Hadhramaut. The award is made by Green Prophet, an organisation focusing on the Middle Eastern environment. For a detailed breakdown of some of Damluji's restoration work see 'The Restoration of Nasjid al-Faqih in Aynat, Wadi Hadhramaut'.

### **Tayf – News from Soqatra**

The Friends of Soqatra annual newsletter, *Tayf* (Issue 9), draws attention to the publication of *A Collection of Mahri Poetry*, introduced, translated and transliterated by Samuel Liebhaber. Mahri is a non-literate language which makes this publication an impressive achievement. The newsletter also contains a note from Miranda Morris on the 'code language' often used in much Soqotri poetry. Archaeological exploration on the