Human Immigration of the Arabian Peninsula

by Thomas Kummer
www.ancient-cultures.info

An important question, which experts try to answer taking new discoveries into account, is the following. Did *homo sapiens* immigrate the Arabian Peninsula only via Sinai, or also by crossing the Red Sea at its most southern tip from modern-day Ethiopia via Bab al-Mandab to Yemen?

Recent research has revealed that the first humans, who made knapped stone tools outside Africa, were discovered in the Levant corridor at Ubeidiya 3km south of the Sea of Galilee, and are dated around 1.5 million years.

But so far experts established that the first proven maritime crossing was done only about 50,000 years ago from New Guinea to Australia.

The first archaic lithic industries or stone tool producing societies on the Arabian Peninsula were discovered at al-Shuwayhtiyah situated 45km north of Sakaka in northern Saudi Arabia with 16 sites where choppers, polyhedrons and flakes were found, which could be dated to an age of 1.3 million years.

Other Early Paleolithic sites with archaic tool discoveries similar to those at the Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania are situated in Saudi Arabia at Wadi Fatima close to Jeddah, Saffaq near Dawadmi north of the Riyadh-Makkah highway and Bir Hima about 100km north of Najran.

The Olduvai site is dated 1.3 million years and the tools were produced by the *homo erectus* species. Again comparable surface finds were recorded at Bab al-Mandab and Hadramaut both situated in Yemen.

A new discovery was made recently at Jebel Faya near Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates with pre-historic tools found under a rock overhang, which was used as shelter. The discovered archaic stone tools could be dated to 125,000BP meaning before present times.

These are similar to those archaic stone tools from northeastern African sites. This important discovery on the Arabian Peninsula proves human activity about 55,000 years earlier than previously thought.

Experts so far assumed that the Arabian Peninsula was invaded from Africa around
70,000BP by a very small group of 150-1,000. On the Eritrean coast various shell middens sites were found and dated to 125,000BP the same age as those archaic tools from Jebel Faya in the United Arab Emirates.

This new discovery supports another yet unproven assumption, that *homo sapiens* were able and possibly did cross the Red Sea from the coast lines of modern-day Eritrea and Somalia to Yemen at a very early stage, possibly 20,000 years before the first Australian maritime crossing.

How was this possible? Well we have to remember that the Red Sea level was between 100-80m lower and this made the crossing distance, which today is about 20km, only few kilometers long with the Arabian Peninsula possibly well in sight.

But the first untouched Paleolithic site on the Arabian Peninsula was found only in 2006 in the Tihama area in Yemen, which is called Sh'bat Dhiya and dated between 80,000-70,000BP featuring so-called “levuloid debitage” industries.

Similar Paleolithic sites were discovered in Saudi Arabia at Tihama (different to Yemen site with same name) situated on the Red Sea coast, as well as on the Farasan Islands off the southern Saudi Arabian coast at Jizan.

Various bi-facial and crude tools, end and side scrapers, denticulates all from the Middle Paleolithic Period comparable to certain Jubbah stone tool items were found here and give proof of a human occupation between 130,000-70,000BP.

But there remains an unsolved mystery. No evidence of any Upper Paleolithic sites between 40,000-10,000BP was yet discovered on the Arabian Peninsula. This does not prove that they did not exist, as it is unimaginable, that the previously highly populated Arabian Peninsula was totally abandoned during this period.

Possible explanations could be, that those sites are covered today by sand dunes, or lie in coastal areas below the now risen sea level, as both the Red Sea and the Mediterranean sea levels were much lower at the time.

**Arabian Peninsula Explored**

If we look at the Arabian Peninsula from the start of the Stone Age onwards, we can divide it into two main development periods. The first being predominantly nomadic including semi-sedentary seasonal settlements and the second period was the start of fully sedentary and subsistence economies with organized agriculture and sophisticated food production.

There is a further distinction we have to consider with regards to lifestyles and this was
determined by the fact that ancient settlements were either coastal or inland.

This explains the time horizon differentiation, but if we divide the Arabian Peninsula into regional areas, taking into account the various cultural zones with a common objective during the Bronze and Iron Age, the result is not very different from the modern states existing today.

The first economic zone is certainly the northern area of the Arabian Peninsula consisting of Jordan and northern Saudi Arabia.

Here human civilization actually started with the Natufian Culture which were the first to permanently settle down and farm, a development which experts call the “Neolithic Revolution”.

In northern Arabia still various hunter-gatherer societies were active at Jubbah, Shuwaymis and Hanakiya, who were the creators of the fantastic life size human rock art depictions seen here.

The second economic zone includes the western part along the Red Sea coast, which is the home of the famous “Incense Route”, which came to fame about 3,000 years ago, when it was dominated by the Nabataeans.

The third economic zone incorporates “Arabia Felix” a name chosen by the Romans, because this area was the producer of the valuable frankincense situated in Yemen and southern Oman. This area also was home of the ancient kingdoms of Saba with it’s famous queen Sheba, Qataban, Ma’in, Aswan, Hardamaut and Himyar.

The fourth economic zone combines Oman and the United Arab Emirates as the key early copper producing tribal areas called Makkans or Magan.

The last economic zone is the Arabian Gulf area with the ancient kingdoms of Dilmun and Gerrha, who thrived from maritime trade and overland incense transport to luxury hungry Mesopotamia.

Let’s review the two different Bronze and Iron Age lifestyles, which were based on their distinctive coastal and inland subsistence economies. With close to 2,000km coastline and with many islands the early inhabitants of modern-day Oman and the United Arab Emirates were both excellent seafarers and traders.

Early long distance trade was therefore natural for them, sourcing high value goods from the developed Indus Valley, India and resources rich Africa and selling them to fast growing Mesopotamian kingdoms, using favorable monsoon winds. But there was quite an environmental difference between the Omani Indian Ocean coast and the Gulf.

The Omani coast had strong currents and lower water temperatures resulting in rich fishing grounds creating an important source of maritime food supplies, as documented by the many shell middens found here.

The diet of coastal inhabitants was very healthy and
existed of a high variety of both maritime and land species, as well as agricultural produce.

About 5,000 years ago line and net fishing either onshore or by boat was common practice already, as was the collecting of mollusks like mangrove snail *Terebralia palustris*, oysters *Ostrea cucullata*, and shells *Anadara*, as well as gastropods and coelenterates.

Around 3,000BC typically small villages of up to 2ha were established on the coast, where natural harbors allowed boating and along wadis with natural springs. The inland living tribal clans were occupied with oasis farming, herding, hunting and gathering. In certain areas also with early gold, silver and copper mining and smelting.

Herding included cattle, goat, sheep and later camel, and hunting was focused throughout the Arabian Peninsula on various antelope species mainly gazelle.

The first true farming world wide happened in the Near East and wheat, rye, barley, lentil, bitter vetch, pistachio, almond, acorns, hackberry, pear, fig and many other grains, fruits and nuts became quickly part of the diet of the peninsular population 5,000 years ago.

Over 100 edible fruits, seeds, leaves and grains were available in different areas at the time. And in addition plant species were imported for the first sorghum farming on the Arabian Peninsula, which happened in Oman at the port of Ras al-Hamr around 4,800BC with two sorghum species *bicolor* & *dura* imported from the Indus Valley.

A high seafood diet is attested in low tooth wear of ancient skeletons and high levels of caries points to a high consumption of sugar rich dates. In contrast high tooth wear is explained by consumption of hard grains and lots of meat.

**First Human Steps in the Arab World**

It all started with the development of human civilization and population along rivers in Egypt and the Near and Middle East. A new globally performed DNA analysis has proven, that the DNA of all human races across the globe is to over 90% identical and we all are descendants from the same African female as mother of all modern races and the finally evolution winning *homo sapiens 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 on the Red Sea coast at Djibouti. The African Rift Valley includes many lakes: Lake Malawi, Tanganyika, Kivu, Edward, Albert, Victoria and Lake Turkana.

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. This is why many Neolithic sites are found here.

Therefore *homo erectus*, who was later replaced by two other hominids *homo sapiens sapiens* and *homo sapiens neanderthalensis*, moved up the Rift Valley and left the African continent around 1.8-1.6 million years ago.

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.

But *homo sapiens sapiens* left Africa only about 150,000 years ago and settled for the first time on the Arabian Peninsula and invated Europe only 50,000BP.

The Early Paleolithic Period lasted from 200,000-100,000BP and various Acheulian tools were found at Naga Ahmed el-Khalifa near Abydos on the banks of the Nile.

Thereafter followed the Mid Paleolithic Period from 100,000-50,000BP with wide spread flint mining done between Asyut...
and Qena. The first production of real flint blades happened at Nazlet Khater near Qaw during 50,000-20,000BP in the Late Paleolithic Period with the very first known underground mining in the world attested during this period in Egypt around 35,000BP.

Therefore developments happened much faster between 21,000-12,000BC during the Final Paleolithic Period with a wide variety of lifestyles in Upper Egypt. The next 3,000 years from 11,000-8,000BC are archaeological wise a blank page in Egyptian pre-history with no remains of any cultures found because of extreme Nile floods during this period assumed to have washed away all remains.

Around 8,000BC the Elkabian Culture developed in southern Upper Egypt at Elkab and the Qarunian Culture in Lower Egypt in the Faiyum oasis south of Cairo. From 7,000-4,000BC two different lifestyles developed parallel to each other, the Epi-paleolithic hunter-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 called “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 early clay modeling was developed, plus first jewelry, pottery and female figurines formed, as well as the earliest copper items produced. From 4,000-3,500BC the Amratian Culture also called “Naqada I.” developed at Amrat and Hierakonpolis domesticating donkey and also were the first to use mud brick for buildings.

War maces and the first use of cosmetics came also into fashion at that time. Pottery produced 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 between 3,500-3,100BC the Gerzean Culture or “Naqada II.” produced buff pottery ware with brown or purple paintings including figures, ships and people. Thereafter the Egyptian history started in 3,200BC with the Pre-Dynastic Period and the first true kingdoms in Lower and Upper Egypt.

**Summary**

What is certain is that *homo sapiens* and *homo neanderthalensis* lived close together on the Arabian Peninsula with the latter getting extinct around 50,000-30,000 years ago. We can assume that there was no conflict of interest between the two races as *homo neanderthalensis* was hunting bigger animals and *homo sapiens* focused on the smaller fauna species like gazelle.

We can also assume that *homo neanderthalensis* was possibly much more developed using sophisticated stone tools and already could speak.

This raises a few interesting questions. Did *homo neanderthalensis* develop his sophisticated skills first here before he moved to Europe where the race was widespread. And did *homo neanderthalensis* actually mix with *homo sapiens* and did a close cultual exchange took place here as well?

Some experts believe that this might be well possible and certain finds point into this direction. This is also true for the first maritime crossing of the Red Sea to populate the Arabian Peninsula. Today more facts speak for it than against it, but the final proof is still missing.