

Umm al-Quwain 2  
A Neolithic settlement and graveyard in the United Arab Emirates





# **Umm al-Quwain 2**

## **A Neolithic settlement and graveyard in the United Arab Emirates**

Edited by  
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ARCHAEOPRESS PUBLISHING LTD

13-14 Market Square

Bicester

Oxfordshire OX26 6AD

United Kingdom

[www.archaeopress.com](http://www.archaeopress.com)

ISBN 978-1-80583-125-9

ISBN 978-1-80583-126-6 (e-Pdf)

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Cover: UAQ2 Tomb 1, second half of the 6th millennium BCE; Projectile point (chalcedony) found in the rib cage of Individual D from Tomb 1.



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## Acknowledgements

We extend our warmest thanks to His Highness Sheikh Saud bin Rashid bin Ahmed Al Mualla, member of the Supreme Council of the UAE and ruler of the Emirate of Umm al-Quwain, as well as to His Excellency Sheikh Majid bin Saud bin Rashid Al Mualla, head of the Department of Tourism and Antiquities in Umm Al-Quwain, for their gracious invitation extended to the French Archaeological Mission to conduct research within Umm al-Quwain. Owing to their generous hospitality, the French Archaeological Mission in the United Arab Emirates, specifically the operational branch in Umm al-Quwain, has completed five excavation campaigns at the site known as Umm al-Quwain 2, in addition to various complementary study seasons. We are proud to share that these efforts have led to significant discoveries and advancements in the understanding of the region's history. We would also like to express our sincere appreciation to Ms Rania Kannouma, Head of the Department of Archaeology; Mr Meaqdad Aboelgreed, Archaeologist; Ms Nasreen Jamal, Executive Secretary; and Ms Mona Eisa, Honours Officer. Their contributions have been invaluable to the success of our archaeological endeavours.

The excavation and survey efforts received support from the Department of Tourism and Archaeology of the Emirate of Umm al-Quwain. Further backing was provided by the *Pôle SHS de l'Archéologie et du Patrimoine* and the Sub-directorate for Higher Education and Research, under the Directorate of Culture, Teaching, Research, and Network, which is part of the Directorate-General for Globalisation, Development and Partnerships at the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs in Paris, France. The National Research Agency (ANR) NeoArabia project has greatly contributed to our research over the last few years. Oxford Brookes University has also generously provided financial support.

We wish to convey our heartfelt gratitude to the Ambassador of the French Republic to the UAE, Mr Nicolas Niemtchinow, and Ms Stéphanie Salha, Counsellor for Cooperation and Cultural Action, for their steadfast support and ongoing commitment to our research. We also thank the French Institute in the UAE for their unwavering support. We sincerely thank Professor Alexandre Farnoux, who chairs the Foreign Excavation Commission, and Professor Pierre Tallet, who presides over the sub-committee for Africa and Arabia.

We are thankful for the support and help provided by all contributors. We also thank Mr Jacques Desplaces for his kind support and assistance. Further, we would like to thank Mr Christian Velde, Resident Archaeologist at the Department of Antiquities in Ras al-Khaimah, UAE, and Professor Derek Kennet, from the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago, USA, for providing access to the wet sieving equipment in Julfar, Emirate of Ras al-Khaimah, UAE.

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# Preface

The recent excavations at UAQ2 (2011–2017), conducted by the French Archaeological Mission in the United Arab Emirates, represent a significant milestone in the study of the Neolithic period in Eastern Arabia. Nearly two decades after the initial investigations led by C. S. Phillips in the early 1990s, this renewed exploration has revealed the dual function of UAQ2 as both a residential and funerary site. The primary occupation of the site spans from the late 6th to the end of the 5th millennium BCE, with additional evidence suggesting later activity. A comprehensive series of radiocarbon (<sup>14</sup>C) and optically stimulated luminescence (OSL) dates has enabled the establishment of a precise chronology. These findings shed new light on the economy and material culture of the Arabian Neolithic, particularly in the northern UAE—a region that remains under-documented despite its archaeological richness. The data from UAQ2 provide valuable insights into the lifestyles, subsistence strategies, and cultural practices of Neolithic communities, presenting a detailed picture of dynamic and interconnected societies.

The discoveries at UAQ2 challenge several long-standing assumptions about Neolithic societies in the Arabian Peninsula. The site contains the oldest and most extensive graveyard of its kind in coastal UAE, offering evidence of intergroup violence and ritual practices associated with pearling. The material culture, including Ubaid pottery, pearls, and other ornaments, indicates that UAQ2 was integrated into broader exchange networks linking Eastern Arabia to Mesopotamia. Furthermore, the faunal remains from the settlement suggest a more complex economic system than previously understood, combining maritime resource exploitation, herding, and hunting. This points to reduced residential mobility and possibly a partially sedentary lifestyle. These findings necessitate a reassessment of the Neolithic in Eastern Arabia, highlighting the diversity and adaptability of its communities as they followed distinct micro-regional trajectories.

This monograph is structured into five chapters, each addressing a specific aspect of the site and its broader implications. The **Introduction** situates the UAQ2 excavations within their historical and scientific context, outlining the objectives of the project and the significance of revisiting the site after two decades. It also frames UAQ2 within the larger scope of Neolithic studies in Eastern Arabia, summarising the key research questions and methodologies employed.

**Chapter 1** provides an overview of the site, detailing its geographical and environmental setting and the history of archaeological investigations, including the methods and strategies employed during recent excavations. **Chapter 2** focuses on the graveyard, analysing burial practices, associated grave goods, and the social and ritual behaviours inferred from the burials. **Chapter 3** examines the site's chronological framework, presenting the results of <sup>14</sup>C and OSL dating alongside geoarchaeological studies that contextualise UAQ2 within the broader environmental and climatic changes of the Holocene. **Chapter 4** explores the material culture, including lithic industries, ornaments, and imported goods such as Ubaid pottery, situating these finds within local and regional economic and cultural networks. **Chapter 5** investigates subsistence strategies and the animal economy, with particular attention to the exploitation of marine and terrestrial resources, as well as evidence for herding and hunting practices.

The **Conclusion** synthesises the key findings of the UAQ2 excavations and their implications for understanding the Neolithic in Eastern Arabia. It underscores the importance of UAQ2 as a unique site bridging settlement and funerary practices, offering new perspectives on social organisation, economic strategies, and exchange networks in the region. The conclusion also identifies areas for future research, emphasising the need for continued interdisciplinary studies to further explore the complexities of the Arabian Neolithic in the UAE and beyond.

Through these chapters, this monograph aims to provide a comprehensive account of UAQ2 and its significance for understanding the Neolithic in Eastern Arabia. The findings presented not only deepen our knowledge of the region's past but also underscore the importance of continued research in UAQ and the northern UAE.



# Introduction

S. Méry, K. Lidour

The Archaeology of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) remains relatively unknown today compared to the neighbouring great civilisations of Mesopotamia, Iran, and the Indus. The ancient past of the UAE is characterised by continuous human occupation since the Middle Palaeolithic, as recent excavations at the Jebel Faya rock shelter in the Emirate of Sharjah have revealed. At this same site, the stratified layers dated as early as 210 ka BP ultimately provide little information about the ancient lifestyles of their occupants, which are mainly documented by lithic tools.

The sites dating from the Arabian Neolithic period (c. 6500-3300 BCE) offer the oldest architectural structures as well as material cultures and zooarchaeological assemblages allowing for a detailed analysis of ancient human societies. This period is still poorly understood in the Arabian Gulf, particularly in the UAE. Prehistoric research has mainly focused in Saudi Arabia, the Sultanate of Oman and Yemen since the 1970s, with these regions seeing the first identification of substantial stratified Neolithic sites—notably the shell middens of Muscat and the Ja’alan in the Sultanate of Oman and those of the Tihama in southwest Yemen. This focus is also due in part to the continuation of major multi-year excavation and survey campaigns such as the Joint Hadd project, initially directed by S. Cleuziou (University of Paris 1 Pantheon-Sorbonne) and M. Tosi (University of Bologna). Nevertheless, the recent research is also greatly indebted to the excavations and detailed publications of the sites of as-Sabiyah H3 (2010) in Kuwait and Dosariyah (2018) in Saudi Arabia, within the framework of which this monograph is positioned. This momentum has, in fact, led to significantly greater attention being paid to the recent prehistory of the Arabian Gulf, which had been neglected for several decades.

In 1977, French archaeologists, led by S. Cleuziou, were invited for the first time by UAE authorities and under the patronage of HH Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan (1st President of the UAE and former ruler of Abu Dhabi) to undertake excavations with local teams at Hili (Emirate of Abu Dhabi), at sites dating from the 3rd and the 1st millennia BCE – in particular, Hili 8, one of the significant key sites for the development of oasis agricultural-based societies during the Early Bronze Age. R. Boucharlat, after that, joined the team to investigate prominent Iron Age sites such as Rumeilah and Hili 14. At that time, the UAE represented almost virgin territory for archaeology, with the very first scientific research being initiated by the Danes at the end of the 1950s, which involved the excavation of Early Bronze Age sites in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, such as Umm an-Nar (close to Abu Dhabi city) and the Jebel Hafit tombs (near Al Ain).

Since its inception, the UAE-France archaeological cooperation has been characterised by a desire for cultural and scientific openness – manifested by the UAE authorities within Museums and Departments of Antiquities of the emirates of Abu Dhabi (from 1977, in Al Ain, with S. Cleuziou, R. Boucharlat, S. Méry, and others), Sharjah (from 1986, with R. Boucharlat and M. Mouton), Umm al-Quwain (from 1987, with O. Lecomte, V. Charpentier, S. Méry, and K. Lidour), Ras al-Khaimah (from 1986, with C. Hardy-Guilbert), and Fujairah (from 2001, with A. Benoist and J. Charbonnier). Nearly 50 years of continuous collaborative research between the UAE and France has allowed archaeologists to shed light on the richness and diversity of the UAE’s historical heritage over more than 7,500 years – from the Neolithic to the present.

The first archaeological cooperation between the Emirate of Umm al-Quwain (UAE) and France lasted from 1987 to 1993, when O. Lecomte conducted excavations at ed-Dur (occupied during the first centuries CE) in the framework of a European collaborative project bringing together Belgian, British, Danish, and French teams (see, for example, Boucharlat *et al.* 1988; 1991a; 1991b). O. Lecomte also initiated excavations at the Neolithic site of Akab, located on the Al Ghallah island (Jousse 1999; Prieur & Guérin 1991; Jousse *et al.* 2002).

In 2002, the French Archaeological Mission in the UAE resumed archaeological research on the Neolithic Period in the Emirate of Umm al-Quwain. New excavations at Akab were conducted by V. Charpentier (for the settlement area, Charpentier and Méry 2008) and S. Méry (for the *Dugong Bone Mound*, see, for example, Méry *et al.* 2009). From 2009 onwards, a survey began that aimed to better understand the patterns of the coastal Neolithic occupation of the Emirate of Umm al-Quwain. In 2011, the excavation of Umm al-Quwain UAQ2, a site recovered and excavated in the early 1990s by C.S. Phillips (2002), was resumed by a joint UAQ-French team led by S. Méry. The excavations were conducted each year between 2011 and 2014, plus the last season that took place in 2017. Post-excavation study was done from 2011 to 2018 in the field. Two other sites were excavated in 2018 at a smaller scale, UAQ36 and UAQ38 (Méry *et al.* 2019; Degli Esposti *et al.* 2019).