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Window 4

Sea Mammals and Humans along the Shores of the Oman Peninsula

Vincent Charpentier & Sophie Méry

Nowadays, 90% of stranded cetaceans in Oman are found south of Ras Al-Hadd. Although the archaeozoological record of Neolithic sites explored along the coast of the Arabian Sea does not suggest that prehistoric populations regularly hunted sea mammals, a number of such sites have yielded whale bones, simply collected on the shores of the Indian Ocean. This material was clearly transformed from 4700 BC onwards, as best showed by a large plaque, found at Suwayh SWY-1, obtained from a mandible of *Baleinoptera* sp.

On the other hand, smaller sea mammals were regularly hunted throughout the Neolithic, as was the case of dolphin (*Delphinus delphis* L.) at Ras Al-Hadd HD-5, during the 4th millennium BC, or of dugong (*Dugong dugon* M.) in the warmer Persian Gulf, from the very beginning of the 5th millennium BC. Until recent times, dolphins were still fished nearby Barr Al-Hikmann and the Masirah island. Along with dry shark, dry dolphin was traded to the mainland as a protein source. In the Gulf, however, dugong fishing has lasted only until the '80.



FIGURE 4.1
Whale bone plaque from Suwayh SWY-1 Neolithic
settlement, 5700-4300 BC (copyright V. Charpentier).

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FIGURE 4.2.
The Akab dugong bone mound, 3500-3200 BC (photograph by S. Méry/Famu).

Beside regular fishing of some species, opportunistic fishing is attested during prehistory as well, as proved by a pinniped found at the site of Ras Al-Jinz RJ-2. Like the specimen recently hit along the Omani coasts, this one, dated between 2500 and 2100 BC, is an elephant seal (*Mirounga leonina*), the largest southern seal, native to the sub-Antarctic island (Kerguelen Islands, Prince Edward, etc.); it certainly drifted for more than 8,000 km, before it was hunted by Bronze Age fishermen on the Omani coast.

A sanctuary dedicated to dugong worshipping, uncovered in the island of Akab (Emirate of Umm Al-Quwayn), in the Gulf, certainly constitutes a key discovery for the archaeology of prehistoric Arabian Peninsula. The shrine consists of an ovoid monument of about 10 m², preserved on about 40 cm, built with the bones of at least forty dugongs. An armful of ribs is placed just in front of a series of skulls, deposited on three rows and looking towards the east. Parts of the bones are reddened by an ochre solution, which has permeated the enclosing sediment as well. The monument is marked by an exceptional concentration of ritual offerings: 2076

objects were found in 10 m², including chlorite or shell beads, fish hooks made of mother-of-pearl, bone awls, shell scrapers and knives of flint tile. This marine sanctuary, some 5500 years old, recalls the Australian «dugong bone mounds» of the Torres Strait, dated to the 9th-14th centuries AD, and associated with propitiatory fishing rituals. As a whole, these elements indicate that the design and the utilization of the Akab monument during the 4th millennium BC were dictated by precise rules.

The complex was ultimately the ritualized and spectacularized representation of a large marine mammal, and one can only be struck by the orientation of the skulls towards the east, which was consistent with the orientation of the deceased in a series of Neolithic necropolises, such as the graveyard of Jebel Al-Buhais 18 (Emirate of Sharjah, UAE). Certainly, this representation evokes the contemporary ritualization of green turtles (*Chelonia mydas*) discovered in the necropolis of Ras Al-Hamra RH-5 (Sultanate of Oman), where turtle skulls were placed next to the deceased faces or on top of the tomb, and elements of turtle carapaces were laid on the bodies ■