145. New Stone Age Sites in the Arabian Peninsula

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Since literary and scientific English is (for better or for worse) so Londinio-centric in character, the Hon. Editor wonders (with all deference to Professor Ekwall’s opinion, as expressed in his final paragraph) whether the euphonious ‘swidden’ might not stand a better chance of acceptance than the more rebarbative and aggressively dialectal form ‘swidden.’ In any case, the opinions of readers will be welcome.—Ed.

‘SWIDDEN’—LAND CLEARED BY BURNING

Dialectal English swidden is explained in Wright’s English Dialect Dictionary as ‘a place on a moor which has been cleared by burning, or which still shows signs of burning.’ There is also a variant form suivven, which is clearly developed from earlier swithen, the base also of swidden. The word is recorded from North Yorkshire, more especially the Cleveland district, and the earliest source in which it is mentioned is Atkinson’s Glossary of the Cleveland Dialect (1868).

Swidden is more often evidenced as a verb, and there are also the variant forms swithen and swizzen. Its meanings according to the Dialect Dictionary are ‘to burn superficially, as heather, wool, etc.; to singe, scorch,’ also ‘to shrivel up’; according to the Oxford English Dictionary, ‘to burn, scorch, singe,’ also intrinsically ‘to be singed.’ The verb is used in the North Country, especially Yorkshire, but also in North Lancashire and the Lake District, in the sense ‘to shrivel up’ also in Leicestershire. It is recorded from 1600 on in the form swithen, from 1691 as swizzen, from 1798 as swidden.

The noun swidden (switchen) has not been found in early English literature, but a well evidenced place-name element switchen must at least partially be identical with it. The meaning of switchen in early place names cannot of course be definitely established, but the only suggestion that can be offered for the element is that it is an early form of swidden or a word nearly related to it. And a strong indication that the meaning was ‘a clearing’ is a reference of 1220–35 in Rotuli Hugonis de Welles, I (Lincoln Record Society), where some asarts in Whitwick in Leicestershire called Stiriennes (evidently for Switernes, Swithenen) are mentioned. An asart was a forest clearing, and Whitwick is near the ancient Charnwood Forest. Several places called Swithen or with names containing the word are (or were) situated in moorland or forest areas. Other early instances of the noun swidden are Syrthunes 1232 in North Yorkshire (Place-Names of the North Riding, p. 330), le Syrthyn 1275, the present Sweden in Westmorland (Place-Names of Cumberland, p. 371), le Syrthyn 1318 at Bramley near Rotherham, West Yorkshire (Goodall, Place-Names of South-West Yorkshire), Swithen 1425 in Rothwell near Leeds (Thoresby Society, XXIV, p. 290). Goodall in the work quoted also mentions Swithen, a hamlet in Darton, and Swithens in Sowerby, both in West Yorkshire. These two names have not been found in early sources, but doubtless contain switchen ‘a clearing.’

Switchen forms the second element of at least two place names. Swinnow, the name of a small place in Moorsholm (in Skelton in the Cleveland district of North Yorkshire), is Swine-, Swinn-, swithene in thirteenth-century charters (Place-Names of the North Riding, p. 145); the name seems to mean ‘clearing where pigs are turned out to forage.’ Estwidthen in a twelfth-century text (op. cit., p. 310) is no doubt instead or misspelled for Estswithen and means eastern clearing’; it is the earliest instance of swithen found hitherto.

Less easy to judge are names in which swithen occurs as a first element. Here the participle swithen, ‘burnt,’ on which more below, is sometimes a possible alternative. But Swythengate in a Yorkshire final concord of 1246 (Feet of Fines for Yorkshire), probably the name of a road in Clifford near Tadcaster in West Yorkshire, may well mean ‘the road leading to the swidden’ (gate from Old Scandinavian gata ‘road’). Swithenthale, the lost name of a place in Cumberland found in 1578, is held in the Place-Names of Cumberland, p. 371, to have as first element the word for a clearing, but swithen, ‘burnt,’ is equally possible. The second element is thweate, ‘a forest clearing.’ Swythenknoyle 1404, Yorkshire Deed, IV, 90 (in Old Lindsey in Stainland in West Yorkshire), is perhaps ‘the burnt knoll.’ Switheland in Leicestershire (Switheland 1309–19, Swithelande 1324 in Rotuli Hugonis de Welles, I, II) does not mean ‘the burnt land’ or ‘land cleared by burning.’ Its second element is Old Norse landr, Danish lundr, ‘a grove,’ but its first element is possibly the noun swithen, so that the name means ‘the grove with or by the swidden.’ ‘Burnt grove,’ however, is a possible alternative. It is worthy of notice that Swithland is near Charnwood Forest not far from Whitwick.

The words discussed here are ultimately Scandinavian and connected with a group of words widely distributed in Scandinavian countries. There is first a verb meaning ‘to burn, singe’ and the like, found as Old Norse svíða, Old Swedish svípa, Danish svide. The past participle of the verb was Old Norse svíðin, ‘burnt,’ and Modern Icelandic svíðið land means ‘land cleared by burning.’ The verb was introduced into English, and swithe is recorded from about 1220 on in senses such as ‘burn, scorch, singe’ in texts from districts where Scandinavian influence is prominent. Its past participle was Middle English swithen, ‘burnt.’ From svíða are derived various Scandinavian words for ‘burning’ or ‘land cleared by burning,’ in the latter sense for instance Old Swedish svíð, Swedish sveä, Norwegian sveid, Old Swedish sveþja, Swedish sveþja, Old Norse sveþning (all often in place names).

A Scandinavian word directly corresponding to the Middle English noun swithen is not known, but there is an Old Norse svíðna, ‘to get burnt,’ from which swidden (switchen) the verb is derived. Swithen, ‘a clearing,’ may have been formed from the verb in the same way as Old Norse brenan, Old Swedish brenda, ‘burning; land cleared by burning’ from Old Norse brenan, Old Swedish brendam, ‘to burn.’ Alternatively the noun switchen may be a derivative of the adjective (participle) swithen, ‘burnt,’ the original meaning being ‘burnt land.’ Goodall in the work just quoted identifies swithen with Old Norse svíðin, the source of Norwegian sveen, which is found in many place names. But this sveen goes back to Old Norse svíðin, a form of Old Norse svei with the suffixed definite article, meaning ‘the clearing.’ It is not probable that this is the right solution, since there are no other safe instances of the Scandinavian suffixed article in English.

The form swidden may be preferable to swithen as a term for ‘land cleared by burning,’ since it is the term now in use. The word swidden as a technical term has the advantage that related words with the same meaning are in living use in Scandinavian countries, where the custom of clearing land by burning was very common till fairly recent times. Swedish sveja is used both as a verb and as a noun and it enters into various compound words, such as svejebruk, ‘sveiden cultivation,’ svejefjärd, ‘land cleared by burning.’

New Stone Age Sites in the Arabian Peninsula. By Henry Field, D.Sc. (Oxon.). With a text figure

145 In view of Professor F. E. Zeuner’s article on the recent location of ‘neolithic’ sites on the southwestern fringe of the Rub’ al-Khali by D. G. Bunker and G. Popov of the Desert Locust Survey, the discovery of additional sites to the east and north adds links to the chain of Stone Age sites in this little-known region.

During the spring of 1935 Mr. Z. R. Beydoun, geologist for Petroleum Concessions, Limited, reported to Mr. F. E. Wellings,
I.P.C. Chief Geologist, that a new archaeological site had been found in the northern Hadramaut, where prehistoric sites appear to be rare since only one presumably definite site was found during the season's work.

This is the Nahrit site, in the territory of the Bait Azab Section of the Bait Sumeida (Mahra) tribe, just west of the main drainage area of Wadi Nahrit in an open and flat space. The Wadi flows north–westward from the Jebel Mahrat escarpment a little to the south into the Wadi Armah basin just to the north. The exact position of the site is longitude 40° 40' E. and latitude 17° 01' N.

The accompanying photograph (fig. 1) shows the site as being on a low mound with an outer rim covered with loose chert and flint fragments from which two implements were collected. Within this outer rim of chert there is a circular pattern of upright slabs of rock up to 5 feet 6 inches in height, and the diameter of this circle is 14 metres. The central part of the circle is composed of gravel and top soil together with a few lumps of gypseous rock. Behind this site there is a longitudinal mound of scree which contains chert, some of which appears worked.

Three examples were forwarded to me for study:

(a) The largest (9.0 x 7.5 x 6.0 centimetres) is a refractory nucleus of deeply patinated chert with a pitted surface and some evidence of desert varnish. An ancient flint-knapper attempted to remove three flakes from the natural flat striking platform. The poor quality of the chert renders success impossible.

(b) The second (7.0 x 4.2 x 2.0 centimetres) is leaf-shaped with a light pinkish-white, striated lower side which lay protected on the sand. The upper and exposed surface ranges from dark brown to a light reddish brown. A 'bulb of percussion' on the flat striking platform indicates the hallmark of human workmanship. The cutting edge shows wear, being shiny as seen on flint sickle blades excavated at Kish and other sites in Mesopotamia (now Iraq). It is also observed that this blade appears to fit more naturally into the left hand, perhaps one of the earlier evidences for the right hand being less skilful than the left.

(c) The third specimen bore no traces of human flaking.

As to the age of these specimens, the sole evidence rests with patination. However, in view of T. E. Lawrence's 9 researches in northern Sinai during 1913-1914 and my own observations in Sinai, Jordan, Syria, Iraq, Iran, northern Saudi Arabia and from Al Kuwait to the Trucial Oman Coast from 1925 to 1935, it is clear that patina on flint or chert may be acquired within a few generations depending on the intensity of the action and reaction of geological agents. However, I have found similar worked examples in quantity at certain localities 10 of South-Western Asia.

Typologically, these two specimens should be assigned to the Palaeolithic, but they may well be of neolithic date. Until a stratified deposit has been excavated within the confines of the Arabian Peninsula south of latitude 26° N., all surface finds cannot be assigned to periods comparable to those excavated in the Nile Valley, Israel, Lebanon, north-eastern Iraq and northern Iran.

Another site described by Mr. Beydoun lay to the north of the Habshiya escarpment and of similar nature to the Nahrit site. This is, however, smaller and the circular wall is not higher than 2 feet; the diameter is about 5 metres. No implements were seen in the vicinity. The site is located in a wadi bed at about latitude 17° 06' N. and longitude 49° 55' E. A slab of rock with inscriptions, supposedly of Himyaritic type, is reputed to exist near the above site but was never found.

Many triliths, as described by Wilfred Thesiger, were recorded; these were usually found aligned beside the main camel tracks and near disused wells, but are limited to the area east of longitude 49° E. West of this delimitation, a number of rock mound alignments, similar to triliths, were found in abundance. However, these differ from triliths in that instead of consisting of three upright slabs of rock per mound, they are made up of a conical pile of small rocks and boulders generally situated on the ridges of a range of hills and usually in a line along the skyline. At one or both ends of these lines, a flat-topped, circular mound of rocks, often 6 to 8 feet in diameter and 3 to 4 feet in height, is invariably found. These aligned mounds are common in the Al Abar area in the western plain (Jau Mulait) and on the northern Jol north of Wadi Hadramaut, but can be occasionally found east of longitude 49° E. No implements were noticed near such sites; however, no thorough search was made.

During February, 1935, while en route to West Pakistan to make a reconnaissance survey across former Baluchistan from Pami to Quetta on behalf of the Peabody Museum of Harvard University, my wife and I stopped at Dhabran. Here I was given an opportunity to examine some of the important surface finds made recently by the Arabco staff from the following localities:

(a) 70 kilometres west of Dhabran, Don Holm collected rolled and worn, dehydrated, white chert tools.

(b) 70 kilometres north-north-west of Rafha near Jebel Umm el-Rijm, Charles Rock found several heavily patinated dark brown scrapers.

(c) On Armah Plateau (49° 10' E. and 25° 00' N.) north-east of Riyadh about 40 miles south-west of Ruma, a square kilometre is covered with chert nodules (up to 0.5 metre in diameter) with many flaked by human hands.

(d) Jafurah el-Jiban (35° 10' E. and 24° 20' N.) with quartzite bifaces from gravels 10 to 20 metres above plain level.

(e) Jal as-Saliban (35° 15' E. and 24° 35' N.) south-east of Selwa and just north of the old Wadi Sahaba which with (d) lies about 60 miles across saddhu; a finely grained, buff-coloured quartzite with rolled and worn artefacts was found.

(f) Es Shafah (49° 42' E. and 21° 50' N.).

(g) Jiladah (46° 18' E. and 18° 48' N.).

(h) Aramco camp (no name) at 48° 50' E. and 18° N.

(i) Aramco camp, known as G-2554 (49° 46' E. and 18° 18' N.), where 19 blades of 'Solutrian' type lay arranged in a circle 1.0 metre in diameter. The largest specimen, with the finest pressure-flaking technique, measured 13.5 x 25 x 0.75 centimetres; the next in size being 12.0 x 5 x 0.5 centimetres. This excellent-quality flint is laminated with marked concentric circles. Several of these specimens would pass for the finest Solutrian eulilles-de-lavier, almost matching in skill of craftsmanship the work of the finest Solutrian, Dynastic Egyptian or Danish flint-knappers, with the exception of certain ceremonial Egyptian knives, the hafted blade from Solutré 15 and the Fihen dagger.
The wealth of surface material, especially from the sites known as Jildah (46° 18’ E. and 18° 48’ N.) extending to G-2534 about 300 miles to the east, make it more desirable than ever to find a stratified site in order to determine the relative chronology.

It now seems probable that these were camp sites used by the ancient hunters, who brought their flint weapons, tools and arrowheads with them, for there is as yet no direct evidence of local sources of flint or of flint-working in this southern land along the northern border of the great sands.

To the north-east of the Rub’ al-Khali rises the mountain chain of eastern Oman and the Peninsula overlooking the Strait of Hormuz. Mr. D. M. Morton, area geologist of the Qatar Petroleum Company,17 sent the following information:

‘Prehistoric sites in Oman appear to be rare; we are continually on the look-out for any indications. At the end of March, 1955, one worked flint blade on the southern flank of Fahud, 4 kilometres north-east of camp. Another implement was found during April at Ras el-Gala’s at the east end of Natih. Triliths are known from Boy and Nafun. Of unknown significance and date, a large stone cairn18 (3-5 metres in diameter and 1-0 metre high) have been noted at the east end of Fahud and 5 or 6 at the north flank of Natih, and several in the Wadi Amaiur near Najd.’

Thus, with these new surface sites, widely scattered over this vast Arabian Peninsula, we see the emergence of a cultural sequence. It remains to determine their age by geological association and stratigraphy and then to relate these cultures to those of the Horn of Africa across the Straits of Bab el-Mandeb, across Sinai into the Nile Valley, into Jordan, Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, Iraq, Iran and northward into the Caucasus, north-east into Soviet Central Asia and Afghanistan and south-east into the Indus Valley.

In conclusion, the physical characters of ancestors of the modern dwellers in South-Western Asia, ranging from the Proto-Mediterraneans and their contemporaries back through the local facies of the Upper, Middle and Lower Paleolithic will be determined.

Thus, the racial and cultural development in South-Western Asia, crossroads of three continents, will become finally clarified.

Notes
2 Position 17° 12’0’ N. and 45° 55’2’ E.

REVIEW

AFRICA


Mr. Christensen starts his monograph on the Gold Coast Fanti in the best scientific tradition. That is, he states his biases so that the reader may make the necessary allowances in assessing what follows. It is well that he does so, for the resulting monograph is heavily influenced by them.

To begin with, the author explains that: ‘It is essentially to the sanctions and attitudes as they find expression in the belief system of the Fanti that one must go to understand the paternal line. . . . In addition to consideration of the formal structural aspects of a given society, attention to its qualitative or psychological phases is essential for any comprehension of the integrated whole’ (p. 3).

Leaving aside (as does the author) the question of what the connexion is between ‘sanctions’ and ‘attitudes’ and the notion of the ‘qualitative’ or ‘psychological’ phases of society we are left with the problem of how any structural analysis could proceed without taking into account the sanctions involved in maintaining a given pattern of behaviour and the attitudes towards such patterns. Neither here nor during the course of his exposition does the author help us to understand what different procedures or data are to be used when considering the ‘belief system.’

The ‘qualitative’ or ‘psychological’ emphasis does have a marked effect, however, in the manner in which Christensen chooses to conceptualize his central problem. His stated purpose is to demonstrate that the Fanti, who have by previous writers been considered to have a matrilineal descent system, in fact instances a system of double descent. This is defined as ‘a system in which the individual is simultaneously a member of two exogamous lineages.’ Almost