

An aerial photograph of a desert landscape. A dry, winding riverbed filled with dark, rocky debris cuts through the orange sand. In the lower right, a circular stone structure, possibly a well or a small fortification, is partially buried in the sand. The overall color palette is warm, dominated by shades of orange, brown, and tan.

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THE MYSTERY OF THE DESERT KITES

Directed by Nathalie Laville
Produced by Ma drogue à moi

52' & 90'

In the North of Saudi Arabia and South of Jordan lie thousands of mysterious geoglyphs whose shape, when seen from the air, reminds us of giant kites.

The oldest of these immense stone structures were built around 7000 BC. Here we are looking at some of the oldest structures in human history, predating the Egyptian pyramids and the spectacular Stonehenge alignments by over 4,000 years.

Who designed these structures and why were they built?

Using cutting-edge technologies, an international team of archaeologists led by French researcher Rémy Crassard and Franco-Jordanian research fellow Wael Abu-Azizeh are trying to solve this mystery, as they are determined to shed a new light on the little-known Neolithic period.

SYNOPSIS

In the 1920s, in the Middle East, giant geometric stone structures have been spotted in the Arabian Desert. Today, there are nearly 6,000 of these "desert kites" in a vast area stretching from Saudi Arabia through Syria to Kazakhstan. Archeologist Rémy Crassard, along with an international team of scientists, dived right into a long-term investigation. This team is trying to figure out what are these stone alignments and who built them. According to dating information, the oldest of these structures date back to around 7,000 BC, i.e. to prehistoric times, and more precisely to the Neolithic period.

This information was a turning point in the investigation. It enabled Rémy Crassard and his Jordanian counterpart Wael Abu Azizeh, after several years of research, to find an answer to their initial question. These structures are massive death traps that were designed to trap gazelle herds. The stone alignments led to pens which had pits at the end. Gazelles would fall, fracture their legs and would eventually be put down by hunters. Here's another mystery that has been solved. But it leads to an even greater mystery. Who were these prehistoric men who were clever enough to build such massive death traps?

In 2021, a series of groundbreaking discoveries have helped shed light on these mysterious and fearsome hunters. In the Arabian Desert, four campsites, where these Neolithic men had stayed, were found. Many unusual artifacts were found there, showing a civilization more advanced than its peers. For instance, maps, the first architectural maps in history, dethroning the 4,000-year-old Bedolina map. They show these kites engraved on stones. After examination, it turned out that these maps were to scale (1:500). In other words, these prehistoric men didn't act empirically. They theorized and formalized these great stone structures without compasses, without hot-air balloons and, of course, without drones. They designed these maps precisely and mathematically with a true architect's vision. This kind of finding goes against all preconceived ideas: Until now, it was believed that a geometric and mathematical vision of the world required the invention of writing. However, these Neolithic men, 3500 years before the invention of writing, seem to have been endowed with rational and cognitive capacities hitherto unsuspected.

But there's more. Excavations revealed an impressive statue of a man, or is it a god? If you take a closer look at his face, you'll see an open mouth representing a pit where gazelles would die, and a moustache representing the kite's antennae... This raises the question of the spiritual dimension of kites: were these traps part of a religious ritual? And if so, what were the rituals and beliefs, lifestyles, relationships and exchanges among the people of this little-known civilization? Will the next excavations be able to shed new light on this question?

This 90-minute archaeological investigation will reveal the secret of these mysterious kites and the identity of their builders, whom the team will call the Ghassanians, the ancestors of modern man.



*Top picture, on the left: Rémy Crassard
 Left picture: Wael Abu-Azizeh
 Bottom picture: Crassard, Abu-Azizeh and their
 team*

THE SPEAKERS

FRANCE

REMY CRASSARD (CNRS-Centre national de la recherche scientifique, Lyon): archeologist, principal investigator of the Globalkites Project and principal investigator of the Khaybar Longue Durée Archaeological Project (Saudi Arabia)

SOFIANE BOUZID (CNRS, Lyon): data scientist, geographical study of distribution and statistical study of kite shapes

JWANA CHAHOU (Université Lumière Lyon 2) & **EMMANUELLE VILA** (CNRS, Lyon): archeozoologists, study of animal bones and behavior

BRUNO DEPREUX & **JACQUES ELI BROCHIER** (CNRS, Lyon) study of kite geoarchaeology (in order to understand how they evolved during and after their use, climatic and environmental contexts, etc.)

OLMER BARGE (CNRS, Jalès, Ardèche) & **EMMANUELLE REGAGNON**: cartography, interpretation of satellite images, study of large-scale kite distribution

SEVERINE SANZ LALIBERTE (CNRS, Jalès, Ardèche), photogrammetry + comic scriptwriter

KEVIN GUADAGNINI (CNRS Jalès, Ardèche) topography, especially the study of Khaybar kites

VICTORIA REINA (Université Lumière Lyon 2) PhD student, study of lithic furniture (silex) from hunting campsites where kites were used (South Eastern Badia Archaeological Project, the Khaybar Longue Durée Archaeological Project)

GERMANY

German team excavating Neolithic sites: including **HANS GEBEL**.

Luminescence dating laboratory, University of Freiburg, Germany (**FRANK PREUSSER**).

CHERYL MAKAREWICZ (Kiel University, Germany): archaeozoology specialist, studying fauna/animal bone remains, during the post-excavation phase in late October in Amman. In-depth laboratory analysis in Kiel: isotope studies (to identify the environment and migration routes of the gazelles from their bones).

UNITED STATES

AUSTIN CHAD HILL & YORKE ROWAN, Kites in Context Project team (USA, Chicago)

SAUDI ARABIA – JORDAN

Wael Abu-Azizeh (French Institute of the Near East (French: Institut français du Proche-Orient, IFPO); Laboratoire Archéorient-Lyon): mission co-director

Mohammad Tarawneh (Al-Hussein Bin Talal University, Jordan): mission co-director

Juan Antonio Sanchez Preigo (Archéorient): Experimental archeology, flint knapping (on site during the mission). Imitating the cutting gestures and techniques to better understand manufacturing processes

SPAIN

Fiona Pichon (Institución Milá y Fontanals, Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas (IMF-CSIC), Spain): use-wear analysis specialist (the study of micro-traces left on flint tools, to understand what they were used for). Laboratory tests in Barcelona

Isabella Oltra Carrio (University of Valencia, Spain): micromorphology specialist. Study of sediment accumulation, on-site soil sampling. The goal of these tests is to better understand the nature of human occupation on these sites (temporary/seasonal occupation, or permanent occupation).

FILMING LOCATIONS

SAUDI ARABIA

New desert kites have been discovered over the last two years while observing satellite images of north-west Saudi Arabia, not far from Harrat Khaybar. Harrat Khaybar is a volcanic field with impressive white volcanoes that can be observed from the air. Here, at the very birthplace of civilization, the remains of human communities dating back to the Neolithic period have been uncovered, enabling us to better understand the lifestyle of modern man's ancestors.



JORDAN

The Harrat al-Shām, in eastern Jordan, which was seemingly hostile, turns out to be one of the richest archaeological landscapes in the Near East. Also known as the Black Desert, this is a region of rocky, basaltic desert, where around a hundred kites have been found. The Jordan Museum, which is located in Amman's dynamic new downtown area of Ras al-'Ayn, showcases Jordan's history and cultural heritage in a series of beautifully designed galleries. On display are artifacts (crockery, pottery, carved stones, etc.) from previous excavations dating back to the Neolithic period.



TURKEY

Located in the Germuş mountains of southeastern Anatolia, this region boasts the world's oldest monumental megalithic structures, erected by hunter-gatherer groups in the Pre-Pottery Neolithic A, between 9600 and 8200 BC. These monuments were probably used for rituals, probably burial rituals. These distinctive T-shaped pillars are carved with wild animals that give an insight into the worldview and beliefs of the people living in Upper Mesopotamia around 11,500 years ago.



GERMANY

Just a stone's throw from the French border lies the city of Freiburg and its university, built on the remains of an ancient 15th-century cathedral. The Albert Ludwig University of Freiburg hosts an archaeology department specializing in the dating of prehistoric artifacts using cutting-edge luminescence techniques.

FRANCE

In the south of Ardèche, the CNRS laboratoire de Jalès analyzes kites digitally. Thanks to modelling and topographical surveys, they are able to determine their precise distribution throughout the world. In Lyon, in the CNRS Laboratoire Archéorient, Rémy Crassard gathers and analyzes the results of his years-long research.

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