

Oldest natural pearl found in Arabia

June 18 2012

French researchers at the Laboratoire Archéologies et Sciences de l'Antiquité (ArScAn) (CNRS) have unearthed the oldest-ever archeological natural pearl. Discovered at a Neolithic site in the Emirate of Umm al Quwain (United Arab Emirates), it dates from 5500 BC. These findings, together with previous discoveries of natural pearls on the south-eastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula, provide evidence that the earliest pearl oyster fishing took place in this region of the world. Published in the journal *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy*, they show that natural pearls were a major component of cultural identity in early societies in the Persian Gulf and the northern Indian Ocean.

Until now, gemmologists had popularized the idea that the oldest natural [pearl](#) (dating from 3000 BC) came from a prehistoric Japanese site. Yet the pearl that has just been discovered at the coastal site of Umm al-Quwain 2, in the United Arab Emirates, was found at a level established by carbon-14 dating at 5547-5477, 5410-5235 BC. It is therefore the oldest natural pearl ever found at an archeological site, both in the Arabian Peninsula and in the rest of the world. The discovery provides evidence that natural pearls were already collected 2500 years earlier in this region, for their esthetic value or even for ceremonial purposes.

The presence of natural pearls at many Neolithic sites in the Arabian Peninsula confirms that they were collected not only in the Persian Gulf but also on the shores of the Indian Ocean (Sea of Oman and Arabian Sea off the coast of Oman). No ancient natural pearls have been found in Egypt, Mesopotamia, India or China, although some have been unearthed in Mesopotamia dating from 3200-3000 BC.

In the Arabian Peninsula, all the Neolithic pearls discovered (101 in total) come from the large pearl oyster *Pinctada margaritifera* and from *Pinctada radiata*, which is much smaller, easier to collect, and provides higher quality pearls. Diving for them was difficult and dangerous. Once collected, they were sorted, giving priority to the spherically shaped pearls. Although they are often white, opaque and dull due to alteration, some are remarkably well preserved, displaying white, pink, orange or brownish shades, and they have kept their original luster. Mother-of-pearl was also an important resource in the economy of local Neolithic societies, since the large valves of *P. margaritifera*'s were used to make fish hooks for the capture of a wide range of fish, some as large as tuna and sharks.

Natural pearls played a special role in funeral rites. Thus, the Umm al Quwain pearl, which was not drilled, had been placed in a grave at the site's necropolis. In other necropolises, the pearls were placed on the deceased's face, often above the upper lip. Recent work has shown that in the fifth millennium BC, half-drilled natural pearls were associated with men, and full-drilled pearls with women.

More information: Vincent Charpentier, Carl S. Phillips, Sophie Méry, 2012. Pearl fishing in the ancient world: 7500 BP. *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 23: 1-6.

Provided by CNRS

Citation: Oldest natural pearl found in Arabia (2012, June 18) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-06-oldest-natural-pearl-arabia.html>

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