



Norman Whalen studying lithics

Norman Whalen – A Pioneer of Palaeolithic Arabia

Academic Career and Fieldwork in Saudi Arabia

Whalen began his work in Saudi Arabia in 1979, joining the ‘Comprehensive Archaeological Survey’, during which he was tasked with identifying Palaeolithic sites. This was the first of 14 expeditions to the Arabian Peninsula, which resulted in the recording and recovery of thousands of Palaeolithic artefacts. Two Saudi Arabian sites in particular became central for Whalen’s research: Dawadmi and Shuwayhitiyah. During 1988-2002, Whalen broadened his fieldwork focus, and conducted a series of surveys in Yemen, Jordan, and Oman.

The Acheulean site near Dawadmi was identified during the 1979 survey. Whalen returned with a team in 1982-3 to excavate the site. This was the first Lower Palaeolithic excavation in Saudi Arabia, and resulted in the recovery of 8,395 stratified artefacts. Uranium-Thorium ($U^{234}-Th^{230}$) dating on calcareous concretions adhering to the undersides of several of the artefacts provided a provisional date of >100-200 kya.



Norman Whalen excavating at the site of Dawadmi

Norman Whalen’s academic career studying the Palaeolithic of Arabia began after a decorated military career in WWII, and two decades as a priest in the US State of Arizona. In Saudi Arabia, Whalen worked closely with the Saudi Arabian Department of Antiquities and Museums, studying and publishing key ‘early man’ sites, such as Shuwayhitiyah and Dawadmi. In the 1980s, he synthesised his fieldwork in Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, and Jordan to focus on migration out of Africa, making technological links with classic East African sites. Whalen’s pioneering fieldwork and publications have laid a strong foundation for future Palaeolithic work in the Arabian Peninsula, yet his work has not been widely recognised in the international literature.

Early Life

Norman Whalen was born in 1920, and spent his early life in New Jersey. He enrolled in the US Army Air Corps 1941-46 as a navigator in the 98th Bombardment Group, completing 75 bombing raids, and ultimately achieving the rank of Major. He was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for his part in Operation ‘Tidal Wave’, and during his career he also received the Distinguished Flying Cross and 11 Air Medals. Whalen later studied at the University of Arizona where he achieved a doctorate in 1971. He then accepted a professorship at Southwest Texas State University (SWT).

Key References

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Whalen’s Legacy: The Archive, The SCTA, & The Palaeodeserts Project

The Palaeodeserts project (Oxford) and the Saudi Commission for Tourism & Antiquities have recently returned to several of Whalen’s sites. The Palaeodeserts project aims to further understanding of the nature of these sites and their context, and to improve the understanding of Arabia’s place in the story of human evolution. Whalen’s fieldwork and publications have laid a strong foundation for future Palaeolithic work in the Arabian Peninsula, and his record of collaboration with colleagues throughout the Middle East also provides a worthy example for future researchers.