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Ancient Cultures In Arid Lands

Anthropology professor Alan Simmons explores how the social and economic changes that occurred 10,000 years ago in the Middle East forever altered the human experience

About 10,000 years ago, humankind experienced a dramatic transformation known as the Neolithic Revolution. It was during this time that the peoples of the Middle East began to cultivate and produce their own food rather than hunt and gather it. Consequently, nomadic existence gave way to the development of village life, and farming and domestication of animals became common.

For UNLV anthropology professor Alan Simmons, the Neolithic Revolution remains the single-most fascinating period in human history — so fascinating, in fact, that he has spent his life's work devoted to its study.

"The Neolithic Revolution truly changed the social fabric of life," says Dr. Simmons, who joined the UNLV faculty in 1993 and now chairs the department of anthropology and ethnic studies. "For literally millions of years, we had been hunters and gatherers. But when we settled down into village life and started producing food, we set the stage for the present world. Without the Neolithic Revolution — without the security provided by domestic plants and animals, without the population growth that results from village living — we never would have developed complex urban societies."

Simmons points out that the Neolithic Revolution was born in the Middle East (or the Near East, as anthropologists tend to refer to it). In this region where so much political and religious strife exists today, he notes, the Neolithic Age took hold, establishing the foundations of some of the world's most sophisticated ancient societies, including those of the Babylonians and Sumerians. Thus, he says, it is widely acknowledged that the aptly labeled "cradle of civilization" produced the roots of Western culture.

Achieving a better understanding of how and why the Neolithic phenomena occurred has taken Simmons to this region repeatedly during the course of his career. Over the last 25 years, he has actively studied the period from a variety of perspectives and has participated in excavations in Jordan, Egypt, the Sinai Peninsula, Cyprus, Lebanon,

and Israel's Negev Desert.

With the help of his students, Simmons has investigated sites in the arid areas on the Near Eastern mainland, most recently at Ghwair I, a small Neolithic village located about 150 miles south of Amman, Jordan. He has also studied how and when the Mediterranean islands were first colonized, focusing on Cyprus.

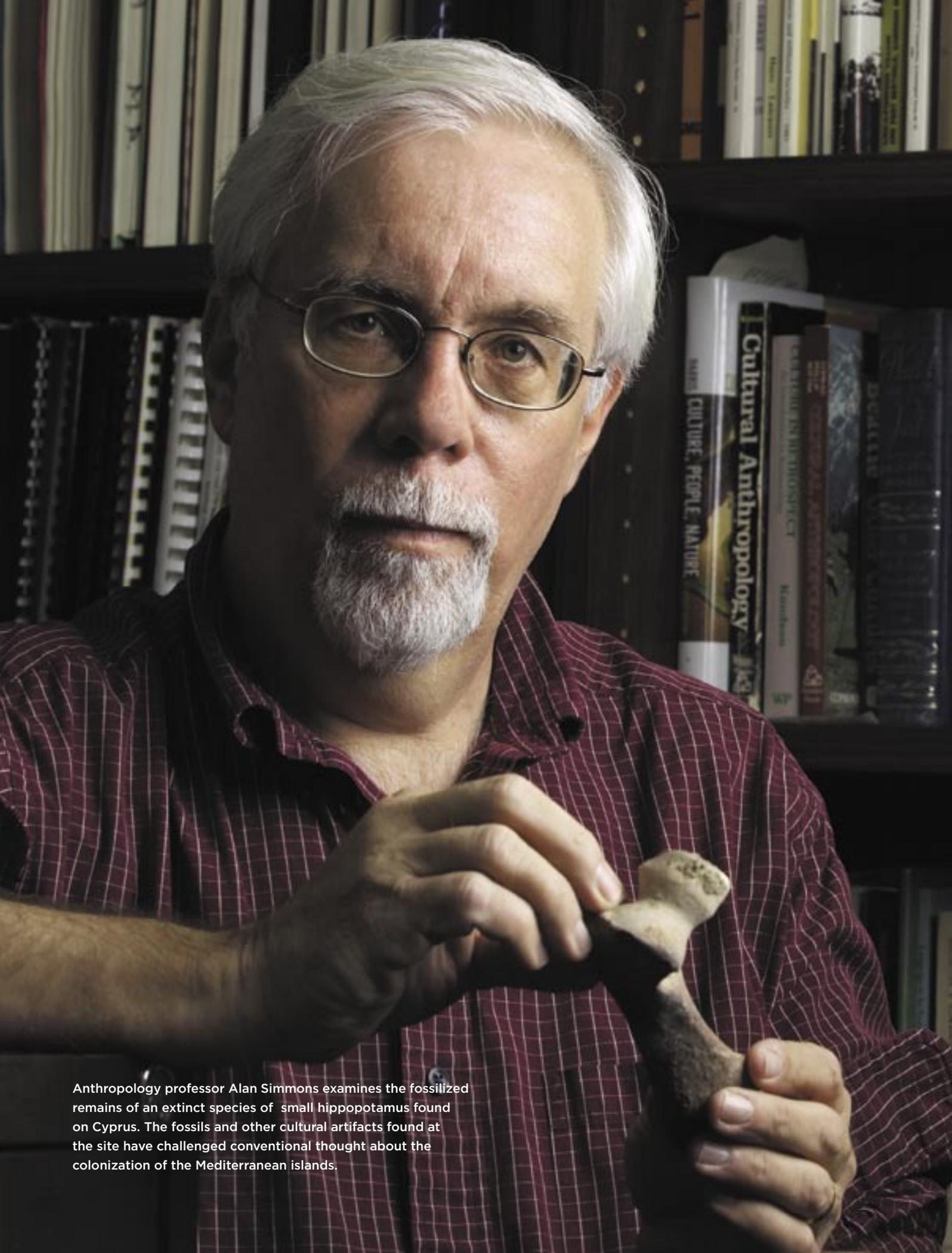
His excavations at Ghwair I, a joint UNLV-Jordanian Department of Antiquities project, have contributed to an ongoing debate among archaeologists about the nature and complexity of Neolithic communities, focusing specifically on whether they maintained egalitarian social systems. Simmons and his colleague, Dr. Mohammad Najjar, the project's co-director, have made compelling arguments that the social hierarchy of these ancient people was much more elaborate than originally believed.

"Hints of social inequality are reflected in architecture there that is much more complex than what we would expect to find in a small village," Simmons says. "This includes spectacularly preserved structures standing up to three meters tall and a complex that may have functioned as a communal theater-like facility or public gathering place."

Simmons notes that an elaborate child burial site found there suggests that people were born into status, which is unexpected for small Neolithic settlements.

"While such sophistication might be somewhat anticipated in the large Neolithic 'towns' such as Jericho, it is surprising to see such complexity in a small settlement like Ghwair I," Simmons says, adding that its location in the extremely arid region near the Dead Sea makes it unusual as well. "Ghwair I is situated in a marginal environment where there are fairly limited resources. It would have been difficult for a village to prosper there."

Funded by the National Science Foundation, the National Geographic Society, the Brennan Foundation, and UNLV's International Program, research at Ghwair I has actively involved many UNLV students, including several who have completed or are working on master's theses or doctoral dissertations. »»»



Anthropology professor Alan Simmons examines the fossilized remains of an extinct species of small hippopotamus found on Cyprus. The fossils and other cultural artifacts found at the site have challenged conventional thought about the colonization of the Mediterranean islands.

“The research at Ghwair I contributes substantially to a better understanding of early village life and significantly aids Jordan in the preservation of its past,” says Simmons, who hopes to help develop an archaeological park at the site. “We would like to continue excavating Ghwair and then preserve it for future generations to observe and enjoy.”

IN ADDITION TO CHALLENGING CONVENTIONAL thought about the complexity of Neolithic societies, Simmons’ work offers fresh insight into the colonization of the Mediterranean islands during this period.

Once the Neolithic Revolution became established on the Near Eastern mainland, he says, it was inevitable that the radical changes it brought would spread to surrounding areas. Neolithic economies ultimately reached Europe, but the exact trajectory of this is unclear. Along the way, it



At *Ais Yiorkis*, a small site in the foothills of Cyprus, Simmons and his research team have excavated a large circular stone structure that is unlike anything discovered in the area.

appears that several Mediterranean islands were colonized; conventional wisdom has suggested that this occurred relatively late in the Neolithic sequence.

This assumption, however, has been questioned by Simmons and his research team since they discovered that the first occupants on the island of Cyprus appeared around 12,000 years ago and were actually pre-Neolithic hunter-gatherers.

“Our excavations at *Akrotiri Aetokremnos* on Cyprus generated considerable controversy,” Simmons says, noting that his findings implicate humans in the extinction of a native species of pygmy hippopotamus on the island. “We found the fossilized remains of several hundred of the small hippopotami, as well as cultural artifacts indicating that humans had hunted the animals.” These materials predated the Neolithic Revolution and challenged the assumption that colonization of the

Mediterranean islands occurred much later.

Simmons’ discovery there also established a chronological benchmark from which researchers would go on to investigate subsequent Neolithic developments. Since *Akrotiri Aetokremnos*, new research by British and French investigators has shortened the gap between the “Akrotiri Phase” and the traditional Neolithic period, establishing a previously unknown, earlier Neolithic period. In addition, the French research group also documented the presence of cattle on the island during this earlier period; previous research had indicated the presence of cattle much later in the Bronze Age (around 2,500 B.C.).

Simmons continues his research on Cyprus in a different location; he and a group of student researchers are currently involved in multidisciplinary excavations at *Ais Yiorkis*, a small site in the foothills of Cyprus that is quite distinct in terrain from others on the island. Significantly, he says, cattle remains also have been discovered there and a formerly unobserved economic practice involving an early form of cattle “ranching” has been discovered.

Simmons’ team has been at work at *Ais Yiorkis* for the past three summers with funding from UNLV and private sources. They have assembled an enormous assortment of artifacts and animal remains and have also excavated a large circular stone structure unlike anything discovered in this area. While the function of this structure is as yet unclear, Simmons hopes additional excavation will clarify its nature. He was recently awarded funding from the National Science Foundation to extend his work on the island for two additional years.

As a result of his extensive research, Simmons has authored more than 80 articles, reviews, book chapters, technical reports, and monographs that have appeared in such prestigious publications as *Science*, *Nature*, *American Antiquity*, *Journal of Field Archaeology*, *Antiquity*, *Archaeology*, and *L’Anthropologie*. In addition, he has presented many papers to both academic and lay organizations and has been an invited lecturer at the Archaeological Institute of America and the Explorer’s Club. In 2004, Simmons received UNLV’s Barrick Distinguished Scholar Award.

Because of his activities in Cyprus, Simmons has been accepted into the Fulbright Commission’s Senior Specialist Program, which he hopes to use as a vehicle to share his findings about the Near East with those studying human cultural development.

“So many wondrous events have occurred in this land,” he says. “It is truly one of the most amazing places to study the history of humankind.”

Dr. Alan Simmons received his Ph.D. in anthropological archaeology from Southern Methodist University. He holds master’s degrees in anthropology from Southern Methodist as well as from the University of Toronto. His undergraduate work was completed at the University of Colorado, Boulder.