The El Kowm area (central Syria) can be considered as a region of reference for early Prehistory in the Near East. The presence of permanent water sources in the heart of the arid steppe favored continuous occupations since the beginning of the Quaternary.

Since 1997, the Institute for Prehistory and Archaeological Science of the University of Basel has undertaken a complete interdisciplinary research program of this major site of Hummal under the direction of Prof. Dr. J.-M Le Tensorer associated with the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums of Syria.

The site of Hummal is a prominent mound at an artesian spring built out of the sediments which piled up during the Quaternary. The impressive stratigraphy –twenty meters high- comprises more than 25 geological units preserving a great number of archaeological levels. It covers an extremely long period of time ranging from the Oldest Paleolithic (Oldowan) to Upper Paleolithic (Aurignacian) over more than a million years. Therefore, it is the longest and most important cultural sequence known as yet in an arid landscape in the Middle East.

The outstanding feature of the Mousterian period (around 150,000 to 80,000 years ago) consists in the remains of a giant camel. The animal measured over 3 meters at shoulder-height. Roughly speaking, it was bigger than the modern camel by 1.5 to 1.75 time.

In the same layers, beside the large amount of flint tools, we also found 3 human remains at Hummal. For the moment, the scanty evidence does not allow a clear determination of the species (Neanderthal or archaic Homo sapiens).

Moreover, the archaeological results are of outstanding importance. The study of transitional cultures such as Yabrudian and Hummalian between Old Paleolithic and Middle Paleolithic might certainly provide an answer to one of the most important question into which scientists have been looking for a certain time: the origins of Modern Man.

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