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The Rock Art of Wadi al-Jifir in Eastern Oman: an Abstract of Human Activities and Identity

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Introduction :

Progress in rock art studies confirms that this ancient art holds useful information about prehistoric people, their organization, tools, animals and activities. Worldwide, the general complexity of rock art has resulted in various proposals and approaches to comprehend and agree upon the meanings of rock senses. Likewise, rock art has always been difficult to investigate and comprehend. Nevertheless, it remains to be a useful source of information, since it offers a different quality of information when compared with unearthed archaeological material.

In Oman, rock art is categorically one of the richest and most fascinating corpuses of human heritage in the Arabian Peninsula. Yet, this source of information remains unstudied in sizeable areas of Oman. Furthermore, few studies have addressed this prehistoric source of information. These attempts were made by Clarke (1975a-b); Preston (1976); Jäckli (1980); al-Shabri (1991, 1994) and ElMahi (2000, 2001, 2002, 2010a-b).

This article presents the results of examining Wadi al-Jifir's rock drawings. These rock drawings were encountered during field investigations in 2010 at Ja'alalan Bani Bu Hassan in the Southern Sharqiyah Governorate of Oman (Fig. 1). During this survey, a number of archaeological remains (cf. al-Jahwari 2011) were recorded, including numerous rock drawings, which are the subject of this paper. In dealing with these rock drawings it is necessary to contemplate the various aspects of why prehistoric people picked, engraved and painted rock scenes. Although this question remains an unanswered completely, it seems to impel the present inquiry of Wadi al-Jifir 's rock scenes. Therefore, the purpose and the impetus that motivated conducting such drawings prompted this investigation. It is an attempt to understand why the inhabitants of Wadi al-Jifir made their rock drawings along the wadi.

Upon examination, Wadi al-Jifir 's rock drawings seem to present no snap shots of extended activities (cf. El Mahi 2000, 2001, 2002). In fact, they seem to present abstracts. These abstracts are to express a thought or an idea apart from any human activity. Consequently, the rock scenes of Wadi al-Jifir are regarded as abstracts to fulfil specific objectives.

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Modern Islamic pottery like porcelain, celadon and Bahla Ware were found in Wadi al-Jifr. It indicates that it has been inhabited until recent times when its inhabitants shifted to the centre of Ja'alan town. These nomadic goat herds still use the wadi as a grazing land for its animals, and make use of rock shelters.

The geographical terrains "wadi" means a valley. Wadi al-Jifr is a stretch of low land lying between hills and mountains and seasonally rain water flow through it (Pl. 1). It drains northwards. Water is also trapped in different locations in the course of the wadi. Hence, it is marked by short annual grass and dwarf shrubs. Therefore, these conditions are characterized by seasonal and perennial vegetation. This includes also low sub-shrub and grass cover (Pl. 2). The present ecological conditions of the wadi can be described as reasonably favourable for most of the year.

The Survey:

In 2010, our survey in Wadi al-Jifr recorded all archaeological remains, including the rock drawings. Sixty-three rocks with drawings were mapped and documented. All rocks with depicted figures were recorded and their contents were fully described, photographed and drawn. Each rock consists of drawing(s) was marked and given unique code (e.g. W.J.1.R1), then its content was described and photographed. All rocks were plotted on a satellite image using GPS coordinates that were taken to each rock. This image shows their distribution along the wadi banks and density (Fig. 3). Other archaeological remains in the Wadi were also fully documented in order to define their relationship to the rock drawings (Fig. 4).

In order to organize the data related to the rock drawings and to facilitate their analysis and interpretation, a database was created using Microsoft Access 2007, and it includes all related data. The database facilitated making quantified analysis of the total number and percentage of the depicted figures, which will be presented when interpreting the archaeological evidence later in this paper.

The 2010 survey yielded a number of archaeological remains, including the 63 rock drawings that extend along the wadi banks, mainly the northern and north-eastern bank (Fig. 3). It also yielded stone foundations of possible settlement remains that were either totally built of stone or perishable materials. They indicate settlement activity along the wadi banks, particularly at the beginning of the wadi. Other remains included rock shelters that were modified by adding exterior stone walls in front of their entrance and they were used either for short stay or for keeping animals. The

The paper regards these rock scenes as abstracts of mental conceptions of ideas to serve a meaning and a purpose. And all of these conceptions are indeed a reflection of identity and confirmation of activities. However, it would be useful to touch briefly on the geography and the setting of Wadi al-Jifr before we proceed with this attempt.

Wadi al-Jifr :

Wadi al-Jifr is located (N 2448426.427; E 743532.335) in the north-eastern part of Ja'alan Bani Bu Hasan in the Southern Sharqiyah Governorate of Oman (Fig. 1). The area is part of the Ja'alan region that is located on the southern edge of the Oman Mountains, 50km south of Sur. It is divided into five main physiographic zones (Roger et al. 1991: 7) in which the mountainous area of Ja'alan, particularly Jabel Ja'alan, Jabel Khamis and Jabel Qahwan (Fig. 2), is cut and crossed by several wadis that are filled with gabbros stones, limestone boulders and conglomerate covered with alluvial gravels and silt. The water run-off of almost all of these wadis is dry most of the time but during season of rainfall they are sometimes fed by rapid floods. Moreover, these wadis consist of a number of thorny trees, shrubs and grasses.

Jebel Qahwan, the area where Wadi al-Jifr is located, is characterized by its natural resources (e.g. flora, fauna, minerals). In terms of fauna, a number of wild animals exist in this mountainous area, including gazelle, Arabian ibex (Tahar), fox, birds and others. Jabel Qahwan, together with Wadi As'Sareen and Jabal Nakhal, is the home to one of the three main populations of the Arabian Tahrs in Oman (Kamoonpuri 2011). This natural diversity in this area has led the government of Oman to currently plan and develop Jabel Qahwan to be a natural reserve for Arabian Tahr, gazelles, leopards and birds (Kamoonpuri 2010).

Wadi al-Jifr (Fig. 2) is part of the well-known mountainous area in Ja'alan, that is Jabel Qahwan which is at the same time is part of Jabel Ja'alan mountain. After rainfall, water in this wadi comes from the main watersheds of Jabel Qahwan and runs through a number of wadi tributaries until it reaches one point where afterwards runs in one main wadi channel towards south. The wadi consists of different geological formations such as rocky and gravel hills, ancient terraces and wadi banks, ridges and wadi channels; all of which are filled with boulders and rocks of different sizes.

Currently Wadi al-Jifr is not inhabited. The survey of the wadi revealed several settlement remains built of stone foundations and perishable materials (wood, cloths, etc.), and rock shelters that were used as temporal places by goat herds who perhaps used the area for grazing.

portrayal. This is equally followed by human figures and animals (Pl. 4). All of these images are completely isolated from each other and do not comprise or indicate part of activity.

In addition, (Table 3) shows the statistical frequency of the animals depicted on the rock boulders of Wadi al-Jifr. The table is self-explanatory. The horse is the most dominant animal, followed by camel.

Discussion:

Other than the rock drawings, archaeological remains in Wadi al-Jifr consist of stone foundations of some constructions. They are distributed along the northern and north-eastern banks of the Wadi in close proximity of the rock drawings at the Wadi entrance in the south. These remains did not yield any datable evidence with the exception of few pottery sherds of the Late Islamic period (AD 1300-1800) such as Julfar and Bahla wares, and Modern times (AD 1800-present) such as porcelain and celadon. On the other hand, Hafit burial cairns (end of fourth-early third millennium BC) mentioned earlier are not close to the rock drawings; they are on top of some rocky hills surrounding Wadi al-Jifr. Thus, it is difficult to give a precise dating for the occupation in the Wadi. Nonetheless, the rock scenes of the camel and horse can possibly be relative chronological indications. This will be discussed later.

It seems logical that no group of people will make any drawings in an area which they are not related or attached to it. Usually man executes such portrayals only in places where it serves a specific purpose. Whatever purpose these delineations fulfil, it has to be in a location of interest and bond. For this reason, the inhabitants of Wadi al-Jifr must have made these rock drawings along the Wadi to serve a purpose and for a good reason, especially that their drawings are concentrated on the single entrance of the Wadi. The ancient artist in Wadi al-Jifr must have had a reason behind picking individual depictions (abstracts) to fulfil a certain purpose or an idea. It would be far-fetched to assume that the Wadi al-Jifr artist had no intentions behind his/her activities. So what is behind these rock scenes? Before any attempt to answer this question we need to look at the rock drawings or "abstracts" as illustrated in Tables 1 and 2.

It is evident that the portrayal of a human foot and hand in addition to scenes of a man mounting a horse are the most dominate depictions in the Wadi al-Jifr assemblage (cf. Table 2). The depictions of the human hand and foot are very common in prehistoric rock art. Archaeological investigations have reported these items from a wide geographical range including Arabia (cf. Wright 1985; Hawkins 1987; Kabawi et al. 1990; Jung

majority of these archaeological remains are located on the northern and north-eastern banks of the wadi due to the fact that these banks are a flat gravel terrace with rocks suitable for picking figures. Furthermore, Hafit burial cairns were noted on the rocky hills surrounding the wadi, particularly those located close by the wadi entrance in the southern part, as well as some Islamic tombs on top of a rocky hill in the northern part of the wadi.

Wadi al-Jifr rock scenes:

All drawings of Wadi al-Jifr were executed by picking. The geology of the area must have helped considerably in implementing these drawings on limestone rocks. The rock drawings were executed on boulders of various size and shapes. Their geology is examined by Osman Abdulkalig (*pers. comm.* 2012) of the Geology Department, Sultan Qaboos University, who identifies them as limestone. Furthermore, these boulders were transported by high velocity of water from the wadi's upstream. Again, water has shaped these boulders and gave them their present smooth surface. The boulders are presently resting on alluvial deposits. It is clear that these boulders were transported long time before they were drawn on them.

Given the quality of these boulders and their solid smooth surface, drawing proved to be easy by picking. Again, examining the geology of the area it seems these boulders were the only possible surface to make these drawing. The boulders are found all the way along Wadi al-Jifr.

The terrains in which these drawings have been depicted extend from the entrance of the Wadi to the highest points of Jabal Qahwan in Southern Sharqiyah Governorate (Figs. 1 & 2). The rock drawings include human figures with tools and others without tools, hand and foot prints, domesticates, and unidentified symbols (Fig. 5). All these rock drawings have been documented and studied. Furthermore, it is noticeable that these drawings are concentrated on the entrance of the wadi. Towards the inner and higher parts of the wadi, the drawings become less in number. Again, upstream there is no concentration of drawings on boulders (Fig. 3).

Wadi al-Jifr's rock drawings contain various presentations. All rock drawings are recorded in Table (1). Close examination of Table (1) casts light on the contents of Wadi al-Jifr's rock drawings. Classification of the drawings resulted in the items presented in the different drawings, which are illustrated in Table (2). It is worth mentioning that the Arabic inscription found in Site no. W.J.7.R4 is of recent origin.

Table (2) illustrates the exclusive high frequency of the human hand and foot (Pl. 3). The figure of a horse and camel riders (Pl. 4) follow in

So, what is the purpose of these abstract symbols? And why did the artist pick them on distinguished boulders along the wadi? It is difficult to answer these questions with confidence; however, we can agree that there must have been a purpose for these drawings. These drawings being abstracts must have served a purpose, and their location, concentration and position must have served a purpose.

To understand the purpose of these abstracts and their function, we need to examine the date of Wadi al-Jifr rock drawings and ecological potential of the wadi. The date of Wadi al-Jifr assemblage is not known. However, its relative chronology can be attempted through a representation of certain domesticates on the rock limestone boulders. Among the most indicative images is the horse. Up to the present, the earliest archaeological evidence of the horse goes back to c.400 BC, which is known as the Late Iron Age or Early Samad Period (cf. Yule & Weisgerber 1988: 33-40; Potts 1990: 270; Yule 2001a: Grave S2020, pls. 240-7, 557:d, 534: 1-2, 556, 557: c; Yule 2001b: fig.16). Again, on the other hand, Macdonald (1996: 73) points out that horse breeding and use were possibly taking place in Arabia around the second half of the first century BC. Accordingly, the rock drawings of Wadi al-Jifr can possibly be dated to the period extended between the late Iron Age and early Islamic phase in Oman. It is important to point out at this stage the characteristics of the climatic conditions in eastern Oman during that time. It was characterized by conditions similar to the present. The flora of eastern Oman was dominated by *Prosopis cineraria* during a late phase of the Holocene and this is an evident indication of arid climatic conditions (cf. Leizine et al. 2002: 229). Additional investigations by Van Campo (1983) and Sirocko et al. (1993) confirm the same possibility of arid climatic conditions during the late Holocene.

In such climatic conditions, the inhabitants of Wadi al-Jifr must have depended on pastoralism. The Wadi being a watercourse it must have been also rich in vegetation especially after rainy seasons. In these conditions, traditional pastoral societies move away from such a location in the rainy seasons to exploit other places. By summer and as pasture is exhausted, they return to the same wadi. The role of such a wadi and its pasture are extremely significant in their resource scheduling. In fact they practice transhumant seasonal movement (cf. ElMahi 2011). Most probably the inhabitants of Wadi al-Jifr followed a similar transhumant seasonal movement between the wadi and the extended plains of eastern Oman.

1993; Gunn 2007; Achraati 2003, 2008; Khan 2008). The works of Achraati (2003, 2008) have elaborately addressed the hand and foot in rock art. He discussed the symbolism of the human foot and hand drawings lengthily in their religious and artistic practices. Moreover, he explored their implication in the rock art of Arabia and north Africa analogically in association with ethnographical data.

Achraati (2003: 472) believes that the rock drawings of the hand in north Africa and Arabia are not related to ancient fecundity and magic. He illustrates the correlation and the link between the nomadic societies' cultural wisdom and the depicted images of the hand. The hand among these societies is a significant tribal symbol.

As for the foot, the word "foot - *rijl*" is related to "man- *rajul*". Similar connotation is also reported in some areas in the African continent such as the Afroasiatic languages (cf. Achraati 2003: 483). M. al-Mahrooqi of the Arabic Department at Sultan Qaboos University (*pers. comm.* 2012) confirms that the two words in Arabic (*Man - rajul* and foot - *rijl*) are of one origin. Again, in Africa, namely in Chad and the western Africa, the same two words are derived from one linguistic root (cf. Cohen 1994: 333; Orel & Stolbova 1995: 2113; Achraati 2008: 23-33).

When hand and foot drawings are subjected to quantitative analysis, it clearly indicates its high presence and communication (foot 43% and hand 21%). The prevailing concentration of these two items is obvious. This high prevalence consequentially indicates the nature and significance of these drawings. They are merely abstract symbols, which have a definite meaning for Wadi al-Jifr inhabitants. It is equally possible that these abstracts are significant tribal symbols known to all other groups in the area.

On the other hand, figures of humans and horse riders are represented by 5% and 13% of the drawings. These are also believed to be abstract symbols since they are not part of any human activities. Indeed, these rock scenes do not portray any sort of activities, except riders on horses or camels. In fact, the majority of the rock drawings do not present any "snap shots" of any extended activity in time and place.

Men on horses or camels are represented by 13% of rock delineations, while drawings hand and foot constitute 64%. This majority can possibly be termed abstract symbols. Consequently, the high frequency and communication of these drawings, its concentration on the wadi's entrance and its spread all the way upstream must have had served a significant purpose.

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Again, the seasonality of pasture compelled pastoral societies in Arabia to mark grazing areas under tribal territory.

In such arid environment, Wadi al-Jifir with its natural resources (water, pasture and game) must have been a significantly rewarding territory. Equally, such a wadi must have been an attractive potential resource for other pastoral groups in the area. Therefore, the wadi must be guarded and protected against other pastoral groups. It is obvious that the concentrations of the abstract symbols picked on big boulders in the entrance of the wadi are deliberately made to mark this wadi within the tribal territoriality. The high frequency of human hand and foot is to announce the identity of the wadi's owners.

No surprise pastoral societies in Arabia are known to mark their animals. In fact, they mark the key animal (camels) which constitutes their capital and means of survival in harsh environments. Equally, the images of men riding horses exhibit the strength and the ability of the owners of the wadi. No doubt, the horse was a dear animal and not owned by everybody. It is a symbol of richness, strength and power. The abstract symbols were to declare Wadi al-Jifir a tribal territory owned by a mighty tribal group. This tradition of making a grazing area stand out is known and honoured by pastoral groups in Arabia (cf. Al-Rashid 1984; Al-Samhudi 1995; EIMahi 2011).

Finally, it seems that Wadi al-Jifir rock art in essence is an assemblage of abstract symbols depicted in a precise location of the wadi to serve a specific purpose related to the tribal resources and territoriality. To achieve this objective, utilitarian images that stress suggestive connotations over beauty or any other considerations were depicted. The rock drawings of Wadi al-Jifir were meant to project ownership, tribal pastoral activities and interest, and tribal identity.

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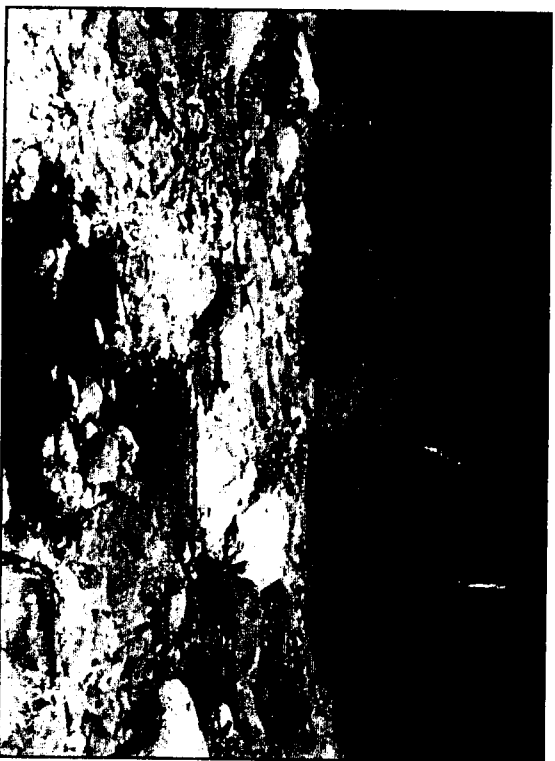


Plate. 1 Wadi al-Jifr geology.

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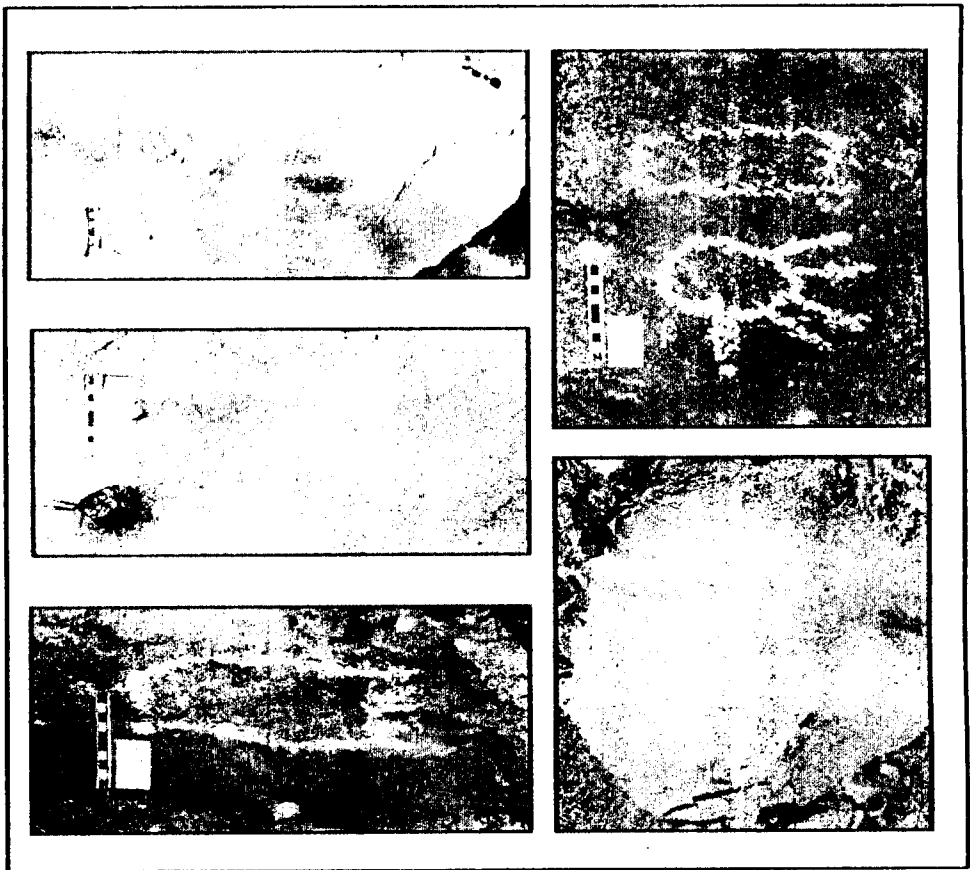


Plate. 3 hands and foot picked in limestone boulders in Wadi al-Jifr.

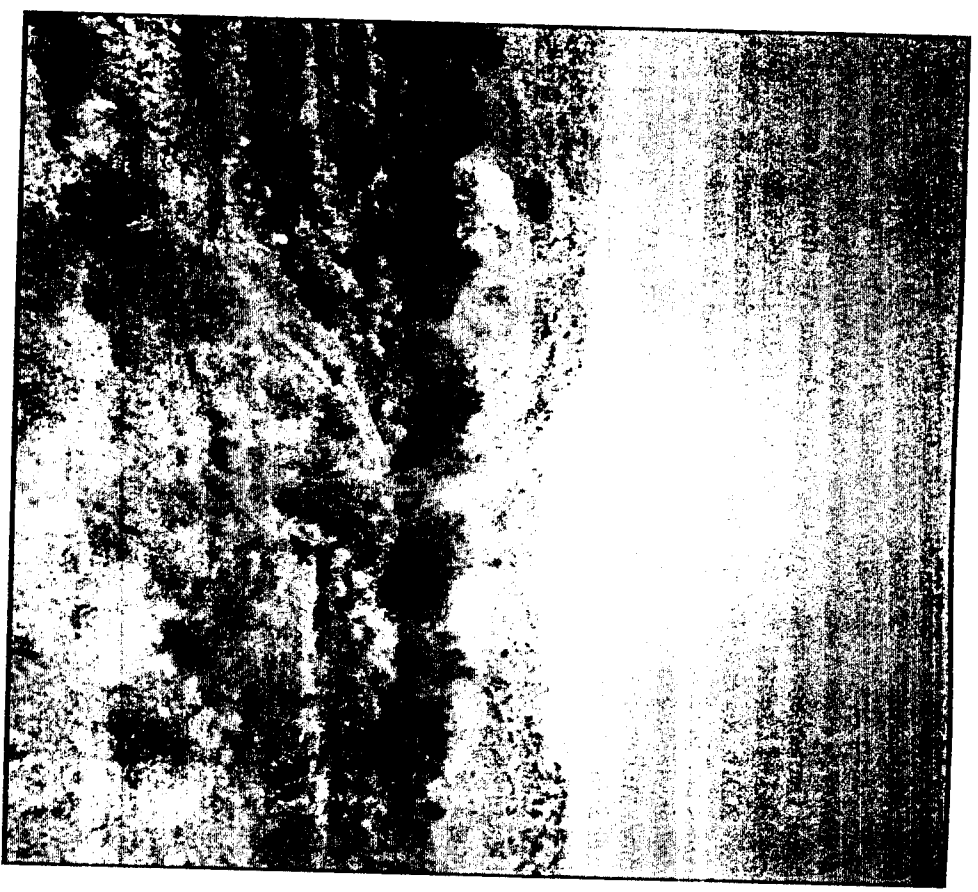


Plate. 2 Wadi al-Jifr vegetation.

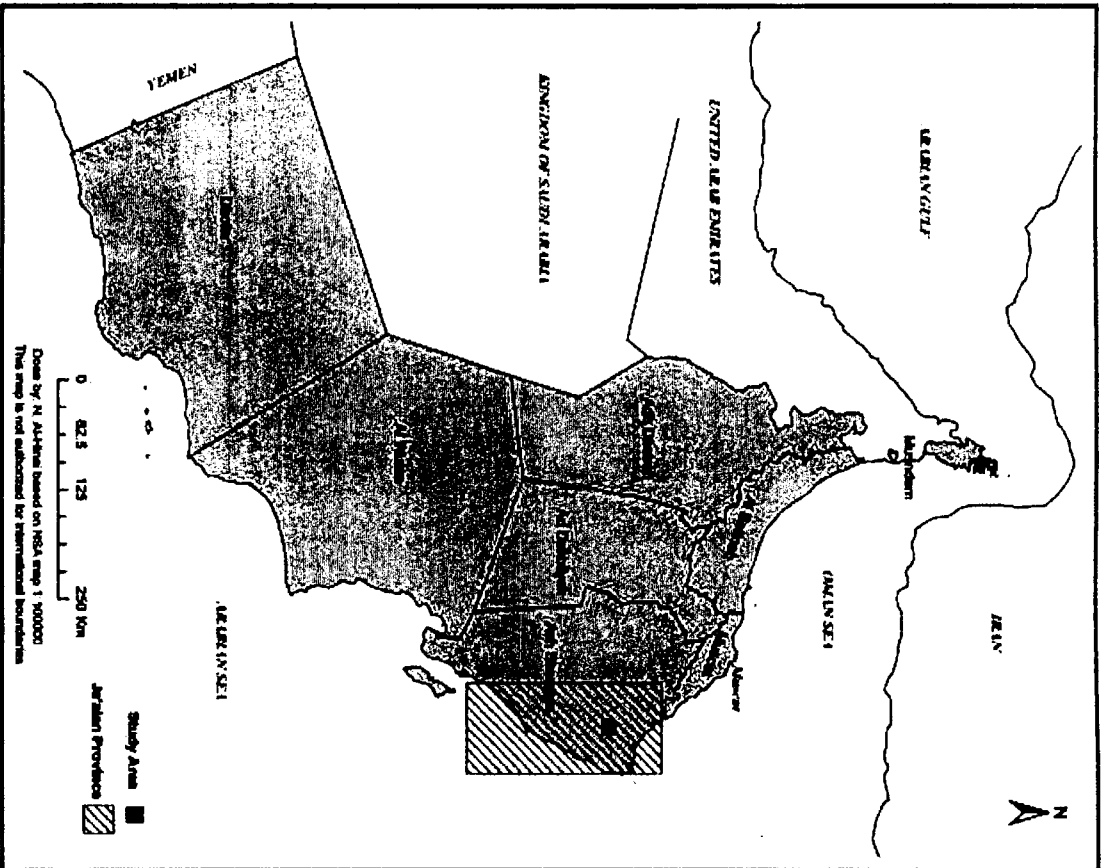


Fig.1 map shows the location of Wadi al-Jif in the Southern al-Sharqiyah Governorate, Oman.



Plate. 4 figures of human riding horses and camels from Wadi al-Jif.
Figures:

Rock Art No	Description	Rock Art No	Description
		R39	
W.J. 1. R8	1 hand	W.J. 1. R40	1 human riding horse
W.J. 1. R9	3 hands	W.J. 1. R41	5 feet, 18 hands, 1 animal? 6 others
W.J. 1. R10	1 human	W.J. 1. R42	3 humans
W.J. 1. R11	2 feet	W.J. 1. R43	1 hand
W.J. 1. R12	1 human riding a horse	W.J. 1. R44	1 hand?
W.J. 1. R13	1 foot, 1 hand	W.J. 1. R45	1 human riding a horse or a camel?
W.J. 1. R14	2 humans with weapons or traps? 1 hand, 3 others	W.J. 1. R46	Others?
W.J. 1. R15	Others?	W.J. 1. R47	1 human riding a camel?
W.J. 1. R16	1 hand, 2 humans, two horses or ibexes? 2 others?	W.J. 2. R3	5 feet, 3 hands, 2 others?
W.J. 1. R17	1 foot, 1 human riding a horse	W.J. 2. R4	1 foot
W.J. 1. R18	1 foot, 1 human riding a horse	W.J. 2. R2	3 feet, 3 humans riding camels? 1 human riding a horse, 1 horse
W.J. 1. R19	6 feet, 2 hands, 1 other?	W.J. 2. R1	9 feet, 2 hands, 1 human riding a horse
W.J. 1. R20	1 foot, 2 others?	W.J. 2. R5	3 feet
W.J. 1. R21	3 feet, 3 hands, 1 human riding a horse, 2 others?	W.J. 2. R6	11 feet
W.J. 1. R22	2 feet	W.J. 2. R7	1 foot, 2 humans
W.J. 1. R23	5 feet, 1 human riding a horse, 2 others?	W.J. 2. R8	1 foot, one animal (dog or ibex?)

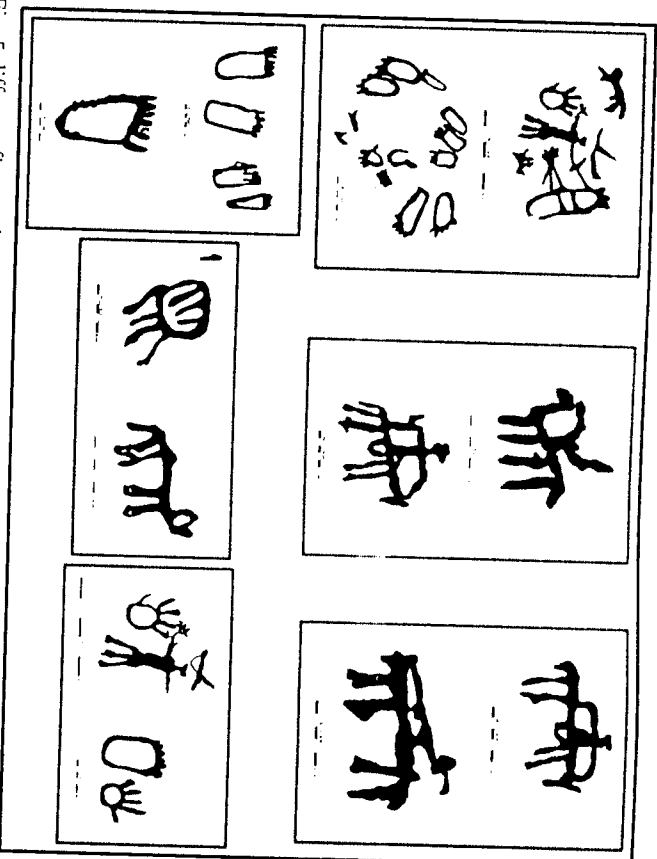


Fig. 5 different figures depicted in the rock arts of Wadi al-Jifir. Tables:

Table 1 shows the content of all recorded rock drawings in Wadi al-Jifir

Rock Art No	Description	Rock Art No	Description
W.J. 1. R1	9 feet, 4 hands	W.J. 1. R33	2 hands, others: lines, circles, traps?
W.J. 1. R2	9 feet, 2 hands, 3 humans: 2 with weapons, 2 others	W.J. 1. R34	1 hand
W.J. 1. R3	1 human riding horse	W.J. 1. R35	5 feet, 6 hands
W.J. 1. R4	2 humans riding horses	W.J. 1. R36	3 humans riding horses?
W.J. 1. R5	1 foot, 3 hands	W.J. 1. R37	5 feet, 1 hand
W.J. 1. R6	9 feet	W.J. 1. R38	4 humans: 2 ridings horses?
W.J. 1. R7	1 foot	W.J. 1.	1 hand, 1 human riding horse

Table 3 presents the total number and percentage of depicted animal figures

Animal	No	%
Horse	41	79
Camel?	5	9
Ibex?	3	6
Dog?	2	4
Other	1	2
Total	52	100

Rock Art No	Description	Rock Art No	Description
W.J. 1. R24	2 feet, 2 humans riding horses, 1 other: trap?	W.J.3. R1	1 foot
W.J. 1. R25	2 feet, 1 other: trap?	W.J. 3R2	2 feet
W.J. 1. R26	2 feet, 2 others	W.J.5. R1	Others?
W.J. 1. R27	1 foot, 1 hand, 3 others: traps or sun radiations?	W.J.6. R1	2 hands, 1 human
W.J. 1. R28	9 feet	W.J.7. R1	1 human riding a horse
W.J. 1.R29	1 foot	W.J.7. R2	2 others?
W.J. 1.R30	1 hand	W.J.7. R3	1 animal: dog or ibex?
W.J. 1. R31	2 feet, 1 human riding a horse	W.J.7. R4	1 human riding a horse, Arabic inscription
W.J. 1. R32	2 humans riding horses or camels?		

Table 2 shows the total number and percentage of depicted figures

Type	No	%
Foot	125	43
Hand	61	21
Human	13	5
Human riding horse	38	13
Human riding horse/camel?	3	1
Human riding camel?	4	1
Human with weapon	4	1
Animal	5	2
Other	38	13
Total	291	100

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