

# Bir Hima

## Saudi Rock Art in the South

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Once you have seen rock art sites in the north of Saudi Arabia or close to Riyadh in the center of the Arabian Peninsula, you need to visit also a petroglyph site in the south of the country, to experience the interesting differences in human and animal images.

It is really amazing how these pre-historic rock carvings differ in style and form. Just imagine, in the north all deities depicted are men and in the south they are all goddesses.

### North vs South Comparison

Let's look at the specifics in Saudi Arabian ancient rock art in the northern regions. We can assume with certainty, that deities here are depicted as males only. Furthermore female

images are rare and seen only in combination with men and here always as smaller figures or in dancing groups. The conclusion therefore must be, that the Neolithic societies in the north were male dominated. Supporting this deduction is the fact that males were shown with sexual features, female depictions in contrast were more schematic or abstract.

Comparing the human depictions in the southern regions we find a very different picture. Female images dominate and throughout the south they are very similar almost identical. Here females are assumed to represent deities.

The fact that their images were identical over a huge area, being home to various tribes and cultures, supports the conclusion that they are depictions of goddesses. So the obvious

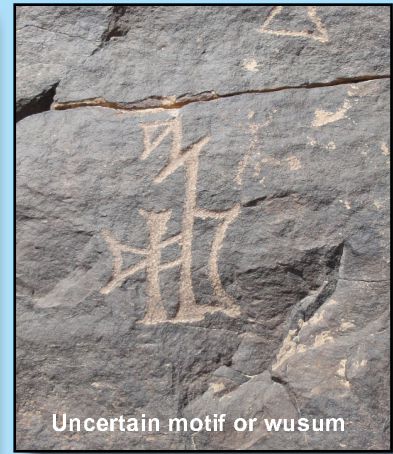




Uncertain motif or wusum



Elaborate ibex approx. 3,000 years



Uncertain motif or wusum

deduction is that the south was at the time female dominated, or females had shaman like functions. Interestingly still today the story of the ancient Arab goddess Alia is well alive in the minds of Bedouins, as deity responsible for fertility and love.

In comparison the few males encountered in the south are depicted without sexual features, but females are shown with obvious sexual traits. These images of females were carved as long slender bodies with more of a triangular torso, narrow waist, followed by wide heart shaped buttocks.

Furthermore female rock art creations can be easily distinguished by their typical hairstyles, either long to the shoulder or even longer down to the waist. This female depiction style can be seen in the areas including Wadi Dawasser, Najran, Abha, Dharan al Janubi, Bisha and the northern parts of Yemen.

### Early Life Style Differentiation

During the Early Holocene Period pre-historic hunters produced first rock art in a heavy engraved outline style with large layouts. The animal images they created included ibex, gazelle, oryx and onager a wild donkey species. Some of these were depicted with spears piercing their bodies representing first hunting scenes.

The sites at which these images were discovered included: Kilwa in the Tabuk

area, Dathami north of Bisha, high Asir area north of Abha, lower Asir area south of Zahran Djanub and in the southwest at Beni Rizam and al Faya with important ibex images close to desert kite hunting traps.

### Neolithic Hunter Pastoral

The rock art creations during this period were low relief pecked out images in a realistic and more dynamic style. The images included long and short horned cattle of the bos primigenius species, and the Arabian fat tailed sheep. For the first time we see life sized humans in key rock art sites in the north at Jubbah, Shuwaymis, Hanakiya and in the south at Bir Hima, the latter being somewhat different in style.

### Literate Rock Art Period

This period for the first time show us early inscriptions of various ancient scripts like Sabaic in the south and Thamudic in the north.

Human depictions became more schematic and those signs were the start of early letters and the convergence from pictograms to writing. Later with the rise of Islam the first Arabic writing called Kufic became the norm and was added as message to many rock art sites by passing travellers.



One of the biggest text panel in Saudi Arabia with 12 lines of text

Bir Hima is an important rock art area in the south of Saudi Arabia with several sites covered with plenty rock art panels and images. Situated about 150 kilometers north of Najran and

about 20 kilometers to the west of the Najran - Wadi Dawasser highway the main site can be easily reached on a tarred road.

In the wider area both texts in ancient scripts, yet undefined interesting signs and many petroglyph images of animals and humans can be seen here. The main site has one of the few long texts found on the whole Arabian Peninsula, which is explained further on in this article.

### Typical Bir Hima Men

The few men are normally depicted in a standing formal pose, and their dimension is about life size or a bit smaller.



Three male & female figures

Most of these men are shown with headdresses consisting of elaborate projections or decorations, and some sport moustaches and beards, which is a rare trait in Saudi rock art.

The male jewelry list includes neck ornaments, pendants, necklaces and even anklets. They wear short loin cloths, but no sight of penis sheath, which were so common in Jubbah and Hanakiya male depictions. But again like their northern compatriots at the time they



Typical southern female figure

wore short tail strings attached to their waist belts. Bir Hima men were well armed carrying spears, small shields, bow, club, quiver, plus a dagger on their waist belt, but fighting scenes in southern rock art were rare.

### Bir Hima Females

We already heard that in the south females dominated in rock art depictions and possibly even in day-to-day life of Neolithic and Chalcolithic societies. Therefore their depictions were prominent with life size images measuring up to two meters in heights.

Surprisingly no faces or breasts were shown, but pronounced hips and thighs. The waist long hanging hair was often braided with ringlets and even metal tips. The reason why all female depictions were created with up raised arms has not yet been fully established.

Theoretically this could be a ritual dancing or praying and worshipping pose. It also could be the ancient indication for a divine status, which we already know many female images represented. A unique depiction with women seated on three legged stools and male pipe player entertaining

them might be further proof of the dominant or divine status of women in the southern region during ancient times.

### Bir Hima Text Site

This fenced site consists of a low hill and one major rock panel, which is twenty five meters wide and about two meters high and broken into four parts with a smaller end piece on right side. Eighty percent of the panel space is covered by one of the longest texts found in Saudi Arabia.

Its creation was dated between 1,000 - 500 BC. The first portion from the left side shows a single camel with a cross on top of his back and a short three line text. The second panel is carved with a date palm tree and two small text groups with seven and five lines.

In addition two unknown signs or symbols were added, which are assumed not to be wusum. A more recently carved and very naturalistic half naked and bald man covered by a loin cloth and sword was also added, which has been dated around 300-500 AD.

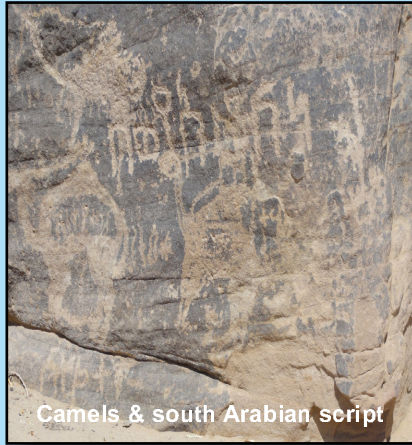
With the third panel the large text really starts. This space is fully covered with twelve lines of rich text, which extends to the



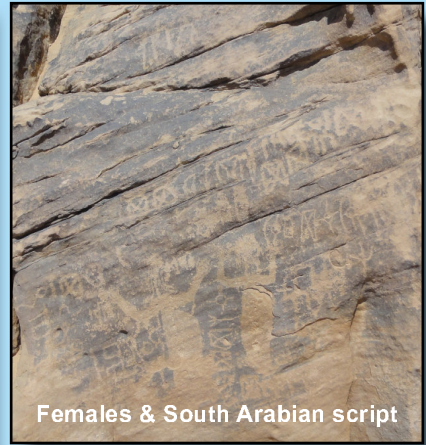
Bir Hima well site



Female figure possibly goddess



Camels & south Arabian script



Females & South Arabian script

fourth panel taking its total area. Here again another unknown sign or symbol was added.

Finally we find two more signs or symbols plus a very nice depiction of an ibex ram with big horns and beard. Unfortunately many rock art depictions have been used by Bedouins as shooting targets and some bullet hole damage can be seen here here.

### Bir Hima Well Site

Behind the first site there is a small valley with five ancient wells to prove that this was an ancient settlement site. Therefore a few cairns can be seen on the surrounding hills, plus a small cave under an overhang.

No surprise that in its vicinity

further petroglyphs were found on fallen boulders. These were early rock art work done in low relief and pecking technique. Some of the boulders are covered on various sides with animals, humans and various horse riders with the typical long lances fighting each other.

### Bir Hima 2 Site

We did not really know where this site is situated and therefore used our instinct we had developed for rock art sites. Only a few kilometers to the south on a paved road we saw a low range of hills to the east, which we checked out to find a two kilometer long area covered everywhere with ancient script and petroglyphs at eye level.

Most of these petroglyphs are rather weathered and therefore

it is difficult to identify many animal species. These figures were combined with lots of texts and human depictions, but as typical for the southern part of the country these were mainly female images.

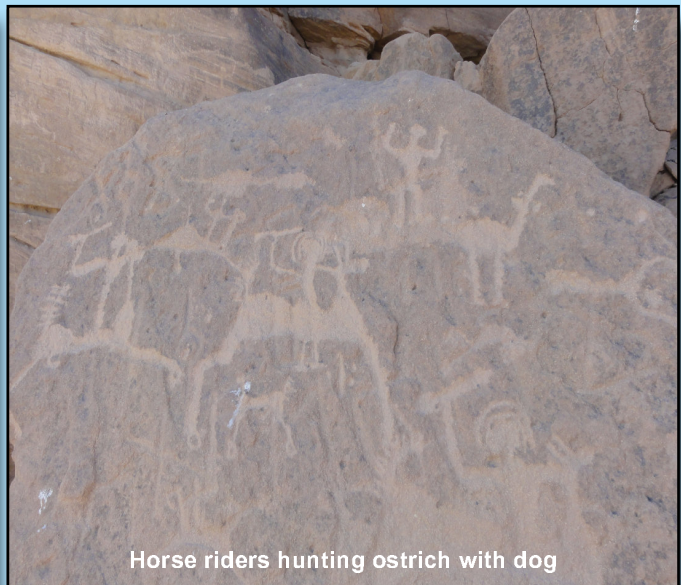
We also encountered regularly horse riders hunting or fighting with long lances. Some horses are depicted as stick figures, or in a different style typical for a certain period with front and hind legs stretched out forming a half open oval. But mostly camels were carved here, but also sheep, goat and gazelle, as can be seen from the pictures in this article.

### Post Office Rock

Once you arrive at this solitary round rock in an open desert area about five kilometers next



Six horse riders hunting with spears



Horse riders hunting ostrich with dog

to the Najran - Wadi Dawasser road it is obvious how it came to its name. Ancient travellers used nearly all rock surfaces to leave the messages to others.

The rock art here was created over various periods possibly between 3,000 - 1,000 BC. The oldest rock art was done in low relief, but 70% was scratched on desert varnish covered rock panels and fallen boulders. Some panels are rather large and measure up to five meters square or more. Many images were superimposed by their creators on other early rock art images and therefore making it rather difficult at times to recognize some figures. A high degree of weathering has taken a further toll to identify animal species.

Here we find predominantly horse riders holding long hunting lances and short throwing clubs on galloping horses carved in the typical oval style with wide stretched front and hind legs. Most of these images were scratched on rock surfaces covered with desert varnish, but some were also created in deep relief and represent earlier works. The second most frequent images are those of human figures in three different forms, naturalistic, box type and stick figure.

One interesting composition also includes a rare scene of fighting men, as horse riding fighters are more common images. A small boulder measuring one and a half meters square is covered with two periods of rock art carvings including an elaborate hunting scene with more than six horse riders hunting ostrich and other animals with long lances or short throwing club.

They are accompanied by at least one dog. Interestingly hoof marks are depicted as small circles here. The rock art depictions also include other animals such as camel and ostrich. Some are depicted very naturalistic with the impression of dynamic movements. Lesser appearing animals are ibex, gazelle, oryx and a single cheetah. About 30% of the rock art work is done in low relief, including images of camel and horse riders, humans both female and male, plus one rare palm tree, which is the only tree shown here. Unfortunately various bullet holes destroyed the animal depictions.

### Ancient Deities & Beliefs

In the southern part of Saudi Arabia to which the Bir Hima area belongs, deities played an important role in



Post Office Rock full of petroglyphic messages



Jebel covered with rock art used as post office

antiquity and they were represented mostly by goddesses. At the time mobile hunter-gatherer societies created symbols on rocks they could worship and pray to.

These were created to be most suitable to their life style and beliefs and were always related to things and natural phenomena, which were unexplainable and influencing ancient men's life and were as well important for survival.

Therefore different deities served for example as sun and moon gods, weather, rain and thunder gods, fertility goddesses for both agricultural and human replication, and finally a deity for successful hunting. In this way a pantheon of many different gods with specific attributes arose with each tribe having its own deity or deities.

### **Pre-historic Metaphysical World**

We also find various images of apparently metaphysical meaning in Saudi Arabian rock art including first ideologies and mythical beliefs. These depictions represent pre-historic divine beliefs and ceremonial rituals, which are proof that these images were the first step towards early beginnings of a religion.

The images were possibly the first symbols to represent deities, shamans, spirits or ghosts ancient men believed in to explain natural phenomena. Some were more human like others not, and looked more abstract or were pure imaginative images.

Abstract images were used for symbolism and for spiritual and mythical beliefs. These rituals and ceremonies were joint clan and society efforts to cement group structures and leadership following.

Mountain tops were always sacred places and some important carved rock panels were found here. These deities were depicted as divine symbols and later in human form, as ancient men did not know any better.

The divine images ranged from naturalistic to schematic and idolliform representations. They were engraved high up on cliffs in a prominent position to be seen from far, often looking eastwards, so that the first rising sun rays illuminated these images.

This diverse pantheon included both good and bad gods and even demons. At some stage of the development of divine beliefs gods were



Elaborate & detailed scratched ostriches



Post Office Rock lies isolated in the desert



Another boulder fully covered with rock art & texts



Horse riders hunting with lances ostrich & ibex



Ostrich rock panel & ancient script



Most artistic ostrich depictions in Saudi Arabia

given human weaknesses and strengths and a family structure with parents and offspring, a concept also found in Egypt.

### Fertility Goddess Alia?

What we know for certain is that Neolithic clans already worshipped a fertility goddess. Today Bedouins still remember the story of goddess Alia. But there is no proof, that the various rock art images of fertility goddesses actually represented this deity Alia.

Then again it is the divine function of fertility, which is important and developed into the more recent Alia image and story thereafter. The pre-historic fertility goddesses were shown with huge balloon like buttocks, forming a heart like shape.

In the Bir Hima area also a rare birth giving depiction was found containing a smaller figure shown head down between the legs of a standing female and an umbilical cord still connecting

both mother and baby. Female deities were normally shown with raised arms bent up in a 90° angle at the elbow.

This pose is found across the country and might be the key indication of a deity in Saudi Arabian rock art images. Other goddesses are carved with exaggerated long outstretched arms, a typical pose of receiving and embracing. Some divine figures were also depicted with a bird like head including a peak, which precise meaning and



Low relief indirect peckings using hammer stone and chisel are possibly the oldest



Every rock panel has been in use and covered over 1,500 Years with rock art & ancients scripts

reason has not been established yet by experts. But we know from other cultures, that the eagle was seen as a totemic animal, as he was able to fly up high into the sky to connect with gods. The above mentioned birth giving image is a fascinating depiction taking into account that day-to-day life scenes are absent from Saudi Arabian rock art compositions. Hunting is an exception, as it was more seen as an important life supporting activity, as was the necessity of self defense by fighting off enemies.

### The Sacred Bull

Sacred and totemic animals existed early on in many ancient cultures, such as the early Dilmun Culture in Bahrain, in the early Mesopotamian city states and in Egypt. As divine representation either the full animal was shown, or only the bull head and horns. For example horns on headdresses in Assyria were indication that its wearer was a deity or a priest. Bull images are very common in Saudi Arabian rock art. Not all are actually the depiction of a sacred bull. Rather rare in Saudi Arabia are bulls at Wadi Abu Oud near al 'Ula, which are shown with a triangular holy symbol between their horns.

### Specific God Depictions

In the northern area of Najran a very special rock panel was discovered already some time ago, which was carved on a larger boulder. This large composition consists of three well engraved female figures. Two of the women are shown in

standing pose and one is depicted in an extremely rare position kneeling down. All three figures are assumed to be divine representations and each is shown with a different hair style and distinctive ornaments.

One is depicted with standing up hair and the other two with shoulder long hair. But all have same moon crescent shaped pectorals in different sizes hanging from their necks in front of their chests. The central figure has a very elaborate huge pectoral with additional crescents on the side and a smaller above the largest crescent.

On this rock panel lots of later inscriptions were added later, using every available space. These inscriptions are possible dedications to deities. Out of respect we find not a single overlapping inscription, otherwise normal in Saudi Arabian rock art, when creators misjudge space needed for their message. This important panel has a typical east looking position for morning sun rays to illuminate it and at night by moonlight.

### Summary

Bir Hima is a huge area with various different sites to be visited. The three sites described in this article are some of the key sites giving you a good overview of the interesting diversity of southern Arabian rock art styles compared to northern Arabian styles. Most interesting here are the many depictions of goddesses, which over a large area are all very similar, if not identical images with regards to their body features.

#### Travel Tips

- As Bir Hima is about 150 km north of Najran you can fly to Najran for a weekend
  - There are three sites quite close to each other which can be visited in a single day
  - The main site is the so-called Text Site situated at north 18° 12' 912" east 44° 28' 719"
  - The second Bir Hima site is situated in the vicinity at north 18° 12' 141" east 44° 28' 333"
  - The Post Office Rock is situated close by at north 18° 08' 525" east 44° 38' 520"
  - You can also combine it with a visit to the ruins of the ancient city al-Ukhoud in Najran
  - These ruins are situated right next to the Najran Museum, which is worthwhile visiting
- If you need a good guide to drive you around and help you find these sites please contact:  
Khalid al-Took - his mobile is: 0554041828, or contact him via his e-mail: ktook@hotmail.com