

Janin Cave

Extraordinary Saudi Rock Art

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Only in recent years it became known that Saudi Arabia is home to so many extraordinary Neolithic and Chalcolithic petroglyph sites and is now ranked after Australia, India and South Africa as 4th most important pre-historic rock art country worldwide.

What makes Saudi Arabia so special are the large rock panels with mixed compositions of human and animal depictions. These are also exclusive, as they are not found anywhere else on the Arabian Peninsula. The compositions are further unique due to their high variety of rock art motifs, style

and size demonstrating the high skill of pre-historic rock art creators. And different to native Australian Aborigines and indigenous South African San bushmen, Saudi Arabian Bedouins have no knowledge by whom, why and when it was created.

Intriguing Janin Cave

This is the only cave featuring ancient rock art and petroglyphs. The Janin Cave can be reached via a 20 kilometer trip on a paved road from the old Buraydah highway crossing the newly built north-south railroad just thirty kilometer east of Hail.

The Jananyn mountain, as locals call it, stands up to 300 meter high and rather alone between various farms and is of the typical light sandstone color.

The cave is situated on the southeast corner of the oval shaped mountain, where the cliff is partly fenced and a round hole with a diameter of approximately ten meters is visible high up on the cliff.

But this is not the famous Janin cave, it actually lies behind and can be reached by climbing up the cliff about 100 meters on the right to find the narrow entrance, which is not visible from the front.



Hand stencils about 10,000 years old



Hand stencils showing left & right palms

The cave was created by a splitting rock movement in antiquity and therefore it is high with up to 200 meters, but also very narrow with only three to ten meters in width.

Unique Janin Hand Stencils

With a depth of about 100 meters deep there is ample space for numerous petroglyphs on both side walls. The Janin cave site is famous for its unique hand stencils believed to be very old and possibly created around 10,000 years ago. Next to those rock art carvings images of cattle and ibex were created by indirect pecking using chisels, as well as some camel figures were carved in deep relief, which are believed to be younger rock art work, same as some human stick figures. The cave also features a few foot prints assumed to be older and closer in age to the hand stencils.

Wall with Unknown Motifs

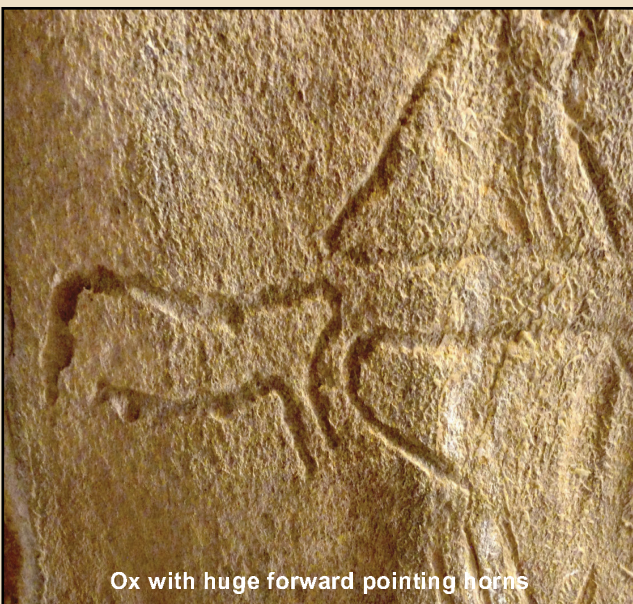
One of the walls closer to the entrance is fully

covered with various unknown motifs and obscure and unidentifiable figures. The entrance area is covered by several Thamudic texts and tribal signs so-called wusums including crosses and line designs. The motifs as seen in the picture of this article have not yet been interpreted by experts and certainly are difficult to read or understand, as some images might be superimposed or even of a yet unknown spiritual nature.

Rock Art on Outside Boulders

About 100 meters to the east of the cave there is a large natural rock shelter with strange geometrical anthropomorphic figures believed to be magical depictions. Some geometrical motifs of circles, semi circles on bodies and heads of anthropomorphic figures with straight vertical and horizontal lines are rather unique to Saudi Arabian rock art.

Many fallen boulders within the fenced area are covered by images of camel with or without rider,



Ox with huge forward pointing horns



Unidentified motifs in cartouche & hand stencil



Narrow cave entrance full of rock art



Members of the guarding family invited us for tea

ibex, ostrich, dogs, wolf, lion, human stick figures and again hand signs. The boulders here have various big panels with over twenty to thirty figures.

Fascinating Janin

A few kilometers east of the Janin Cave is a three kilometer long cliff, where various new rock art panels have been discovered. It seems to have been an important site with a lake and wells, which today are both dry, but which are a clear sign of an early settlement site.

The northeastern flank has the highest concentration of rock art with major petroglyph compositions at the foot of the cliff and on several fallen boulders. Here also some rare faded red pictograms can be seen.

The oldest rock art creations in Saudi Arabia are round holes carved or drilled into horizontal rock surfaces. And a group of

approximately twelve large so-called cup holes with a diameter of twenty five centimeter and a depth of fifteen centimeters were discovered on the upper side of a huge fallen boulder. These cup holes are fully re-patinated and much older compared to other rock art work around. It is assumed that these drill holes were used for food and drink processing as well as for ritual drink sacrifice libation.

Masked Dancing Group

Of special interest is also a mid-sized rock panel measuring three to two meters with over 50 patinated petroglyphs including many animal figures. One of the newly discovered sites is situated about one kilometer north at the end of the cliff, where large rock boulders are piled up forming various natural shelters.

Close by is a dry spring in a gully, again proof that the rock shelters served as semi-sedentary settlement site in

antiquity. These shelters are difficult to reach, but have an exclusive rock art composition with a rare masked dancing group of twelve persons.

Both male and female dancers are depicted as various anthropomorphic schematized figures lined up in a row holding hands with the last persons in the line stemming their free hands on their waist.

This composition is dated about 5,500 - 4,500 BC and the panel is similar to another one found at the Milihiya site, but the Milihiya group is smaller and the panel depiction as well.

Ancient Ritual Site?

Females are recognizable by their protruded buttocks, long dresses and flaring frocks. Male bodies are depicted as more slender with slightly rounded buttocks and indications of a loin cloth wrapping and often sport different body markings, as well

as area and period specific headdresses.

In total five interesting panels of masked dancers were discovered and each of these very special panels is depicting different varied stick style and schematized human figures. Their faces vary in size and shape.

More figures were found on rock panels high up on the cliff and not surprisingly these are more sophisticated rock art creations, then those further down. This is a clear sign that they are older than the lower placed ones.

Summary

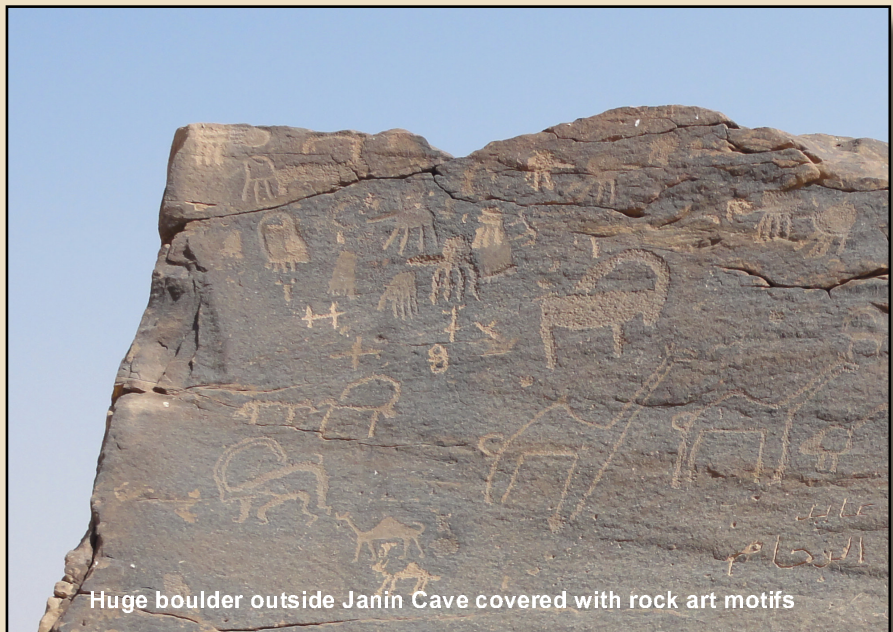
The Janin mountain area is the only site in the northern region of Saudi Arabia with only one period of rock art work. Therefore it is suggested that Janin was a ritual site of great importance with various large clans living in this area together and sharing available water and food resources during Neolithic times.

Janin is certainly an early site, because camels and Thamudic texts of later periods were not found here except a few at the Janin Cave. These texts and camel images were added later by passing Bedouins using the hidden cave during their caravan trips about 3,000 years ago.

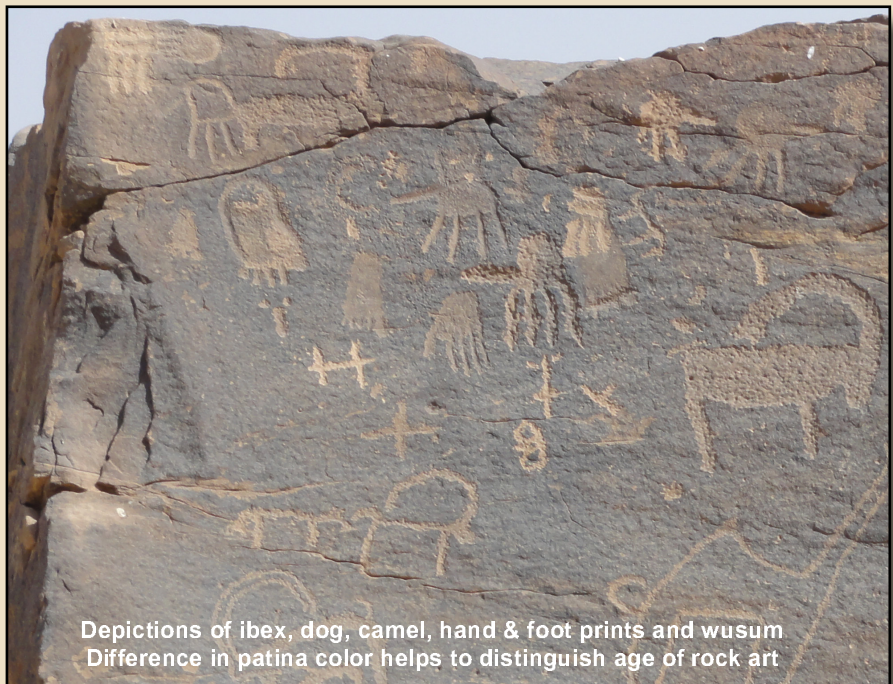
To understand the human occupation scenarios one has to remember the climatic conditions. The earlier periods were much wetter and only towards 5,000 years ago the climate became more arid.

Picture Credits:

S Tabet, E Veltmann-Kummert



Huge boulder outside Janin Cave covered with rock art motifs



Depictions of ibex, dog, camel, hand & foot prints and wusum
Difference in patina color helps to distinguish age of rock art



Ibex, horse riders, camel riders & human "stick figures"