

# Fascinating Jubbah

## Oldest Saudi Rock Art Site?

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**S**audi Arabia ranks world-wide as one of the top five pre-historic rock art and petroglyph areas created by ancient man.

What is so extraordinary about this is the fact, that here very large compositions of humans and animals were discovered, which are not found in this variety and mix anywhere else.

### How it all began!

Jubbah and Shuwaymis, being one of the earliest sites in this country, are unique in content, style and size of their work.

Astonishing life size human depictions are demonstrating the high level of skill of pre-historic rock art creators, with

a common style encountered in Shuwaymis, Jubbah and



Life size Jubbah hunter

two important natural events.

The first event was an erupting volcano close to Shuwaymis, which led to its abandonment and survivors moved 300 kilometers northeast to Jubbah.

Thereafter the huge natural lake at Jubbah dried up due to climatic change, and ancient Jubbah people moved 450 kilometers southwest to Hanakiya.

Surprising is the high variety of rock art motifs and huge compositions on large panels with up to 100 animal and human figures, which are often mixed with mythical symbols and ancient script as well as wusum tribal signs.

Hanakiya and this was based on







Jubbah rock art panel measuring 5 meters in width and 3 meters in height

This is quite different to native Australian Aborigines and indigenous South African San bushmen, which were told by their forefathers about the ancient people who created these images and the meaning thereof.

**Jubbah Overview**

This range of hills is home to a huge amount of rock art images including fascinating compositions of human and animal depictions. It can be regarded as the largest and one of the oldest rock art sites in Saudi Arabia and most images

were created between 7,500 - 6,500 BC.

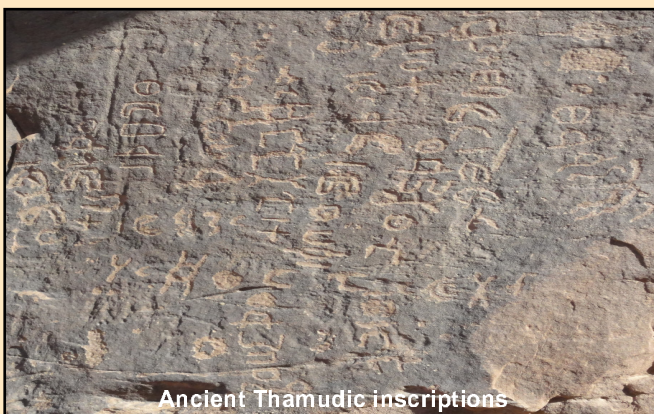
But the area was inhabited already earlier during the Early to Mid-Holocene Period. In addition some more recent burial sites and related stone structures dated between 2,000 - 1,000 BC were also discovered, but no Neolithic permanent residential structures or foundations thereof were found from the time the Jubbah rock art was created.

The reason for this might be that sand dunes not only reached the foot of the Umm Samnan mountain, but also were

blown up against its slopes and experts assume, that ancient human settlement traces are to be discovered below the massive sand dunes.

These petroglyphs were carved in low relief with a depth of between five to ten millimeters. The amount of petroglyphs suggest, that the various sites around Jabal Umm Samnan have been in use for thousands of years. In total over 4,000 pieces of human and animal rock art images were encountered here.

This includes approximately



Ancient Thamudic inscriptions



Chetaah depictions are rare in Saudi Arabia



1,400 camels, over 600 humans, 80 cattle and close to 2,000 other animals, for example caprids including ibex, gazelle, oryx, goat, sheep, as well as dogs and equines including horses and donkeys such as wild ass and onager.

### Jubbah Site Details

It was a pre-historic oasis with various natural springs and a huge lake, which in antiquity already dried out due to climate change. Jubbah lies about 100 kilometers north of Hail at the southern edge of the Nafud desert. Jubbah was an important Neolithic regional religious, social, cultural and economic center similar to Azraq across the Nafud desert on the other side of today's border with Jordan.

Rock carvings here represent highly advanced skilled work of art with most engravings executed in low or bas relief technique and by indirect pecking using chisel and hammer stones. Most panels and figures are in an excellent condition, some look like having been created just yesterday. This level of preservation is due to the arid climate and rock quality.

### Famous Life Size Human Images

What makes Jubbah unique are the large and full sized human depictions as well as very realistic animal figures covered with geometric body markings. Bovids are always depicted together with humans and are shown with a multitude of horn forms some small others exaggeratedly long.

It seems that with cattle horns artists were given freedom of expression, so we encounter forward and backward pointing horns, bent inwards or outwards and even some twisted styles. Sometimes men and cattle are also accompanied by dogs, which were the first animals to be domesticated and used for hunting and animal husbandry purposes.

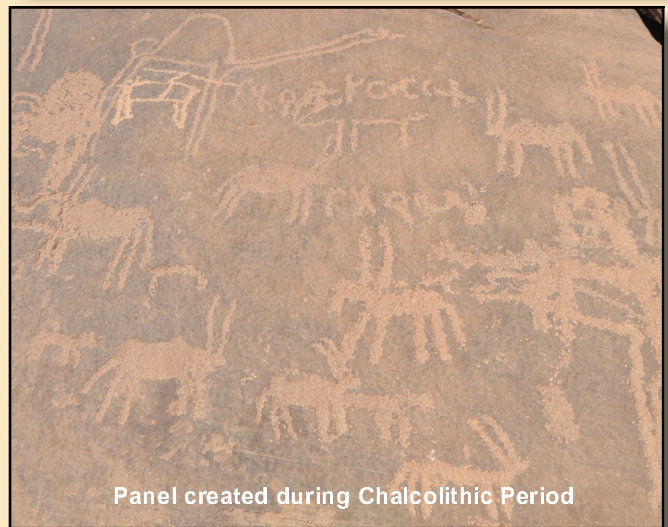
### Different Periods & Phases

Jubbah human depictions have been classified in three styles, which could be linked to different time periods. Neolithic figures were created in a very naturalistic style and in full human size.

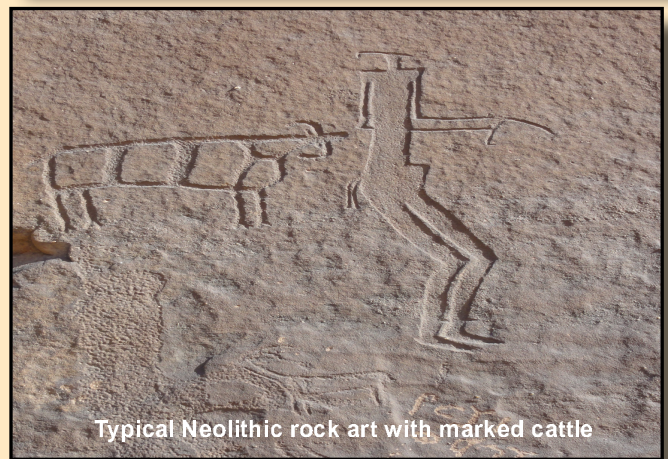
This is also the main creation phase of Jubbah rock art. A few Chalcolithic depictions are schematic, smaller size and show less artistic detail.



Older Thamudic script with more recent camels



Panel created during Chalcolithic Period

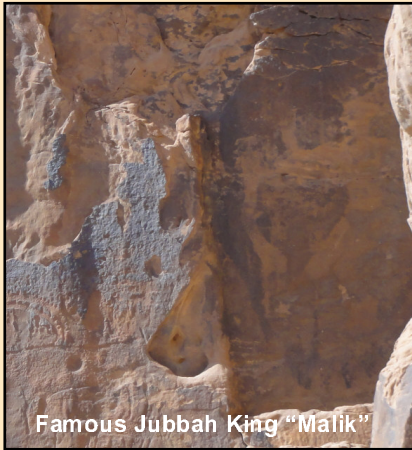


Typical Neolithic rock art with marked cattle

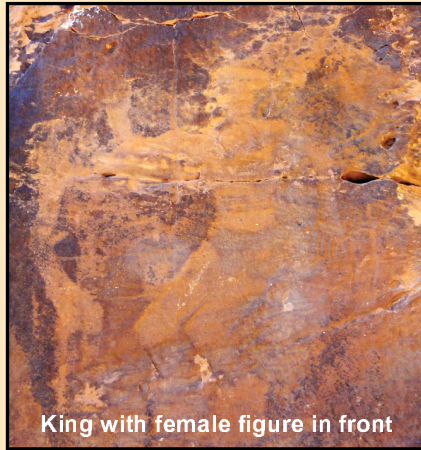


Both Neolithic & Chalcolithic peckings with lion

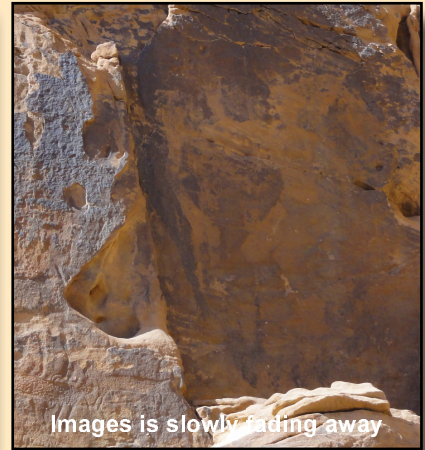




Famous Jubbah King "Malik"



King with female figure in front



Images is slowly fading away

During this period Jubbah was abandoned as a sedentary settlement, but images were created by passing pastoral hunters. The later Bronze and Iron Age images are highly schematic with human depictions being created as very simple stick figures.

First inscriptions in various ancient scripts such as Thamudic, Safaitic and Sabaean were pecked on rock panels from this point onwards including wusum tribal signs. The latter were also marked on animals to state clan ownership and close to water sources.

### The "Jubbah King"

Possibly the most written about human depiction is the "Jubbah King" called malik by Bedouins and dated to

5,500 BC. This life size figure has various special and very detailed features and dress details not found on any other figure at Jubbah and therefore it is assumed to represent a king or deity.

Positioned higher up on the mountain, where sun rays reach this panel in the morning, is another clear indication of special status.

Different to all other Jubbah human depictions this one has full facial features, which is also uncommon for this period taking other sites in the country into consideration.

The face of the "Jubbah King" gives a very natural even gentle impression with nose, ears, eyes and mouth.

The headdress is crown like and a huge oval chest pectoral demonstrates special status. A second smaller and slimmer person has been carved in front with both arms outstretched towards the king or deity, either as an offering or respect pose.

### Group Dancing

This country's rock art is further unique by displaying various large group dancing scenes and not only at Jubbah, but also in other parts of Saudi Arabia.

At Jubbah there are even two dancing groups on one and the same rock panel and in addition all figures wear horned animal masks, but there is no sexual distinction.

The group created on the



Uncertain ghost figure superimposed on Neolithic equid



Huge panel covered with approx. 20 or so superimposed



upper part of the rock panel consists of seventeen human figures all dancing in line with their arms resting on their neighbors shoulders.

Just below a smaller group of nine dancers depicted in a circle and holding hands was engraved.

This is an extraordinary ritual scene, which leaves expert to theorize about cultural importance, Neolithic ideology and mythical beliefs.

### Groups Depictions

Another interesting panel is dated between 6,500-5,500

BC and consists of a large composition of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures.

This rock art creation depicts seven humans with stick arms holding the typical Neolithic boomerang shaped throwing sticks found at various sites across Saudi Arabia.

These men are adorned by long oval pectorals hanging on their chests. Two have abdominal markings with three stripes and another five wear knee long skirt like clothing of which three of the five figures have vertical stripes on their skirts and the other two none.

We can assume that they are all males, as they show round up pointing male sex covers or penis sheaths. These men are followed on the right by a single ox, which might be depicted for a totemic purpose here.

On the left hand side two females are depicted with large buttocks, a typical indication in Jubbah for female figures.

All figures are fully pecked indicating the early Jubbah style. Later a huge outline pecked schematic camel was superimposed across this panel and human figures, but as it is outline only the figures with all



Major panel covered with figures



Three different periods of carvings

their details still remain well visible.

### Hunting Scenes

This rock panel shows human figures in the typical Jubbah style with natural body and legs, but arms are stick like and again holding throwing clubs.

The interesting part of the scene shows two humans facing each other and holding a caught and possibly killed ibex upside down at its front and hind legs. In addition there are three other animals depicted here including ox, goat and

another ibex. The pre-historic artists used the indirect pecking and chiseling technique and this creation is dated at the same time as the previous explained dancing group.

### Umm Samnan North

It lies few kilometers to the north of main mountain range and has various petroglyph clusters with different motifs carved high up on the cliffs. These contain over 200 morphic and anthropomorphic figures, but no large Jubbah style human figures. Some Thamudic inscriptions dated

around 2,000 BC were added later.

It is possible that these late creations are not the work of permanent Jubbah settlers, but were done by passing caravans on their route to the Adumatu kingdom. Adumatu's famous queens resided at Dumat al Jandal's Marid fortress and which were mentioned by Assyrians as equals to Egyptian pharaohs.

### Human Depictions

We already heard that the life size and naturalistic figures





Direct & indirect peckings

were created in low relief demonstrating a high level of artistic skills at the time. These figures consist of torsos, buttocks, legs, feet, arms and hands.

The only not so naturalistic part are the arms of the Jubbah men, which are more stick like and do not show any flesh or muscles. The other body part, which gives an unnatural impression in its depiction, is the head. The heads of Jubbah men are often minimized and only shown as dot or short bar like line.

Experts interpreted that as a flat top headdress, which sometimes have tassels at each end. Therefore the Jubbah men do not show any facial features. Other typical Jubbah male features are circular chest decorations, some rather large, occasional horizontal abdominal stripes and waist belt with two to three hanging tail lines in the back.

A projection from groin to waist is a possibly indication of a penis cover or sheath. Sometimes striped skirt lines are carved down thighs and ankles. Jubbah Women were also created as life size figures in low relief, but

they can be distinguished by braided hanging hair and flaring skirts. Occasionally they wear decorated breast coverings similar to a halter top.

### Perspectives

In Saudi rock art and especially at Jubbah one can see that different perspectives were used. The most common perspective is the simple profile or true profile as a static depiction from the side.

But we often also encounter the biangular view or twisted or turned profile showing the



Male with lance & dagger

head from the side and the body partly or fully from the front. In this way the artist could show two arms and two legs.

But most rock art is a static display without any movement nor dynamism. These were only found in hunting scenes, but the depicting of motion is still rather limited. The typical Jubbah animal depictions were created in true perspective or side view, but with heads twisted showing horns in profile, especially done during the early phase with cattle images.

Some horse rider depictions demonstrate a high artistic skill

in showing movement in bent front and hind legs imitating galloping, plus the typical horse head pose during gallop and a flying tail. These depictions are very similar to the small energetic Arabian horse breed we all know well.

### Determining Age

Precise dating is only possible through associated artifacts, such as engraving tools found in situ. Secondly patina coloration is indicating the sequence in which various figures were created on the same rock surface.

Then style and engraving technique are a third indication of possible age. They together with comparative results from other sites and archaeological experience give an acceptable date range.

The start of a wide spread of rock art creation in Saudi Arabia is today seen by experts between 7,000 - 6,000 BC. Cup mark engravings are the oldest rock art creations and were possibly used for food and drink processing, but also as game boards.

The next step were human



Male with oval chest pectoral



and cattle depictions normally long horned, which were created during Neolithic times. Thereafter all major existing animals were carved in numbers onto many rocks across the country.

### Rewriting Saudi Neolithic History

So far it was common opinion of archaeologists that horse riders were added during the Bronze and Iron Age starting from 1,000 BC. But the 2010 surprise discoveries at al Magar situated between Tathleeth and al Faw suggest, that domestication of horses took place about 6,000 years earlier than previously thought.



Different periods of carvings with lion superimposed

And this important event happened worldwide for the first time in Saudi Arabia and not in Kazakhstan as experts so far believed. During that time the al Magar area was not yet a desert area and existing rivers and grassland was able to support horse breeding.

The large stone sculptures of horses found in situ show engravings of harness and bridal as clear sign of successful domestication. Soon further detailed research results will be published.

### Rock Art Purpose

Now let's look at the reasons for ancient man to create any rock art images. It can be assumed, that all rock art had a high religious and ritual purpose.

The use of symbols and signs were meant to express a message. Unfortunately we still do not understand these messages and experts only have a few assumptions to present.

But the human and animal images are proof of a high intellectual level of ancient man with use of symbolic language and rituals. Therefore archaeologists believe that all rock art is an early

form of written communication.

Looking at the common motifs it is possible that artists had traditional limitations of expression and that rock art was not done for the artist's pleasure and freedom of artistic expression.

The images were created for so-called sympathetic magic reasons and the belief, that man can overcome and control wild animals, which was leading to their domestication.

Hunting scenes were certainly depicted to increase chances for a success hunt, in the same way as certain primitive tribes on

isolated Oceania islands and in the South American jungle still are performing today. Another important purpose of rock art creation was the fertility magic with regard to human birth and animal breeding and husbandry.

### Neolithic 10,000 - 4,500 BC

Rock art was created mostly in low relief and deeply pecked with styles differing widely. Most images of this period are realistic and very naturalistic depictions of animals and humans with the latter skillfully depicted in different styles.

But humans have no faces as heads often are only shown as dots or bar. Male and female depictions include clothing, ornaments and weapons.



More recent carvings only 3,000 - 2,000 years old

In this period cattle are common and often accompanied with men, they have huge geometric markings on bodies and funnel shaped heads with long

horns either pointing forward or backwards.

In total about 60% of all the found images are animals, 30% are human figures, thereof 20% are females, and the remainder are various motifs.



### **Chalcolithic 4,500 - 1,500 BC**

Rock art sites are found close to human settlements and desert kite hunting traps plus first burial cairns. Regional rock art shows more differentiations with more schematized depictions using outline and superficial pecking and no low or bas relief creations any longer.

The major change from Neolithic abstract faces and naturalistic bodies are the new idoliform figures with now natural faces and abstract bodies, just vice versa. These new features include faces with detailed eyes, nose, ears and mouth.

This change possibly took place experts believe, because of a new attitude towards religion with worshippers now shown looking at their deities face to face. Cattle now were shown with triangular or conical heads and some with rather exaggerated large horns.

The Chalcolithic tools used and found around rock art sites included barbed arrow heads, knives, burins, scrapers and so-called microlithics, which are rather small flint stone tools. New was also that selected animals became symbols and representations of deities like the ox and ibex.

Those images were depicted at prominent positions higher up on cliffs or on mountain tops. These places served as open air sanctuaries, and a good example is found at Wadi Abu Oud next to al 'Ula.

Here a small carved cult platform was found

high up on the cliff, not to be seen from below and very difficult to climb up to. The platform features various basins for libation sacrifice and is situated right next to the largest composition with over 50 animal images including sacred marked bulls and yet unidentified geometrical figures.

### **Bronze Age 1,500 - 500 BC**

During this period large panels and compositions of humans and animals were created. The animal rock art included now camel, ibex, gazelle, deer, lion, dog and wolves with some animals carved in simple outline style. They were now highly schematized and abstract depictions also including foot and hand prints.

### **Iron Age 500 BC - 500 AD**

Around this time rock art became very simple and was created by a wider group of people and not only by the clan selected artists like in the past.

Therefore we see lots of simple stick figure like human and animal depictions. This simple style allowed quick overnight stay creations, which were later even further simplified showing stick figures with certain limbs being omitted.

This was the first evolution from images to letter signs and wusum the tribal signs used more and more were part of this important development. Now many inscriptions in Thamudic, Taymaic,



Major rock art panel with 20 - 30 ancient animal carvings





Musnad al Jandal, Sabaic, Minaic, Hagaric, Safaitic, Hismaic, Aramaic and Nabataean were added to nearly all old and newly created rock art panels.

This was the period when many horse riders with long lances either hunting or fighting each other were carved on rocks across the country wherever these horse riders moved and slept over. For the first time we also encounter some camel riders during this period.

### Summary

Jubbah is really an exceptional pre-historic rock art and petroglyph site with over 4,000 human and animal images most carved in interesting compositions on huge panels to be seen in many areas of this mountain.

It is also one of the oldest sites together with Shuwaymis and Kilwa, where ancient man created human and animal engravings in low relief. The variety and mix of motifs is surprising, as is the high level of skilled indirect pecking and chiseling to create perfect images in bas relief.

The life size human depictions created together with domesticated cattle being adorned with geometrical markings covering the entire animal body are typical for Jubbah. But astonishing are the huge chest pectorals most Jubbah men and women were showing off.

The moon crescent sign as well as the oval form must have had an important significance or symbolic meaning. If Mada'in Saleh is regarded as the top archaeological site in Saudi Arabia, Jubbah plays the same role for pre-historic rock art.

### Picture Credits:

S Tabet, E Veltmann-Kummert

### Travel Tips

- Jubbah is situated about 100 km north of Hail,
- It can be easily reached by country road or highway, but the country road is more scenic
- Jubbah entrance - north 28° 01' 778" east 40° 55' 138"
- Jubbah is fenced and has a caretaker guard, therefore you need SCTA visitor permit
- You can start with the short norther tour
- Look for rocky outcrops at the northern mountain edge
- The long tour goes along the 4 km long mountain side
- Here you find many rock art panels with human figures