



HUMAN DEPICTIONS IN SAUDI ROCK ART & PETROGLYPHS

by Thomas Kummert www.ancient-cultures.info

This is the second article about a highly interesting and still rather unknown subject, human depictions created by ancient men on rock panels in the arid desert areas of Saudi Arabia.

In fact there are over 1,500 recorded rock art sites today in the country and Saudi Arabia has been catapulted into one of the global top positions of petroglyph rich countries, with more and more sites being discovered every year, since rock art was declared a national treasure, which must be preserved and protected.

Why Saudi Arabia?

Why are there so many rock art sites in Saudi Arabia? Well you will be surprised about the answer. The Arabian Peninsula and the Mediterranean coastal areas with the Jordan valley are, after the Rift valley in Africa, the second so-called "cradle of mankind".

There is new proof that 200,000 years ago there was a sprawling population hunting many wild animals. Saudi rock art started to spread all over the Arabian Peninsula 15,000 years ago, with an explosion of petroglyphs being created by many clans 8,000 years ago, when the climate was much wetter and greener in this region.

Early Creations

The early hunters and gatherers roamed the peninsula during the Early Holocene and their style of rock art were heavy engraved large layouts of animals such as ibex, gazelle, oryx, onager - the wild predecessor of the later domesticated donkey. Art included some hunting scenes showing spears piercing their bodies.

The later nomadic pastoral clans used a different realistic and dynamic pecked-out rock art style during the Neolithic period spanning from 10,000-2,500BC. Their repertoire included long and short horned cattle, fat tailed sheep and for the first time life-sized humans discovered in the famous rock art areas of Jubbah, Hanakiya and Bir Hima.

Human Motives

When we evaluate the different rock art motifs, there is a high level of differentiation between population groups on the Arabian Peninsula and the development in the north and south.

So far humans have been found depicted in 72 different positions alone in the northern part of the Arabian Peninsula. Most interesting are the dancing scenes showing dancers with masks, even shoes and including both female and male figures.

When it comes to hunting, most scenes do not show wounded or arrow pierced animals, as these scenes were possibly of a religious and cultural nature to pray for success before the hunt. Animals pierced by spears appear more in the southern region.

Fighting over scarce resources is an important ancient way of survival, but surprisingly these scenes are rare in Saudi rock art. These depictions have only been found in the Bir Hima area showing men fighting each other.

Hand prints were first created in the northern Tabuk area, and foot prints at Shuwaymis around 9,000-7,000BC. Both camel and horse back riders mainly depicted in hunting scenes are typical for the more recent Bronze and Iron Age starting from 2,500BC.

Rock Art Development

Different family groups and clans settling at different sites on the Arabian Peninsula used different rock art styles. The first human as well as animal depictions were very naturalistic and only later these became more and more schematized to end up as very simplistic so-called "stick figures".

The level of schematization plays an important role in being able to distinguish different time periods. This schematization also



**Bir Hima
male figures**

sexual distinction between male and female, as they were just representations of rituals and gatherings for significant purposes, passing on an important message to passers-by and generations to come. Later depictions of idols and pictograms evolved from stick figures to confirm this.

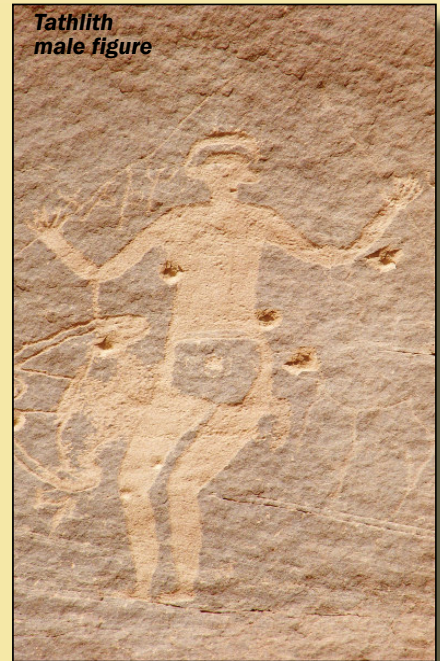
Ritual Purpose & Meaning

All rock art had a highly religious and ritual purpose using symbols and signs to express a message. But unfortunately we still do not understand these messages and so far only have a faint idea and are able to draw few assumptions.

The depth of repertoire and variations in Saudi rock art is proof of a high intellectual level of ancient men living on the Arabian Peninsular with an already very early existing symbolic language and many rituals. Humans and animals were not depicted in motion, not showing any dynamism, which is more proof of rock art being a symbolic message and not an artistic one.

Therefore all rock art is believed to be an early form of first written communication. We also know that ancient artists possibly had traditional limitations of expression and that rock art was not executed for the artist's pleasure and freedom of expression, like art is being created today.

The composition, strength and depth of pecking on the rock surface show that carving was done by skilled artists with use of sophisticated tools. Three main techniques were used. Soft



**Tathlith
male figure**

Famous Jubbah Men

The greater Jubbah area is special for its life size and very naturalistic human figures and the concentration of rock art is unique with various smaller sub-areas rich of petroglyphs. The typical Jubbah male depictions include a flat top headdress with tassels at each end and a huge circular chest decoration covering the majority of the chest space.

The Jubbah man is also decorated with horizontal abdomen stripes and features a belt with tail lines hanging from his waist at his back. Some show a projection in front from the groin to waist, which can be interpreted as a penis sheath, others wear striped skirts depicted by lines running down their thighs to ankles.

Bir Hima Men

In comparison the Bir Hima men were created standing in a rather formal pose, again life size or a bit smaller. Most wear a headdress with elaborate projections or decorations.

Scientists were surprised by finding a previously unknown detail as some men are clearly sporting moustaches and beards, which they discovered when studying those rock art panels a bit closer.

The body decorations or male jewelry include neck ornaments, pendants, necklaces and even

allowed the depiction of complex rituals in a simpler form and led to a faster engraving process now also possible to be undertaken by lesser skilled people.

This was followed by the introduction of new idol type forms of human figures. And finally from these super schematized human figures a different form of expression developed: the first signs of writing whereby these symbols were giving a specific meaning.

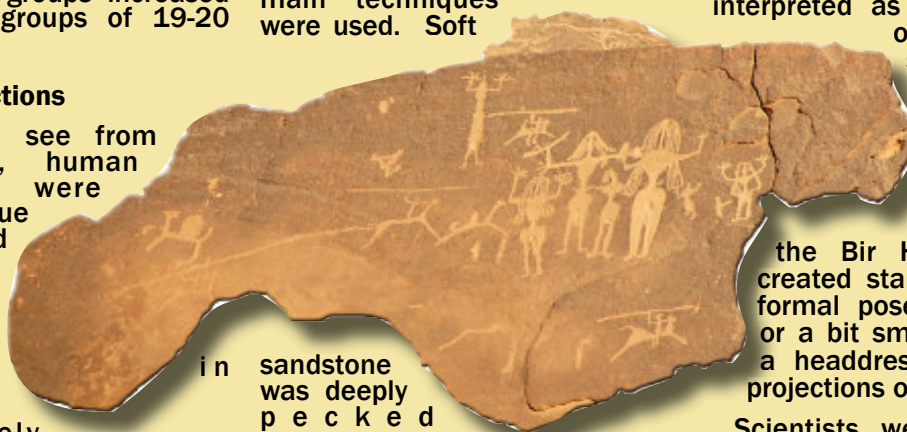
The simple conclusion is - the more schematized - the more recent the rock art work is. Neolithic period rock art panels show normally four to five human figures, but later Chalcolithic period human groups increased to really big groups of 19-20 human figures.

Human Depictions

As you can see from the pictures, human depictions were shown in true perspective and frontal view, but the lower portion of the body is twisted and shown in profile.

Unfortunately human and animal faces are always very ambiguous. But we do know today that specific individual persons, such as tribal leaders, were not depicted in rock art creations, but rather characters and roles like gods, priests and healers for example.

Therefore 90% of human depictions do not show any



in sandstone was deeply pecked with precise lines created with hammer stones and chisels. Rough irregular lines were produced through direct pecking with hammer stones. This technique was used for the majority of Saudi rock art. The third technique was used for scratching patinated rock surfaces covered with so-called desert varnish.

anklets. Clothing consists of short loin cloth, but no penis sheath, which are common in Jubbah and Hanakiya, but instead attached tails are worn. Weapons carried include spears, small shields, bows, clubs, quivers and daggers attached on their waist belt. Considering the depiction of all these armament items, fighting scenes are nevertheless rare.

Female Depictions

Female figures are less prominent than men, representing about 25% of all human depictions, which in turn represent 20% of all rock art in Saudi Arabia. In the Jubbah area similarly to men, they are created in life size format and low relief with braided hanging hair and decorated breast coverings similar to a modern day halter top and are covered with flaring skirts.

The females in Bir Hima at two meters are slightly taller than life size. They feature no faces or breasts, but show pronounced hips and thighs. Their hair is hanging to the waist and often braided again with ringlets or metal tips. Later during the Bronze Age females are depicted next to horse riding men and battle scenes. Throughout the Arabian Peninsula female figures are easily recognizable, because they are always shown with their arms raised.

Unique & Rare Human Depictions

The Bir Hima area offers a very unique depiction with several women seated on three legged stools with a single man playing flute for them, which could be interpreted as a small group of goddesses being worshipped or entertained.

In the Jabal Thaer area various depictions of goddess Alia were found, which were created over time all with exactly the same iconography, copying the initial carvings with no changes. In comparison to Europe where hand and foot carvings are very common and found mostly in caves, these types of prints are very rare here and only found occasionally on the Arabian Peninsula and more in the northern part.

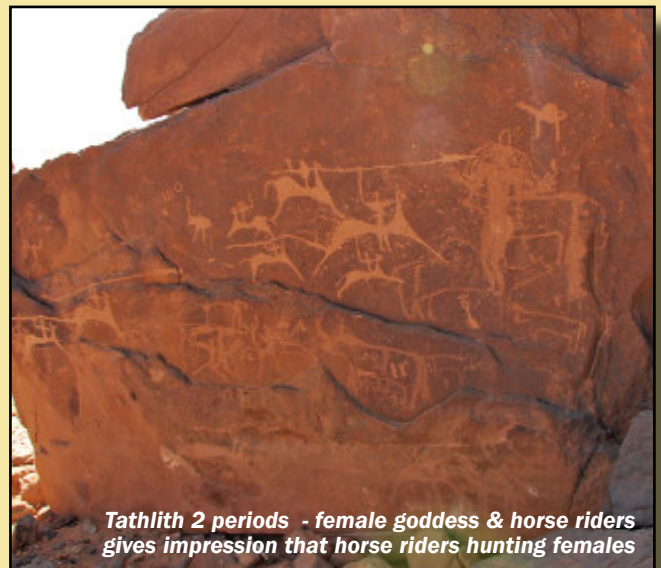
One unique feature is that most hand prints show not only the hand, but the full arm up to the shoulder. Scholars are not yet certain what the meaning of this different depiction is. Other types of unique depictions are the highly schematized figures with long outstretched arms, open palms, narrow waist and semi circular line around their heads. The "aura type circle" has created an interesting array of interpretations and propositions. But the final verdict is still outstanding, if ever a valid, verifiable explanation will be found.

Recent Discoveries

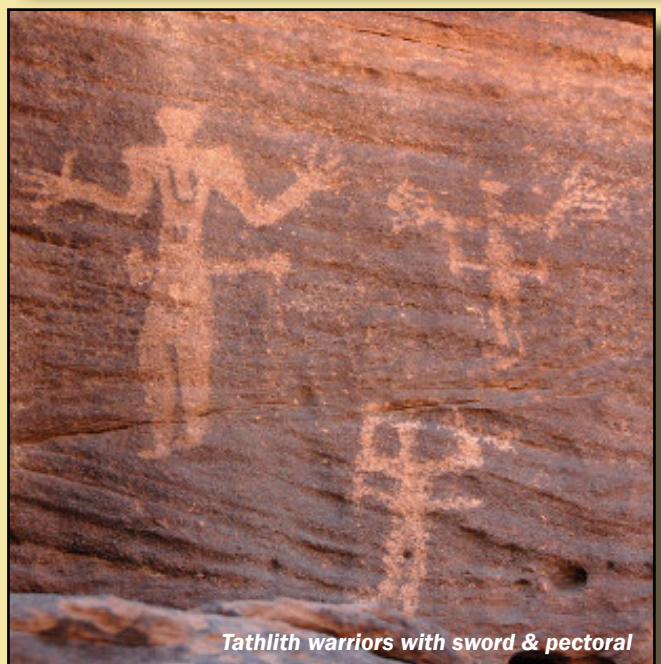
So far the oldest Saudi petroglyph site has been dated around 11,500-8,500BC during the Ice Age and Final Pleistocene and is similar to the Janin site close to Jubbah in the Hail region. And the first female profile depictions were discovered recently at Wadi Damm. Before these discoveries, human profile depictions were restricted to Europe's Upper Paleolithic sites and those were much smaller than our Saudi petroglyphs. Interestingly new profile figures were recently found in Nubia at Gebel Silsilah having a similar small European size of 20 cm only.

First Humans on the Arabian Peninsula

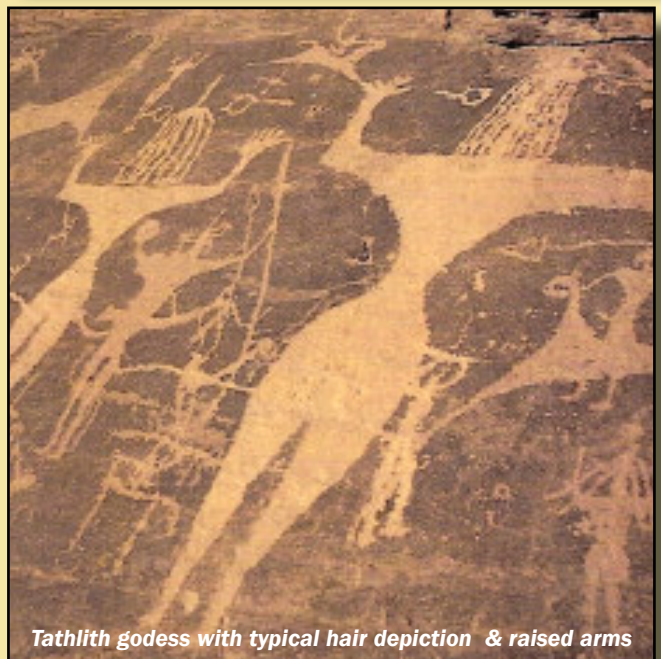
To better understand the creation of petroglyphs we also need to look at the first human immigration into Arabia. The Arabian Peninsula and the Levant area consisting of modern day Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria was the Early Men link between



Tathlith 2 periods - female goddess & horse riders gives impression that horse riders hunting females



Tathlith warriors with sword & pectoral



Tathlith goddess with typical hair depiction & raised arms



Hand signs done as palms or arms

East Africa, Europe and South Asia. Here important steps of human evolution took place with first permanent settlements and farming and domestication of animals.

Around 1.8 million years ago many groups of hunter-gatherers roamed in the Middle East. The first proven human traces with first human made knapped stone tools found outside Africa were discovered at Ubeidiya in Palestine and could be dated 1.5 million years ago during the Lower Paleolithic Period or during the so-called Oldowan.

For over 200,000 years, the famous Neanderthaler, in parallel to the more developed Homo Sapiens, populated the Levant and Arabian Peninsula in the Middle Paleolithic Period or Mousterian. Around 90,000 years ago the Modern Man dominated the Middle East area and 40,000 years later the Neanderthaler vanished for ever losing the highly competitive battle of human development.

First archaic lithic stone tool industries on the Arabian Peninsula were discovered at Shuwayhiyah with sixteen sites containing stone choppers, polyedrons and flint stone flakes. These sites can be dated to 1.3 million years ago.

Similar sites were discovered in Saudi Arabia in the Western Province at Wadi Fatima, Dawadmi and the famous petroglyph site of

Bir Hima. The first undisturbed Paleolithic site on the Arabian Peninsula was found 2006 in the Yemeni Tihama area called Shi'bat Dihya and could be dated around 80,000BC. Similar sites were also discovered in the Saudi Arabian Tihama region on the Red Sea coast and on the Farasan Islands.

Stone tools were used to create petroglyphs in various ways. Pegged with simple round fist-sized hammer stones, as well as using the pressure flaking technique to produce flint scrapers to scratch rock art onto surfaces covered with blackish patina, the so-called desert varnish. In the famous Jubbah site many bifacial and crude stone tools, end and side scrapers were found all being used to create Neolithic rock art.

About 12,000 years ago, the last warming period occurred with monsoon rains over the Arabian Peninsula leading to an increase and wider spread of population with the first domesticated animals and plants, plus the first settlements parallel to Neolithic hunter and gatherer societies.

Coastal fishing was developed 10,000 years ago on the Red Sea coast, and our Early Man has also learned to preserve the fish he caught. New results show that the Arabian Peninsula was inhabited at the time by various diverse and dynamic cultures with long distance trade ties to the Levant, Mesopotamia and Africa.

Important Stelae Production

Unbeknown to most the Arabian Peninsula is an important region where human depictions were created quite early, next to carvings on rock surfaces. These were in the form of stone stelae or statues. The first stelae were already created 6,000 years ago. So far in Saudi Arabia, six stelae with varying heights between 60cm to 110cm have been found in the northern region at Hail, al'Ula and Tayma. Surprisingly



Hand palms in famous Janin cave

in Yemen sixteen stelae were unearthed at various sites in the Jawf, Mareb, Wadi Sulayh and Rawk areas, but they were much smaller in size with only 17cm to 40cm and were dated around 3,500BC.

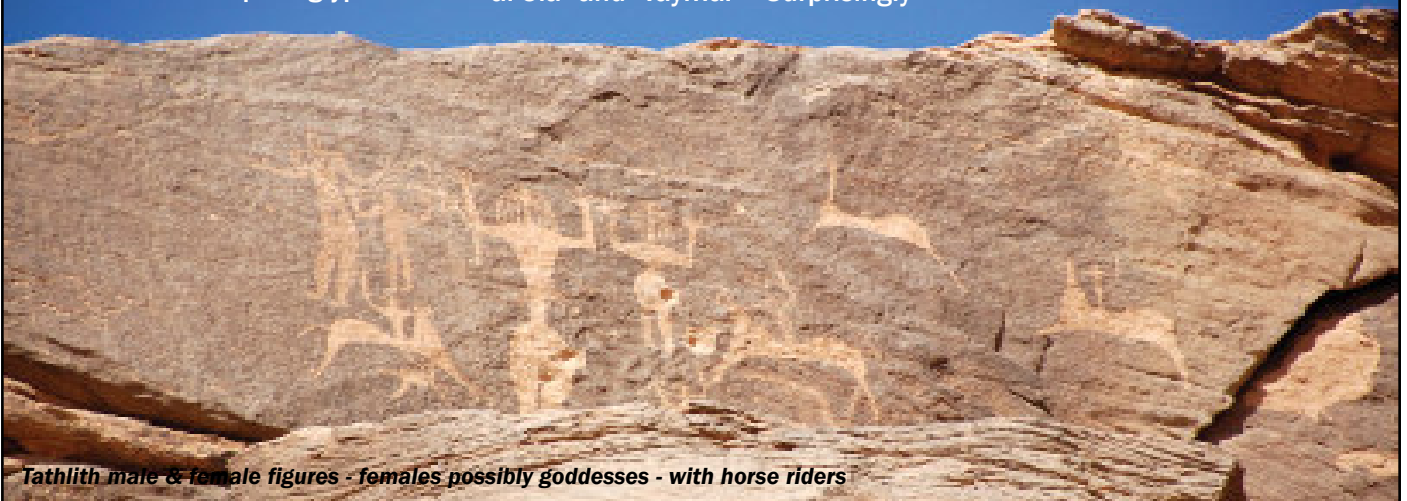
But at the important Riqseh site in the Hisma desert region belonging to the northern Arabian cultural area, over 50 stelae were discovered erected at the perimeters of an open circular sanctuary, each measured dated around 3,000BC.

Rajajil Pillar Site

It is astonishing how human beings followed similar rituals and created comparable structures around the world. The Rajajil stone pillar site is no different. These stelae were erected for cultural purposes and are believed to represent anthropomorphic humans possibly depicting the deceased, although no burials were found at this site.

This is a Chalcolithic semi-sedentary site about ten kilometers south of Sakaka. Rajajil is an important ceremonial site with about 50 small groups of vertical standing stone columns up to 3.5m high and was dated around 4,000BC.

Some of these columns have Thamudic inscriptions, so-called wusums or tribal signs and some rock art with carved ibex and caprids, which we know were



Tathlith male & female figures - females possibly goddesses - with horse riders

added later. The number of stone columns in each group varies greatly from two to three up to 19 monolithic stone pillars.

Archeologists also found small pits in front of some stone pillars, which might have served as fire places. This site has been in use for a long time and the latest visitors were Nabataeans as attested by their potsherds found nearby.

Similar sites were discovered also at Majira in al-Dawadami region with approximately 15 to 17 groups of pillars. Same at al-Milh west of Quwayyah and in the Durma area, where a large concentration of small slabs has been found and dated around the same period.

Important Jubbah Area Sites

The famous Jubbah rock art can be found at over 500 sites and some of the key sites have over 17,000 different human and animal depictions. This is the largest and oldest rock art site in Saudi Arabia with highly advanced and skilled work of art and most have survived in excellent condition.

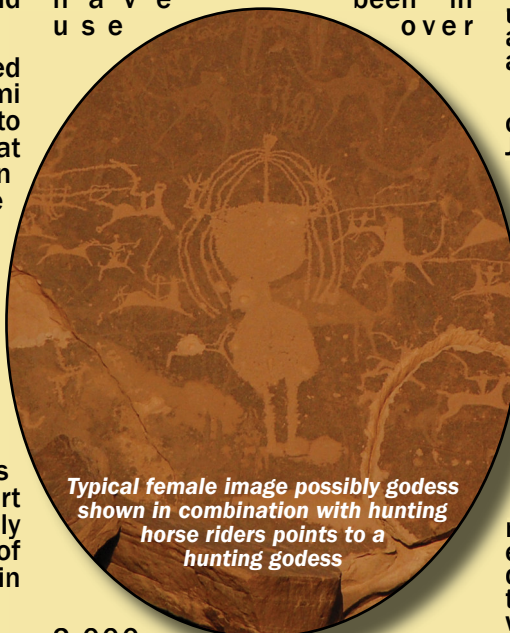
Cattle are always depicted together with humans, some times also with domesticated guard dogs. These creations are dated between 7,500-6,500BC during the Early Neolithic Period.

The human depictions were done in three styles, which belong to different time periods. During the Neolithic Period, human depictions were created very naturalistic and in full size.

Later during the Chalcolithic Period they became more schematic and smaller in size with less detail. And finally during the Bronze and Iron Age humans were shown in a highly schematic

way as so-called stick figures.

The Jabal al Manjour and Shuwaymis area was inhabited during Early to Mid-Holocene, but no Neolithic permanent housing structures have been found. Petroglyphs here were created in low relief with a depth of five to ten millimeters. The amount of rock art suggest that these sites have been in use over



Typical female image possibly goddess shown in combination with hunting horse riders points to a hunting goddess

2,000 years or more, with a total of over 4,000 human depictions and only about 600 animals, so human depictions outnumber animals.

Here we also have the famous dancing scenes with both male and female dancers, but females are never alone they always are shown with men. Most sites in this area are dated between 7,500-6,500BC during the Early Neolithic Period.

Shuwaymis is a unique rock art area with many Pleistocene lake beds and widely spaced eroding cliffs with numerous megalithic burial sites. On the slopes of hills many fallen boulders are

found with hundreds of motifs. Some are well orchestrated compositions and scenes with detailed and well carved figures between one to two meters tall and pecked to a depth of 15 to 20 millimeters.

These boulders were engraved over a very long period of time of 2,000 years, so when they rolled down hill new petroglyphs were added when old one's were upside down. However, no rock art has been dated to have been added after 1,000BC.

The Umm Samnan rock art complex is also situated near Jubbah extending along the foot of a five kilometer long escarpment and was recently fenced in for protection with an on site caretaker, therefore no fresh graffiti has been added.

Here various Neolithic stone tools were found, probably used to create petroglyphs which were completed in typical Jubbah style with large elongated and detailed anthropomorphic figures dating to approximately 4,000BC.

Large rocks are piled up forming natural shelters at the north end of the Janin hill. These are difficult to reach, but if you follow the dry spring in a gully, you will see various anthropomorphic human figures dancing in a row and holding hands. What is very special is that they feature masks similar to these in Milhiya, but those groups and panels are smaller.

Here 12-15 dancers are shown, both male and female. In total there are five panels of masked dancers and each panel features different stick style and schematized figures. Faces also vary in size and shape. Females are depicted with protruded buttocks and a long dress. More sophisticated figures are found on panels situated higher up on the cliff.

Janin is the only site in the region with rock art from only one period, suggesting that this was



Al Jouf dancing group all with unique tassel headdress



Al' Ula area group of male figures with sex depiction

a ritual site of great importance, with various large clans having lived here at the time. The Milihiya area consists of various flat hills with over ten rock art sites.

It is possibly second in importance in the Jubbah region after the Janin site. The small isolated hill has on top a cluster of large sandstone rocks and rock shelters with other petroglyphs on low cliffs and boulders.

An important panel shows a row of dancing humans holding hands and again wearing horned masks. The panel is rather eroded and similar to the five Janin panels, but smaller.

The rock shelters feature long horned cattle and gazelle in stylized form with stick figure humans sporting bows and arrows hunting ibex. At this site many Neolithic and Archaic stone tools can still be seen lying around on the ground.

Yatib is a spectacular petroglyph site about 20km east of Hail with over 1,000 motifs. Again the hill area is fenced and guarded with petroglyphs found on the cliff and boulders featuring human and animal figures. This was done on very hard stone mostly with metal pecking tools.

The Hanakiya area with its many rock art sites is situated about 250km south of Jubbah and northeast of Medinah. This is the only other area next to Jubbah with large full size human figures and animals.

Human depictions are similar to Jubbah and possibly based on similar beliefs and rituals practiced by the ancient occupants of this area. Their cattle depictions look similar, but are different nevertheless, which is proof that it was the settlement and hunting area of a different tribe or clan.

Tayma Area

This is another area with many sites rich in rock art and inscriptions and so far over 170

human depictions have been discovered, including hunting scenes, which are frequently seen in the Tayma area.

Engravings with horses and riders were created later during Iron Age period. Hand and foot prints are rare on the Arabian Peninsula compared to Europe but can be studied in the fenced al Hamam cave. There are a number of other interesting sites such as Karat al Hyran with life size camel and human sexual depictions.

The Karat al Manqara site offers a large number of human and animal depictions including large camels and ibex antelopes. West Khabou is situated 25 kilometers southwest of Tayma with rock panels showing humans fighting and hunting scenes with ibex, horse riders and a man with cow mask possibly depicting a god, as bulls plus their horns are attributes of principal deities.

A unique depiction of a man being bitten by a snake can be seen at the Aba Maier mountain site 120km southeast of Tayma. The Hassou Aba Mafir site offers 2.5m high human depictions with bow and arrow hunting ibex and ostrich, which are similar to the Jubbah Neolithic style.

Al'Ula Area

In the heart land of the ancient Dedan and Lihyan Culture over 350 human depictions were discovered in various areas such as Wadi Merakh, Wadi Sadre and at the Shakhnab Quash sites with hunting scenes showing humans with bows, arrows and hunting dogs.

And at Al Khouriba there is a unique depiction of two men fighting with sword and shields, a rare scene which has been created during the Iron Age around 2,000 years ago.

Sakaka Area

This region has a high concentration of petroglyphs and inscriptions. Its rock art is mainly from the Early Bronze Age with

long horned cattle and some rare depictions were found here. For example south of the Tweir and Al Quneitra road to the west of Shaha, are rare depictions of humans with headdress, clothes with feathers and waist belts were discovered. South of Sakkaka various petroglyphs with foot and hand prints can be seen at Qilat Al Tuwair.

Unique to this area is also a composition of 22 human figures with comb shape headdresses, all standing with half raised arms, open palms, stretched out fingers and holding small objects. Some figures show the male sex and an ox is carved at end of the row of humans.

Many similar compositions have been discovered in the area and all figures are depicted in the same posture, confirming the strict rules employed to create petroglyphs and human depictions. A different rare motif was found at Al Graniya, a site with a cluster of tumuli and Safaitic inscriptions.

Here experts have interpreted a certain human depiction as a ghost figure with narrow waist, triangular torso, circular abdomen, muscular arms and stick legs. This was created by scratching the figure on a hard basalt surface with stone scraper tools.

Another interesting site is Wadi Shazi 30km southwest of Arar with a female figure being scratched on granite next to a structure, which could have served as a shrine. This female figure is shown with raised arms and possibly depicts a goddess next to her temple experts believe.

Migration & Cultural Exchange

If we move further to the south, human depictions differ a lot from the motifs used in the northern part of the country, but nevertheless there are some interesting similarities in certain places giving proof to long range migrations and early trade connections leading to cultural interchanges.

The Bisha province is the



Two horse riders fighting each other with



Male with palm tree - a rare motif



Huge rock art panel with horse riders with long lances - females possibly added later

second important site in the south after Taif and here at a site called Kheta about 80km south of Bisha town a unique composition with a row of large human figures including five men and four women accompanied by large cattle depictions have been discovered.

Some figures are painted in dark brown, others are pecked and all together they are very similar to the famous Jubbah style people. In the same region at Row'a, several large human figures are found equipped with daggers and swords but these are of a more recent date and were created during the Iron Age.

Similar weapon carrying human depictions can be seen in the Rayna area at the Kanea site situated north of Rayna. Here large pecked human figures again with daggers and swords in hand or on waist bands are joined by others with bows and arrows the typical hunting equipment of the Neolithic and Chalcolithic period.

Jabal Arfan

This mountain site is situated 35km northeast of Taif city with rock art and petroglyphs showing the full spectrum of animals and human figures. The animal lineup includes deer, gazelle and oryx all dated older than 4,000 years.

The interesting situation found here is, that men are depicted in three different styles. In the Khamasin area, style men are shown with feathered headdresses, compound bows and using arrows with transverse arrowheads.

In the famous Jubbah style, which is rare in the south, men are depicted with ribbed clothing, penis sheaths and tails hanging from their waists in the back. But they are equipped with a new weapon the so-called Hanakiya type throwing clubs looking like a huge boomerang. The dominant

animals carved in the same scenes are cattle, oryx, deer, gazelle and ostrich.

In the later Thamudic style, men are shown on camel or horse back sporting bows and swords. The normal weapon used by ancient men on horse back is a long spear and can be seen often in a lighter color superimposed on older rock art scenes. The lighter color of contours indicates that the carving or pecking work is of more recent date, as the patina needs a long time to darken.

Najran Area

This area is with over 100 pre-historic rock art sites and close to 50 locations alone in the Tathlith area worth a visit. Here many female figures with varying images are found, which are rare in the northern part of Saudi Arabia.

Female figures are normally shown with their arms upraised, while males are holding spears and shields and few are depicted with their arms hanging down.

It is interesting that here for the first time hunting scenes have been created by ancient men showing spears and arrows piercing the hunted animals.

Most of the hunting scenes across the Arabian Peninsula only show men holding those hunting weapons, but not really using them and killing the animals.

Therefore the interpretation was that those hunting scenes are ceremonial rituals before the hunt praying to gods for a successful outcome.

In this context the ritual dancing and fighting scenes found at Jebel al Kawkab and Jebel al Qara northeast of Najran has to be seen.

These two sites are the richest

rock art and petroglyph sites in the Najran region with over 1,300 Neolithic human depictions of men and women.

We also can see, that the quality of animal depictions normally is superior compared to those human figures carved or pecked onto rock panels.

Summary

Unfortunately the research on petroglyphs in Saudi Arabia is still in its infancy and due to the very limited number of publications international experts know little about the abundance and diversity of rock art in this country.

The comparative rock art in Australia, which is the oldest going back up to 50,000 years, has been fully studied and explored by local and international scholars for decades. India and South Africa are the other two leading countries when it comes to petroglyphs and here also all sites are well documented and researched.

To document and photograph the thousands of Saudi petroglyph sites and rock panel scenes in difficult to reach areas high up on mountain cliffs and often hidden from view below, is a major task.

We expect that future research will produce interesting results and a better understanding of ancient men having populated the Arabian Peninsula and their Neolithic cultures and rituals leading to the creation of our astonishing variety of petroglyphs and rock art.

This article shed some light on this interesting subject of human depictions in Saudi rock art from the beginnings about 15,000 years ago and the evolving development of human and animal depictions and motifs used over the Neolithic and Chalcolithic time span until 2,000 years ago.