

# Wadi Abu Oud

## Little Known Rock Art Site

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**Where in Saudi Arabia do you have three major archaeological sites in one place easily to be visited on a weekend?**

The place is al 'Ula halfway between Madinah and Tabuk in the north of the country. And since October 2011 al 'Ula has a brand new airport being served with two weekly flights so far from Riyadh. If you have not seen any of the three sites, the question is, when are you going?

If you have been driving about 1,000 km to al 'Ula in the past to see Mada'in Saleh the second question is, when are you going to see Dedan and fascinating Wadi Abu Oud? Well

you should at least put it on your personal "to do list" under urgent! It certainly is worthwhile a visit, which I hope the pictures in this article will well prove.

### This Is A Real Secret Tip

The site is still known only to a few locals and is unfamiliar to various Saudi petroglyph enthusiasts. Wadi Abu Oud can still be regarded as a secret tip. In addition it is really an important site and is quite close to al'Ula with at least three major areas full of intriguing pre-historic petroglyphs and rock art.



Sacred bull image



The beautiful wadi is in some places wide and in others narrow and offers spectacular 200 meter high red sandstone mountain cliffs and the wadi floor is covered with soft sand and in some places even sand dunes. So you certainly need a fully equipped 4x4 and sand driving experience.

The Abu Oud wadi runs on the west side parallel to road leading from al 'Ula to Mada'in Saleh Hejaz railway station, which will be in future the planned new entrance to the archaeological site. Due to a steep sand dune at the south end the wadi needs to be approached from the north. If you fly in you can book a local guide plus 4x4,



In front of the main cliff

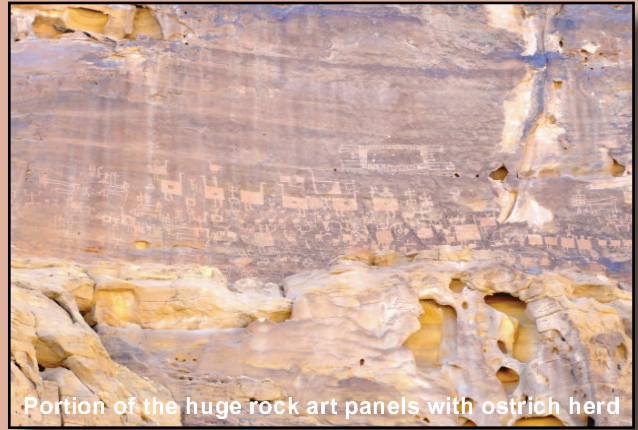
who will take you there – see the travel tips and contact details at the end of the article.

### Unique Petroglyphs

Wadi Abu Oud has been used for over 2,500 years starting with the oldest images being created around 2,000 BC. What makes it unique are the various square designs and depictions of unknown meaning, some of which I have named “flying carpets”, because of their rectangular shape and artistic border lines plus the many tassels at both shorter ends look like oriental carpets. These images and designs are



Described fighting scene with fallen off horse rider



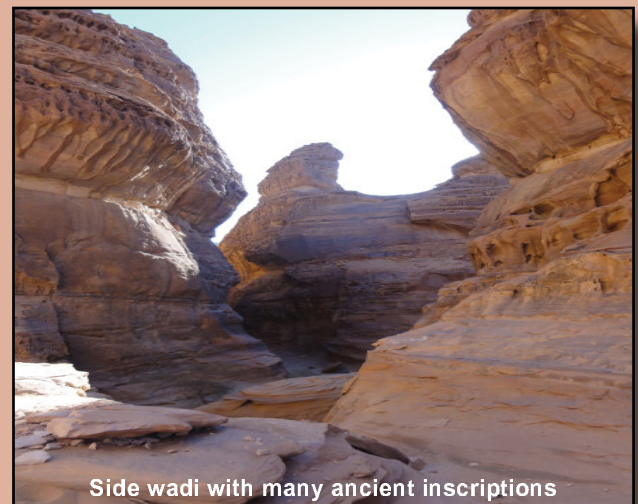
Portion of the huge rock art panels with ostrich herd

presently under study by our leading local rock art expert, who is preparing a research paper on the subject.

Nevertheless their forms and designs will be explained more in detail later on in this article. In addition nowhere in Saudi Arabia we have seen yet bull depictions with divine symbols between their horns, which actually reminds me of the Egyptian goddess Hathor bull images with moon disks on their heads.

### The Gorge Site

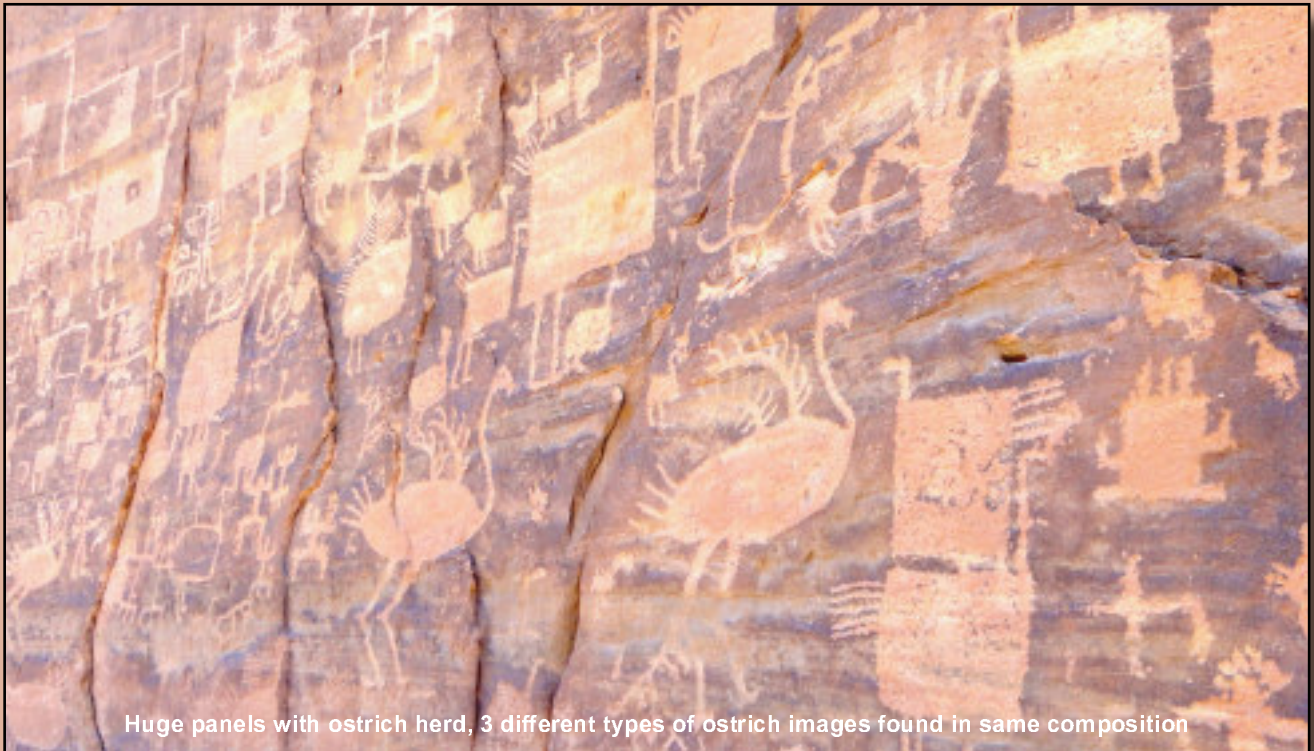
Passing the first medium high sand dune the wadi narrows and one just needs to follow a path where virtual rain water would flow to the lowest



Side wadi with many ancient inscriptions

point to reach the first petroglyph site.

This is situated where a narrow and sharply declining gorge on the left mountain side begins and where both side walls are covered with various Thamudic, Dedanic, Lihyanite and Kufic texts, with the latter being added later during times of rising Islam. In between those texts you will see numerous stick figure horse riders, various ibex and many camels. Rare are the few camel riders, which can be seen here as well.



Huge panels with ostrich herd, 3 different types of ostrich images found in same composition

### Interesting Fighting Scene

This is the place where you need to look for a really unique fighting scene of seven horse riders with one being thrown off his horse by the long lance of his opponent and depicted lying on the ground.

Never before have I seen any similar depiction at any of the Saudi Arabian rock art sites, I have visited. Nor have I seen these on any pictures in the few Saudi Arabian books, which have been published on the subject. In conclusion the gorge site is an average site with more texts than animal and human figures, compared to what you are about to see next.

### The Flying Carpet Site

Can you imagine, on my first attempt I missed it! After a few 100 meters I turned and drove slowly and looked around carefully and still could not see any petroglyphs at all. I have seen pictures and knew the cliffs are full with hundreds of images and must be recognizable.

So I stopped, got out of the car and looked up on the mountain side and there they were, high up on the cliff spanning about 200 meters across on various panels in huge multi-compositions cramped with animals using every available space. The main depicted animals are the divine bulls plus huge herds of ostrich.

The pottery is extremely rare in Saudi rock art and only seen here and possibly in one or two other sites. The presence of flying carpet like depictions has been mentioned already.

In addition to those there is another strange animal images with crossed squares attached to their horns, which interpretation leaves much room for debate and will be explained later on.

### Huge Ostrich Herds

Consists of various big rock panels situated about twenty meters high up on the cliff with up to 500 figures mainly ostrich, which are scratched into dark



Two "flying carpets" are found here, this is one  
This is the only known site with these images



Second "flying carpet" contains animals inside  
Purpose of these designs is not yet researched



Rare image of chariot with hunter with bow & arrow



Above simple flat image of chariot with 2 wheels

big geometrical squares with straight head and feet with some being marked with dark squares.

Other ostriches in absolute contrast are scratched in very naturalistic form showing tail and wing feathers. It is not surprising that these have been created just over and next to the cult platform.

**Desert Varnish**

The blackish rock surface coverage onto which these images are scratched is called desert varnish. It is produced over a long period of time of up to 60,000 years by iron and manganese oxide particles present in the rock.

These are reacting with wind transported clay dust and some organic matter

normally on the wind opposite side of rock surfaces. This biochemical reaction need high desert temperatures and some morning condensed water dew.

A big unanswered question for experts still is the fifty to sixty times higher concentration of manganese in desert varnish compared to the much lower average concentration of 0.12% in the rock itself.

What we know is that lots of bacteria use manganese for growth and they also play a part in the production process of desert varnish. Dark dull desert varnish colors indicate a dominant bacteria growth, light shiny surfaces are proof of dominant clay accumulation.

Black surfaces are created by manganese domination and reddish desert varnish shows

higher concentration of iron particles.

Ancient man loved desert varnish surfaces as rock art working platforms, as it was very easy to simply scratch figures and signs with any type of stone scraper tool exposing the lighter colored stone surface beneath.

**Use of Hunting Nets?**

Other animals show here are ibex with various forms of horns and the common goat. Less frequent depicted are orix, gazelle and equines including onager, a wild donkey species.

These are shown in various compositions across the cliff with interesting squares crossed by vertical and horizontal lines with two round extensions at both ends. These square designs positioned right behind



Huge ostrich herd indicating that the area was a major ostrich hunting ground

their backsides are attached via two long lines to their horns. At first I assumed they represent hunting nets with stone weights on each side. Hunting nets were known to experts having been used by pre-historic hunters, but have been depicted in rock art only once or twice in southern Syria.

### First Chariot Depictions

After consultation with Saudi rock art expert Prof. Dr. Majeed Khan it was clear that the above assumption was not correct. Going with him through various pictures of chariots depicted in Saudi rock art, it became clear that these square crossed designs were actually basic depictions of war chariots drawn by equines.

What made it so difficult to identify them as chariots, was the fact that in the three to four

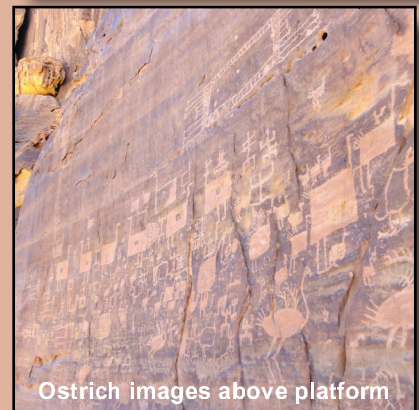
images found at Wadi Abu Oud the chariot riders were missing. But looking again at the petroglyphs an unfinished chariot was found, where the warrior with bow and arrow was half finished.

The use of chariots in sandy desert conditions is certainly difficult if not impossible, but they were used in the northern areas by Assyrians and Egyptians. The latter even perfected the design by developing very light weight chariots with reed made carriges, which could be disassembled in minutes and carried across difficult terrain.

The Assyrian war chariots were heavier double axle models, which were sturdier and more stable to navigate on rocky surfaces. In Saudi Arabian rock art we can see various models with one even being drawn by four equines.



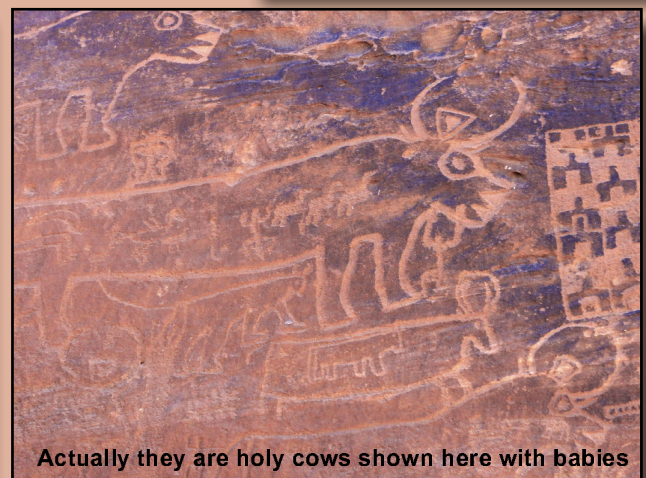
Cult platform seldom found



Ostrich images above platform



Sacred bull images & devine triangle between horns



Actually they are holy cows shown here with babies

### The Climb & Cult Platform

Before I mention the divine bull representations we need to explore the cult platform in more detail. I have read about their existence, but never seen one before and did not know there was one at this site.

So it was a surprise to me, when I finally reached it after a dangerous climb. From below one cannot see it and I also was

not happy with the low angle of my photographs and those I have seen being taken by one other visitor before, which prompted my desire to find and visit Wadi Abu Oud as a top priority.

So to get better pictures I decided to climb up as far as I could. The first part was the usual rock climbing being done to explore Saudi petroglyphs, but after a few meters I reached the 90° cliff and it looked like

being the end. Determination to take the ideal photo shot overcame fear, not the one going up, but the one being able to come down again without ending up in hospital.

The nice thing about sandstone rocks are the many cavities and cracks one can use for both hands and feet to climb up vertically like a spider. In summery it can be done, if heights are not a problem for

of those bulls shown in outline pecking style on the left hand side of the cult platform.

At least two of those bulls are also shown with a small baby bovid between their legs and a pecked line connecting the two at the right place could possibly depict an umbilical cord, but in this case the bull rather is representing a cow like in the case of goddess Hathor.

Well these rock art images in Saudi Arabia still have many secrets to be revealed. It is not surprising that hand prints with arms are carved on the rock surface close to the bovinds.

### Were "Flying Carpets" Invented at al 'Ula?

But the really intriguing images are the two unique rectangular frames with empty interiorspaces and long fringes at the shorter ends with small triangular tassels looking like "flying carpets".

The borders are adorned with a row of small triangulars supporting the oriental carpet impression. But it is clear, that



Older carvings on opposite cliff

this is only an impression this design is giving.

The real meaning and message thereof must be a different one. If we look more closely at the second image, two different animal species are recognizable inside the frame, which is also divided in the middle.

Therefore it can be assumed that these are possible depictions of animal corals and long fringes could be the representations of desert kite funnels and the triangular tassels to be additional smaller corals at the end. So for this is pure theory as no expert has given yet a better explanation.

### Big Question Mark

Furthermore three different designed square figures are found on the cliff panels here. One is just showing many empty squares, actually sixteen lines down and unfinished eight up, with 130 squares. This could have possibly been a counting tool, but again it is pure theory.

The next square figure has a stepped design in four vertical lines, two with black and white identical symbols, one with triangles, and the last with outlines of the same symbol, as can be seen from the pictures.

### Jubbah Men Discovery

The opposite mountain site is covered in various places with

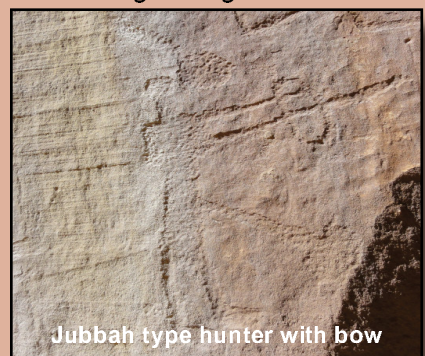
petroglyphs, which can be seen, when walking along the foot of the cliff for over a kilometer. There is one particular huge fallen boulder in corner and therefore easily to be overlooked.

The upper inclined side is full of hunting men with bow and arrow, camels, ibex, gazelle and dogs. The big surprise is that right next to it are depicted two Jubbah style pecked men hunting with bow and arrow and having a club type weapon attached to their belts.

### Summary

This is a really amazing site, which offers many surprises with figures not to be found at other sites. This includes the rare cult platform, bull depictions with divine symbols, war chariots, and "flying carpet" images possibly representing animal corals.

Mada'in Saleh and Dedan do not need any further recommendations. If you have not been to al 'Ula yet, than you have not seen the beautiful side of the Magic Kingdom!



Jubbah type hunter with bow

### Travel Tips

- Wadi Abu Oud can be visited together with Mada'in Saleh & Dedan on a weekend
- It is situated only about 1 km away from the ARAC hotel in al 'Ula
- The wadi runs parallel to the main road leading from the hotel to Mada'in Saleh
- Driving north after 2 km the mountain cliff ends, turn left here & follow the tracks, 4x4 a must
- The trip can only be done from the north side as at the end there is a steep dune
- The first rock art site is situated: north 26° 41' 557" east 37° 52' 100"
- The main site is situated: north 26° 41' 166" east 37° 52' 642" cliffs are full of petroglyphs
- ARAC Hotel phone manager Ahmed Saleh al Gauraany 0503334891 or mail: hotelalula@arac.com.sa
- For guiding phone Ahmed al Fadel 055333828 he can take you by Toyota 4x4