

WALID YASIN AL TIKRITI

Rock art

IN ABU DHABI
EMIRATE





ROCK ART

in Abu Dhabi Emirate



Walid Yasin Al Tikriti

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Preface



In 2009 a film production company based in Dubai approached me to record an interview for Sama Dubai TV Channel on rock art. I declined on the grounds that I was not the right person to tackle the job. I therefore recommended a colleague who had studied the rock art of the UAE extensively. Unfortunately, my colleague was unable to be interviewed due to unforeseen commitments. The film producer appealed to me once more and was reassured that my role would provide a small contribution for a much wider programme. This time I had no cause to object but to yield. This occurrence and the fact that I had safely stored the rock art drawings from Bida bint Saud since 1973 provided the impetus for this monograph. My recent involvement in organizing the exhibition on the Danish Excavations in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi by ADACH (2nd February – 2nd May 2011) encouraged me to brush up on my rock art research and prepare this monograph, which is principally based on the almost forgotten rock carvings of Bida bint Saud. In contrast, the well-known bass-reliefs from Umm an-Nar Island and Hili are also presented in this publication.

Walid Yasin Al Tikriti
February 2011

Introduction



Rock art is one of the earliest art forms to have been practised by humans. From the Palaeolithic (Old Stone Age) there are panels with paintings consisting of various themes on the walls of caves from Europe, Africa, Asia and Australia. The earliest of these have been dated to around 60,000 years ago. A number of rock art sites have been considered of Outstanding Universal Values (OUV) and recognized as a World Heritage sites. Examples are: the decorated caves of the Vezere Valley in France, paintings at Tsodilo in Botswana, Gobustan Rock Art Cultural Landscape in Azerbaijan, the Ellora caves in India, rock drawings in Valcamonica in Italy, prehistoric rock art sites in the Coa Valley in Portugal, the cave of Altamira and Palaeolithic cave art of Northern Spain and rock carvings in Tanum, Sweden. Production is by either adding pigment usually of mineral origin to the rock surface in a painterly manner, or by carving, inscribing or percussion (petroglyphs), that is, the removal of a surface layer of rock to produce an image via the use of simple stone tools.

In the Arabian Peninsula, which is surrounded by mountains from three sides and open to the north, rock art has been practiced since the prehistoric period. In the mountains of Saudi Arabia, which are largely of igneous rocks consisting



of a dark patina suitable for carving, thousands of different petroglyphs have been identified. Amateurs discovered the majority of rock art sites in Saudi Arabia whilst a few examples have been carefully studied and published. One of the informative publications on rock art in Arabia is, the four volumes of Emmanuel Anati¹. The dating of rock art is difficult, and relying solely on the presence of associated sites can be misleading. It is plausible that a site was used by a number of communities over a varying length of time. Some rock art are datable if they bear inscriptions produced contemporaneously with motifs on the same rock.

In the al-Hajar Mountains, which extend more than 600 kilometres and encompass parts of Oman and the United Arab Emirates there are hundreds, if not thousands of rock art sites. Very few of these sites are thought to belong to the Bronze Age while the majority are either of Iron Age, Late pre-Islamic period or Islamic. There are many of a relatively modern date too, especially those in the Ru'us al-Jibal (Musandam Peninsula). In these mountains along the east coast of the United Arab Emirates there are good examples of rock art usually encountered in wadis, passes, ancient caravan routes, on isolated small outcrops, and occasionally on the coastal plain².

Rock art in the Eastern Region of the UAE, which has been studied by M.C. Ziolkowski is generally considered to be of Iron Age date or later³. In her article of 2007 (pages: 221–224) Ziolkowski, however, reveals a number of similarities between rock art motifs and datable artefacts from the third millennium to the early and mid-second millennia BC. The art in the Oman Peninsula, I believe, may have been practiced at periods preceding the Bronze Age. The most interesting rock art in the UAE, in my view, which may have been of pre-historic date, is the site at Khatm Malaha southwest of khor Kalba⁴.

¹ Anati E, *Rock Art in Central Arabia*, Published by Institut Orientaliste, Louvain-La-Neuve. Four volumes, 1968, 1972 and 1974.

² See Ziolkowski MC (2007) "Rock on Art: petroglyph sites in the United Arab Emirates" *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 18/2: 208–38; & Ziolkowski MC & Hassan SA (2000) "Three petroglyphs from the Emirate of Fujairah, United Arab Emirates" *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies*, 30: 257–65.

In this respect I should note that I am much indebted to MC Ziolkowski who has kindly read the draft of the text and, apart from checking the grammar and providing references, she made very constructive comments.

³ Ziolkowski M.C., 'A study of the petroglyphs from Wadi al-Hayl, Fujairah, United Arab Emirates', *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 1998: 9, 13–89.

⁴ The Khatm Malaha petroglyphs were first noted and published by Bertram Thomas in 1931 (see: Thomas B, *Alarms and Excursions in Arabia*. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd. 1931, Pages 198–99). The site was rediscovered in spring 1973 when the author of this monograph was on excursion in the east coast. Two rocks depicted with animals were taken during that visit and displayed in the Al Ain Museum. It has also to be noted that Ziolkowski referred to the rock art at the same site and the nearby shell midden as Khor Kalba B (Site 20), p. 215 of her 2007 AAE article. Today, the carvings discovered by Thomas are located between the UAE and Omani border posts.

The reference of the rock art site at Khatm Mlaha was made in a short report submitted to the Department of Archaeology in Sharjah by the author in June 1987. The aim of the report was to raise awareness to the importance of the site together with other graves from Hafit–Umm an–Nar period at Jebel al–Emalah, and Iron Age graves with a possible Jamdet Nasr one at Jebel Buhais in the interior.



Rock Art at Umm an-Nar

Chapter. 01.



In contrast to the Northern Emirates the rock art in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi is rare and of great importance. Apart from Jebel Hafit, which is an offshoot of the al-Hajar Mountains, and a few outcrops the whole of this range is located in neighbouring Oman or in the Northern Emirates.

The well-known bass-relief ashlar from the cemeteries on Umm an-Nar Island and Hili are unique and indicate highly sophisticated societies during the Bronze Age which they belong to. Due to their uniqueness and importance I have included them, despite the fact that motifs from these two sites are depicted on rocks used as construction materials rather than on in situ rocks.

Apart from an indication of sculpture in the round from the Bronze Age settlement on Umm an-Nar Island the cemetery contains bass-reliefs depicting animals. Two camels, an ox and an oryx have been executed on limestone ashlar, originally decorating the exterior walls of the Umm an-Nar tombs (*Figures 1-4*). One of the camels, though badly eroded, illustrates that it had been professionally executed in a naturalistic shape. In contrast, the other example, which was carved plain with little attention to the hump detail is





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