



## ROCK ART IN NORTHERN OMAN. FIRST OBSERVATIONS

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### SUMMARY

The petroglyphs and pictographs of Oman are little known, but for the last seven years I have been involved in a series of surveys of the Jebel Akhdar Mountains that have resulted in the location of several important sites. Recording these in advance of construction projects undertaken to modernize the country's transportation network has enabled me to study the rock art in considerable detail for the first time. Using superimpositions, cross-dating with known artistic expressions elsewhere in the region, the known dates for introduction of various objects of material culture, and the presence of certain animals in the rock art (as turtles, oryxes, goats-like, camels) I propose a preliminary chronology consisting of several major phases spanning almost 6,000 years.

### RIASSUNTO

Le incisioni e le pitture rupestri dell'Oman sono poco conosciute, ma negli ultimi sette anni sono stato coinvolto in una serie di esplorazioni commissionatemi dal Ministero della Cultura e della Tradizione nelle montagne del Jebel Akhdar che hanno permesso di individuare o meglio indagare numerosi ed importanti siti rupestri. In alcuni casi i lavori intrapresi dal Ministero dei Trasporti per ammodernare la viabilità del paese con la costruzione di nuove strade all'interno dei wadi mi hanno permesso di osservare e studiare in dettaglio per la prima volta l'arte rupestre di alcuni wadi attorno a Rustaq. Utilizzando lo studio delle sovrapposizioni tra figure di stile diverso, la comparazione con vari oggetti di cultura materiale o con espressioni artistiche provenienti da contesti cronologici conosciuti nella regione o la presenza di alcuni animali nell'arte rupestre (come la testuggine, l'orice, lo stambecco e il dromedario) propongo qui per la prima volta una seriazione cronologica suddivisa in diverse fasi e che abbraccia un periodo di tempo di almeno seimila anni.

Rock Art in Oman was first reported in the thirties (THOMAS SIDNEY 1932), when the British explorer Bertram Sidney Thomas on his camel journeys in the Sultanate, noted its presence on rocks in the wadi (deep arroyos) that characterize the country's desert topography. The first scientific interest in this subject arose only in the 1970s with brief studies (CLARKE 1975, PRESTON 1976), especially focusing on Hasat Bin Salt (also called Coleman's Rock), a unique and interesting natural feature that has many petroglyphs but is better known for a bas-relief carving that creates a monumental sculpture on three side of the large rock (YULE 2001) (Fig. 1). In spite of the evident historical, archaeological, and anthropological importance of this rock art corpus, a complete catalogue of the country's petroglyphs and pictographs has never been created. In the last seven years I have carried out a series of surveys in the Jebel Akhdar mountain range for the Omani Ministry of Heritage and Culture with the aim of starting and organizing such a catalogue (FOSSATI 2009, 2013, 2014). Rock art is also known in the south of the Sultanate in the Dhofar region, where it also occurs as both paintings and engravings (ASH SHAHRI 1994). Omani rock art -made as petroglyphs using several techniques including percussion, incision, and bas-

relief carvings and as paintings - presents numerous themes including humans, animals, artifacts, geometric/symbolic figures, and inscriptions (JÄCKLI 1980). These various sorts of carvings and paintings were made over a long time period. However, the establishment of a chronology for this art depends on the study of styles, distinguishing different types of weapons, and demonstrating the presence of certain animals in various scenes. Currently I am only at the start of my analysis of the data I have recorded, but I offer here a few preliminary observations. As is often the case in rock art research, the analysis of superimpositions between figures and the comparison of different levels of revarnishing (on the same surface) has helped with the organization of phases into general time periods. The most ancient rock art in the region (first phase) illustrates wild maritime animals such as green turtles, anemones, fishes (Fig. 2). These images are heavily re-varnished and weathered in comparison of other animals that overlap or are near to these, as wild ibex, gazelles, asses, aurochs, and other animals that constitutes a second phase. These phase can be divided in two sub-phases: one, the more ancient of the two, presents figures of animals completely pecked, while the second sub-phase shows figures realized in outline. Of

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This paper develops the ideas published in my text Rock Art in Jebel Akhdar, Sultanate of Oman: An Overview, in American Indian Rock Art, Volume 41. James D. Keyser and David A. Kaiser, Editors. American Rock Art Research Association, 2015, pp. 1-8.

significant interest is the presence of ibex-like figures that have been engraved on the rocky walls of many wadis in Oman and that have connection with similar figures present elsewhere in the Arabian Peninsula (ANATI 1968; INSALL 1999; KHAN 2003). These earliest (Phases 1-2) engravings were probably made in the fifth and fourth millennium BCE (7,000-6,000 years ago) by hunters that frequented the Jebel Akhdar Mountains in search of prey. A third phase consists of angular, stylized human figures, including women, sometimes seated on a throne and accompanied by an attendant (Fig. 3). Stylistically related to the anthropomorphic bas-relief sculptures on the Hasat Bin Salt Monument (Coleman's Rock), these images probably date to the third and second millennia BCE (5,000 to 3,000 years ago) based on cross-dating with carved tombs found elsewhere in Oman and Abu Dhabi (CLEUZIQU, TOSI 2007). These women shown seated on thrones probably represent royalty (queens or princesses) based on this sort of thematic portrayal as found throughout Near Eastern Officialdom from Egypt to Mesopotamia during this period.

Phase 4 figures include both petroglyphs and pictographs whose primary motifs are geometric/symbolic patterns (solar symbols, sub-rectangular [rectilinear] forms, and others) sometimes accompanied by human figures in a few related schematic styles (Fig. 4). Often the Phase 4 petroglyphs are found superimposed on Phase 1 animal representations. Phase 4 also includes painted figures in white and red but I have yet to find these pictographs in superimposition sequences with petroglyphs so they are classified into this phase based on thematic and stylistic criteria.

The most recent art (Phase 5) is warrior art. These images show horsemen (Fig. 5), camels and camel riders, ostriches (ELMAHI 2001), boats (Fig. 6), weapons and

other items of material culture, and fighting warriors that were carved from the last millennium BC (about 1,000 BC) until modern times – with the latest carvings made within the last few decades. I have met the artist who carved a representation of an *oud* (an Arabian lute) as a tribute to a famous Yemeni singer, and we have also recorded a petroglyph of three automobiles. The beautiful leopards (or lions) engraved in Wadi Sahtan were created – maybe with totemic value – during the last millennium BC; when, for the first time, the Arab people used a writing system. A few inscriptions in the ancient South Arabic alphabet (which is different from today's standard Arabic writing) accompany some of these figures of warriors and animals (Fig. 6). These inscriptions are names of people – possible travelers, traders, or inhabitants of the wadi villages – the same “artists” that produced the older rock art. Later inscriptions, in standard Arabic script, witness the importance of the wadis as road systems that connected the south and interior of the country with the coastal area during historical times.

The interpretation of Omani rock art is in its infancy. Further work will undoubtedly change these preliminary observations as additional rock art research is integrated with ongoing archaeological research on the different cultures that have inhabited Oman through the centuries. As the road building and railroad construction continue as part of Oman's economic development, construction activities continue to threaten many sites, but the Ministry of Heritage and Culture of the Sultanate of Oman is committed to document endangered sites as part of the salvage effort to preserve the rock art of this area. Hopefully, the result will be additional information that will enable the development of a more secure chronology and a more detailed interpretation of this rich body of ancient rock art.

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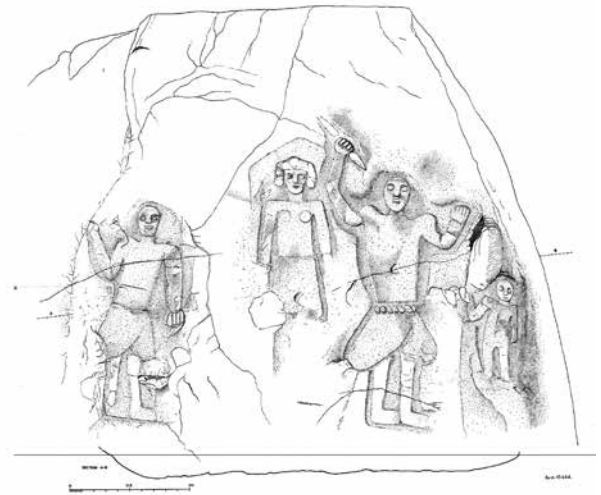
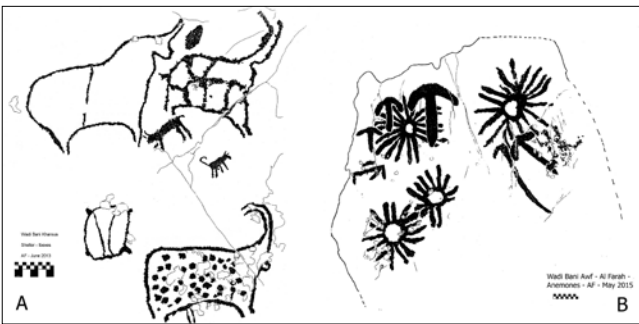


Fig. 1- Hasat Bin Salt (Coleman's Rock) - Figures realized in bas relief are on the most known piece of rock art in Oman, a boulder naturally shaped as a gigantic standing stone - (photo Fossati, tracing by the Italian Mission, courtesy Prof. M. Tosi)



◀Fig. 2 - A: goat-like animals engraved in contour. Two smaller dogs are completely pecked. A green turtle figure, an animal that had a great symbolic value six thousand years ago, is very weathered and re-varnished and engraved with details of the carapace. Stal, Wadi Bani Kharous - (drawing by Angelo Fossati). B: Group of anemones figures overlapped by T figures, representations of daggers of the 2nd millennium BC. Al Farah, Wadi Bani Awf - (drawing by Fossati)

▼Fig. 3 - Ladies - probably princesses - seated on thrones, each with a servant attending them - Gore Anaqsah, Wadi Sahtan - (drawing by Fossati)





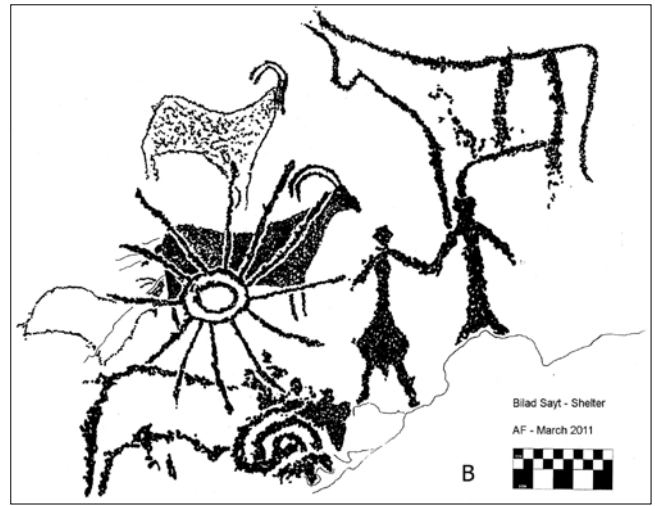
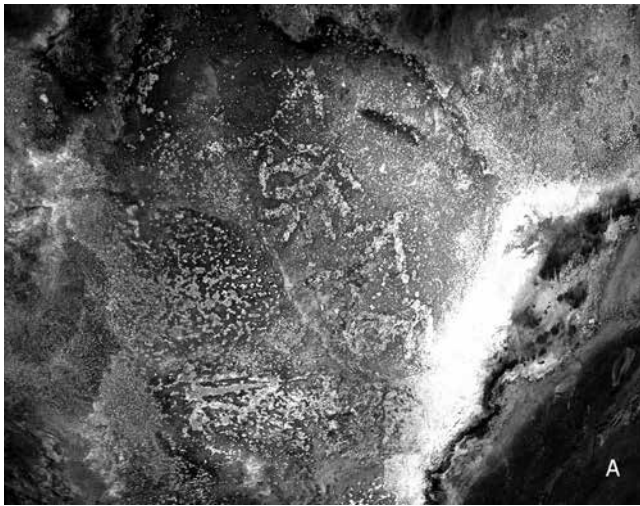


Fig. 4 - A: Anthropomorphs and tree-like figures painted in white on a roof of a shelter in Wadi Tanuf (photo Fossati). B: Solar figure associated to two human figures overlapping a series of ibex-like figures - from a cave in Bilad Sayt (drawing by Fossati)

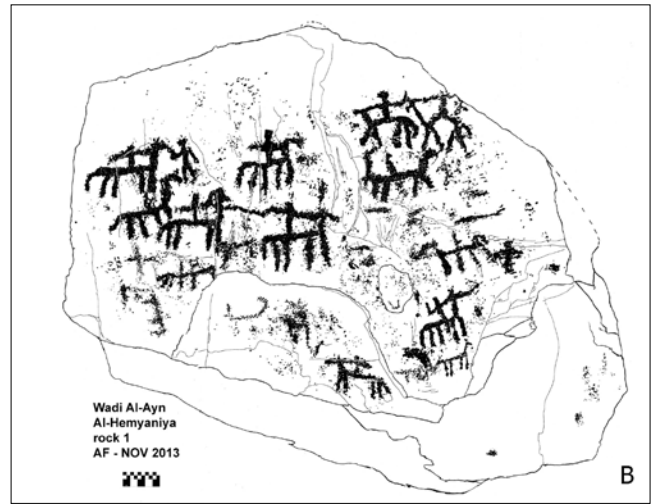


Fig. 5 - A: Horse and camel riders. The camel in Oman is typically ridden sitting behind the animal's hump. (photo Fossati). B: A group of riders on horses and camels engraved on a boulder near Al-Hemyaniya village in Wadi Al Ayn (tracing by Fossati).

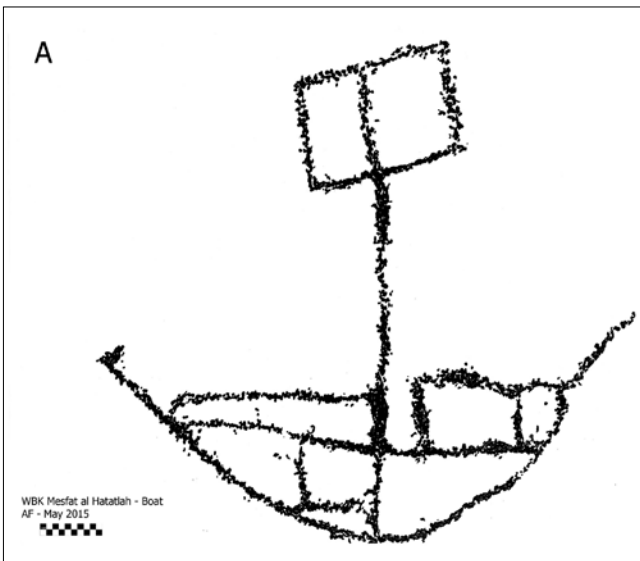


Fig. 6 - A: A typical Omani boat engraved on a rock at Wadi Bani Kharous.. These boats were used to transport goods such as frankincense, which comes from the internal part of the Arabian Peninsula across the sea to the other countries of the gulf of Arabia (drawing by Fossati). B: Inscriptions in South Arabic alphabet from Gore Anaqsah in Wadi Sahtan (drawing by Fossati).