

From Prehistoric To Nomadic Art – A Synopsis of the History and Development of Tribal Art in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

Rock art is one of the most primitive visual form used to express the rites, rituals, religions, social and economy of early cultures. The visual record on the rocks is the manifestation of past societies of Arabia. For them rock was the only source of communication and documentation of their way of life. Here, in Saudi Arabia we have an excellent and unique record of the daily life of ancient people to whom we call Bedouins. The present Arab traditions and cultures mostly based on their ancient cultures prevailing over several millennia.

Introduction

Man entered the Arabian Peninsula before one million years. Stone objects of that period are located at Shuwaythiya in the north, Dawadmi in the central region, Bir Himma in the south and Wadi Fatima in the western region of Saudi Arabia. In the beginning, man lived in caves and rock shelters and depended on hunting and food gathering. The Stone Age continued for several thousand years in Arabia like other parts of the world.

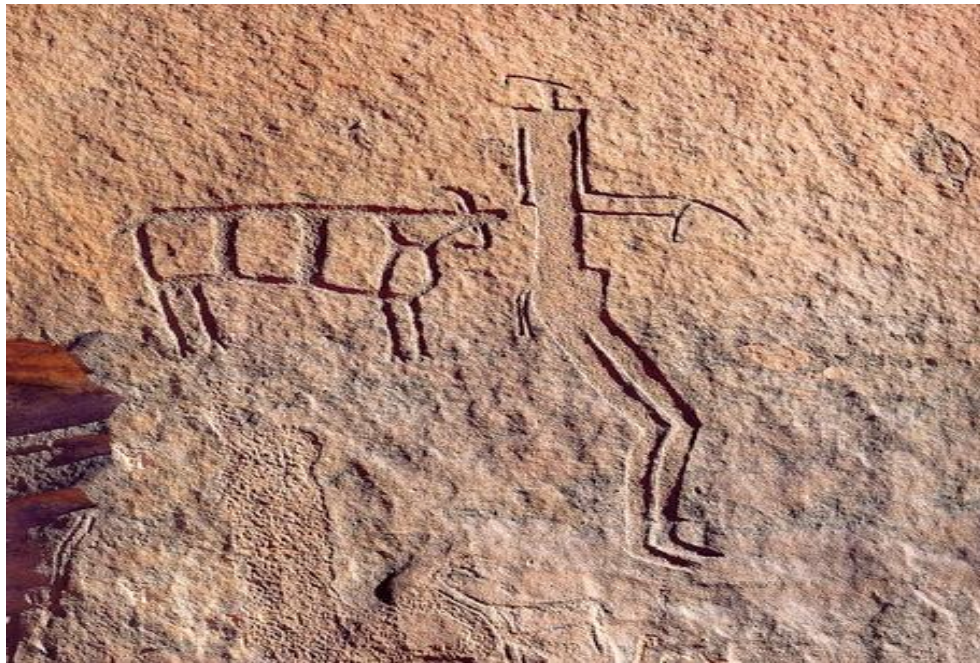
Saudi Arabia is rich in its cultural heritage. There are over 4,000 archaeological and 1,500 rock art sites so far located in the Kingdom. The chronology of Saudi Arabian archaeology indicated a continuity of human presence in the Arabian Peninsula from one million years to the present day. However, Saudi Arabia stands fourth among the richest rock art regions of the world (Bednarik and Khan 2002).

Artistic activities

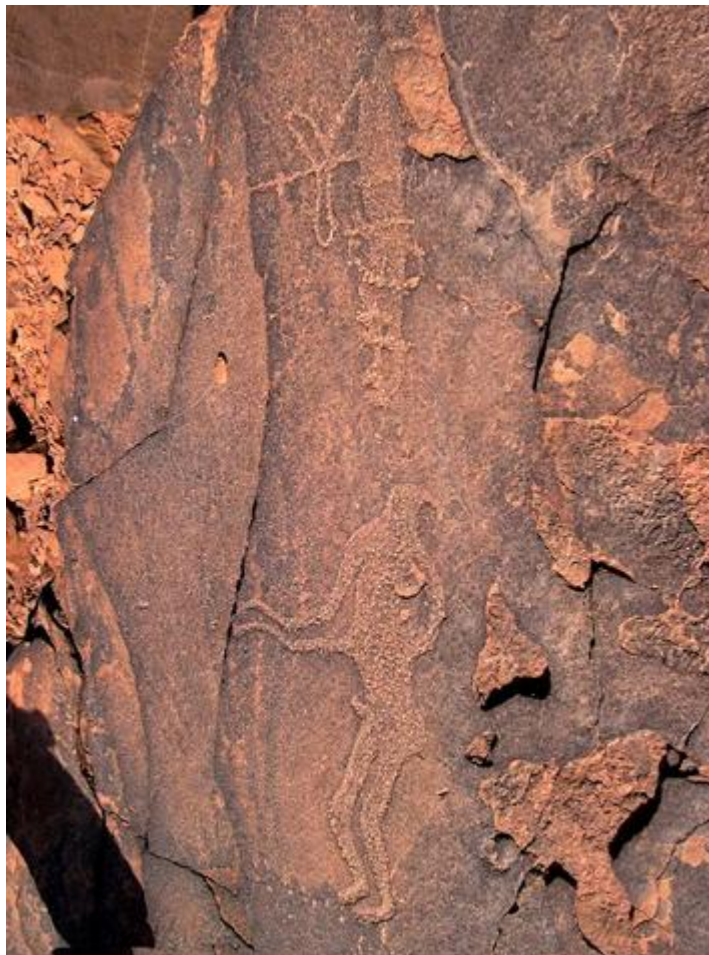
The human life in Arabia until 10,000 years from now based on hunting and food gathering. Ancient people of Arabia depicted on the rocks their everyday activities such as dancing, hunting, fighting and other social and activities by (delete and) painting or engravings on rock surfaces. The artistic work of the ancient people of Arabia found on mountains, hills, and rocks all over the country revealed social, cultural, religious and economic life of the people living in the land, which is now Saudi Arabia.

In almost all compositions that could be attributed to the Neolithic period (c.12,000 BCE) human figures are associated with animals particularly ox and dogs. It means the two animals were domesticated and were part of the daily life as well as social and cultural activities. While, in almost all cases human faces are ambiguous, necks are long, heads and faces obscure (figure 1) perhaps representing images of metaphysical world with human like bodies and abstract faces (figure 2).





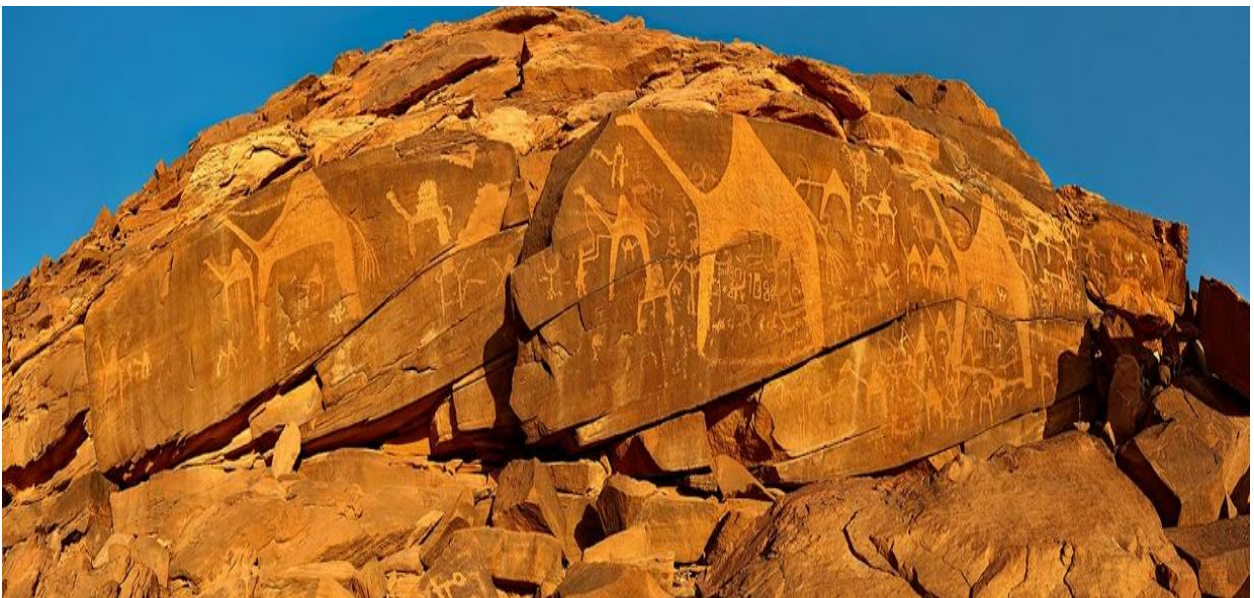
Location of identical anthropomorphic figures with naturalistic human like torso and ambiguous faces at several locations suggested that artists were drawing images of deities or gods. They could not or did not want to conceive the faces of the gods or deities (figures 3).



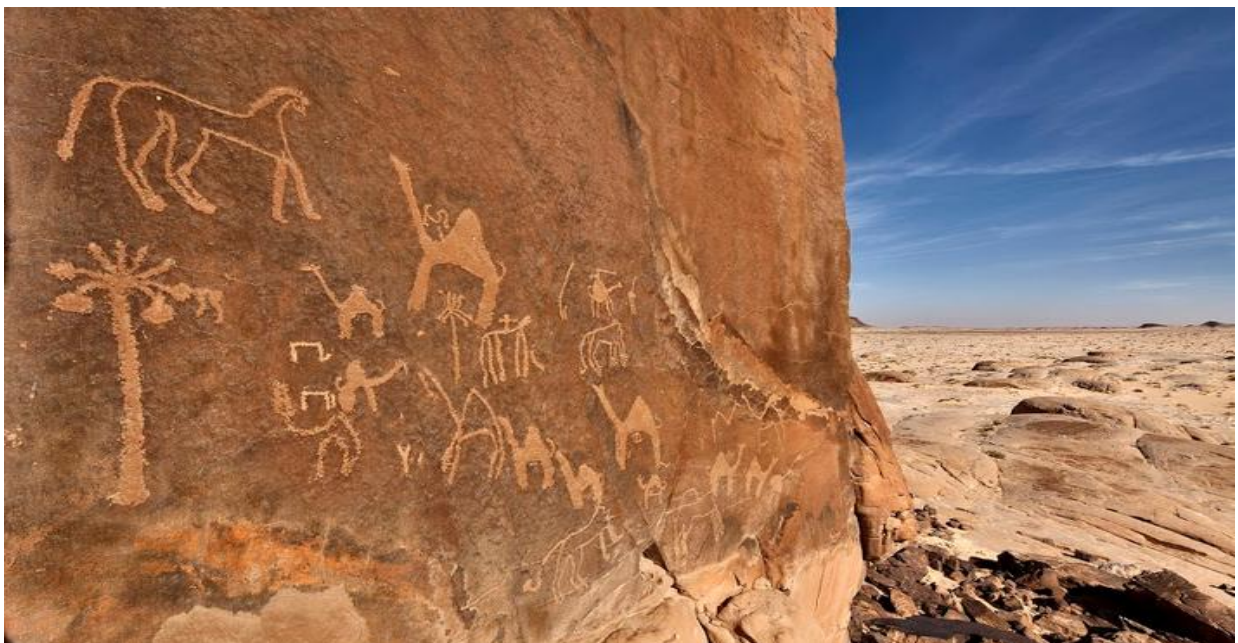
Anthropomorphic representations (located at) Jubbah, Hanakiya and Shuwaymis are not found anywhere in the Arabian Peninsula and neighboring countries such as present day Jordan, Iraq, Syria, Negev and Sinai desert in the north and Yemen, Oman and the Gulf States in the south and east of the Peninsula (Khan 1993, 2000, 2007). In this part of Arabia, known as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, an unknown nation was living with its unique artistic capabilities in which the artists were confined to certain type of image making, such as anthropomorphic representations with naturalistic human like body features and large sized cattle figures with exaggeratedly long horns, created in low or bas-relief (Figure 4).



The earliest images of rock art found at the site of Shuwaymis (UNESCO’s world heritage site) in the north of the country composed of two parallel hill ranges, Jabal al-Manjour and Jabal Tar. The two hill ranges situated in the volcanic and desert environment represented two different cultural periods. Jabal Taar contains the oldest and most exciting human and animal images carved deeply in the sand stone rocks very well preserved (Khan 2007, 2010)) while Jabal Manjour, located opposite to Jabal Taar a mile away, contains rock art of later literate period with hundreds of camel petroglyphs associated with Bedouin or so called Thamudic inscriptions (figure 5).



In the subsequent (4,500-2,500 BP), large compositions of human and animal figures associated with a variety of animal species, non-representational and geometric motifs suggest that the rock art gradually changed both its course and purpose. The figures became schematic, mostly outlined and, for the first time, stick or linear and simplified human and animal figures appeared in rock art compositions. This marked the beginning of a new trend in rock art in which foot and handprints (figure 6) along with a variety of animal species such as camels, ibex, deer, lions, dogs, wolves and gazelles became common elements of rock art compositions. Large number of camel figures appeared in this period while ox figures totally disappeared suggesting a drastic change in the climate from cool and humid to extremely hot and dry conditions (figure 7).



Thus, appeared a variety of human and animal figures in addition to geometric and non-representational motifs. The Neolithic rock art of Saudi Arabia reflects a quite significant cognitive system in which all the social groups, tribes or clans, appear to have shared a common cosmology in which particular animal species, cattle and dogs were overwhelmingly depicted (Khan 1993a, 2017). In almost each activity dancing or hunting long horned ox and dogs are associated with men and women (figure 8.).



Before 10,000 to 6,000 years, ancient people of Arabia mostly dependent on animal hunting, animal herding and early domestication of crops cultivated in oasis, valleys and flood plains. Until 5,000 years before present, Arabian society was mostly nomadic with few individual family groups living together in tents and huts. Stone structures, circles and other archaeological evidence suggested the beginning of small-scale settlements in and around the oasis and valleys (figure 9).



With the establishment of large-scale communities, development of tribes and clans and beginning of domestication of camels appeared the use of animal brands or locally called “Wusum”. In Arabia Wusum are not animal brands only but also used as tribal symbols and marked on camel bodies, tents, knives, swords and hills as territorial boundaries of tribes, signature on documents or ownership of wells in the desert (figure 10).



Small towns and villages appeared during the Bronze Age around 4,000 to 3,500 years before present. Al-Ula, Tayma, Domat al Jundal in the north, Thaj in the east, al-Fao and Ukhdoud in the south and Makkah and Jeddah in the west flourished as small towns and cities. However, Bedouin life continued to prevail until present day.

The rise of Islam brought prosperity to Arabia but for a short period and stopped again after the transfer of the Caliphate to Baghdad and Syria. The nomadic and Bedouin life again started to flourish on large scale.

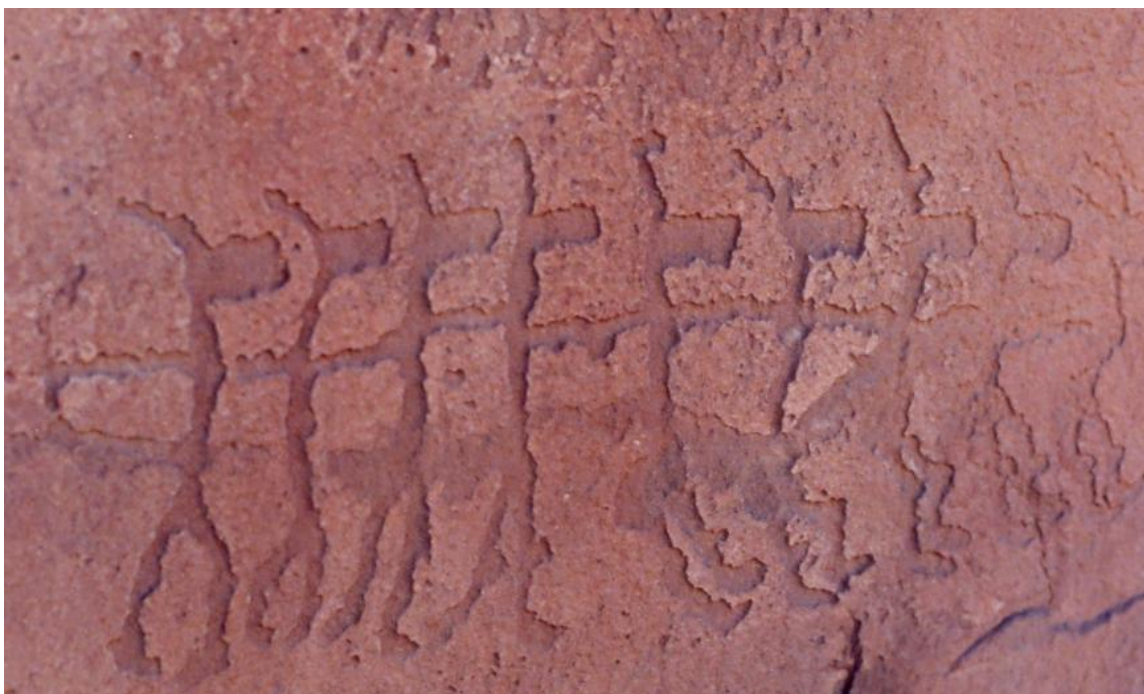
The Arab nomads, locally called as “Bedouins”, do represent a culture the roots of which could be traced far back in prehistory, but it must be clear that they had or have nothing which may support the notion of a tribe as a vestige of savagery and barbarism. Yet, tribal system still exists in Arabia maintaining strong social and cultural traditions since antiquity.

The nomads or the Bedouins are the essential part of their motherland - the present Saudi Arabia, in fact they are the true perseverance of original Arab races, traditions, social and cultural values. In spite of all modern developments that entered the Arabian Peninsula during the last decades, the tribal system of life is not affected and the Bedouins who have now adopted to the modern life style, surprisingly still maintain their original social and cultural values. These are proud of their traditions and they love their land, still spent their vacations camping in the desert in the same traditional style that they have preserved for thousands of years.

The ancestry of Bedouins – at least in life style- traceable for back in prehistory, at the time when the nomadic population may have been greater in both semi arid and verdant regions, than that of the recently established small permanent settlements in the desert areas. Most of the Bedouins have recently settled in large towns and cities and have adopted modern living facilities, but inside their hearts and soul, they are still “Bedouins”, as they strictly adhere to their traditions, social and cultural entities, folklores and dances. Tribal laws and regulations and tribal territories still maintained in the desert, while in big cities and towns, people usually prefer to live in tribal sectors unofficially attributed to certain specific tribes. The tribal, clan and family system still based on centuries old tribal life pattern.

Hundreds and thousands of rock art sites are located all over the country. The art could be attributed to the Prehistoric and tribal period. Some of the Arabian dances and art contents show a continuity of tribal art from times unknown.

In the above composition (figure 11) men and women, dancing wearing masks or could possibly be a dance of super natural beings having human like bodies and ass like faces. It is interesting to note in this context that Saudis have a special traditional folk-dance - “*Ardha*”, which is danced in groups of men performed in a style that seems almost identical to that depicted on the rocks at Jubbah, Milihiya, Janin and Tabuk in northern Saudi Arabia. As far as can be judged from the rock art representations, the pairing, the legs, arms and hands (each person holding hand of other dancer) and arms and legs moving in symmetry, while the postures adopted during the dance are basically the same as in present day tribal folk-dances.



Consequently, it is tempting to see modern Bedouin or tribal attitudes to tribal affinity, cultural and social values and their dances as survival of cultural tradition that could be traced far back in prehistory.

In another example, a rock art panel located northwest of the country representing a dance identical to one still performed in western province at Jeddah, called “Mizmaar”. Mizmar danced in groups with sticks or swords in hands that a dancer moves according to the song and rhythm of the music.

The change from the prehistoric symbolic to tribal representational art can be seen by hundreds of camel figures depicted all over Arabia, sometimes in association with ancient Arabian Bedouin inscriptions, and sometimes with “Wusum” or tribal brands (figure 12.)



Even after the invention of writing and increased literacy, the Arab tribes still use “Wusum” for the same purpose as they were using in the past. The knowledge of symbolism transmitted from generation to generation and some of the signs and symbols date back to thousands of years for back in pre-history.

Thus, we can witness a modern society embodied with old cultural and social traditions. This amalgamation of old traditions with the most ultra modern life style is but a unique living example in modern history. It is not only the Bedouins but the Saudi Royal family also uses “Wasm” as their tribal symbol and marked it on their camels (figure 12). His Majesty late King Abdul Aziz was the first Arabian ruler who officially recognized tribal territories and used official documents to several tribes in this regard. King Abdulaziz used Wasm as his tribal and property symbol and his sons are still maintaining this tradition. The Wasm of His Majesty King Abdulaziz al-Saud is “oIo” depicted on the right thigh of the camel. This Wasm still used by the royal family. The traditional tribal *Ardha* and *Mizmaar* dances continued to perform by the members of the Royal family along with other people on all special occasions thus showing that they are part of the same tribal society and same social and cultural entities.

The gradual change in style, contents, context and conceptuality from prehistoric to Bedouin or tribal art could be clearly defined on the basis of animal representations, tribal symbols and Bedouin writings that developed later in the Iron Age. Bedouin folk dances, branded camel figures and the names of tribes and persons engraved besides rock art compositions testify to the fact that rock art played an important role in describing the social, cultural and religious entities of Arabia from prehistoric to the early Islamic period.

In ancient Arabia, there was a tradition to carve and engrave the images of gods and deities on rocks. Thus, un-walled open-air temples created in the deserts several of them still survive. Variety of gods and deities on rocks, hills, and idols sculptured on the rocks represent a variety of human beliefs, their thoughts, ideas and the metaphysical world in which they believed (figure 13).



Idols were worshipped in pre-Islamic Arabia. For the Bedouins (the desert nomads) it was not possible to built temples in the desert, which could be buried in the shifting sands. They however, created open-air temples and depicted images of their deities and gods on rocks at higher places. Such open air worshipping sites could survive both the sand storms and shifting sand dunes. These are still preserved on several sites in the deserts of Arabia (figure 14).



The discontinuity of art at Shuwaymis and Jubbah becomes all the more striking when compared to subsequent developments in other parts of Arabia, as an iconographic sequence can be traced without obvious interruption from the Neolithic to the pre-Islamic and onward in the Islamic era, when hundreds of early Islamic inscriptions are carved on the rocks and hills all along the ancient trade and pilgrimage routes.



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