

*Archaeological Study of Unpublished Rock Art
Inscriptions at Taif*

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Abstract:

This paper deals exclusively with seven unpublished petroglyphs that newly discovered in the northeast of Taif city in Saudi Arabia. These rock art panels reflect some characteristic culture and intellectual role of Taif on the history of the region from at least the Second Millennium BCE.

Key words:

Rock arts; petroglyph; Taif inscriptions; Thamudic arts; Taif ancient history; Hunting scenes; Okaz.

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I-Introduction:

The site of Jebel Al-Arfaa is located 35 km north-east of Taif city. It directly overlooks Wadi Wej which is one of the most famous valleys to the north-east of Taif city. The location is situated precisely on the vicinity of a region on which Wadi Wej meets the valley Al-korashya which runs from north-east to south-east direction⁽¹⁾. In rainy season it become a temporary watercourse (Plate 1)⁽²⁾. As an important historical record, the rock art of Taif shows a quite significant cognitive archeological documents referring to an ancient and attractive site for early human life activities on the early Thamudic period and an important transition zone of cultural contact between southern and northern borders of Arabian Peninsula⁽³⁾.

From these petroglyphs, one could easily realize an important archeological document of religious beliefs, social customs, tribal traditions and local environment⁽⁴⁾. Study of these rock inscriptions could hopefully present a scientific written history on the stone which may shed more new lights on pre-Islamic periods of Taif province⁽⁵⁾.

II-Archeological study: (plate1)

Like many other sites of rock art at Taif or elsewhere regions in Arabian Peninsula, the rock arts of Jebel Al-Arfaa incised in rocks surfaces covered by engravings that mostly belonging to a few thousand years ago⁽⁶⁾.

⁽¹⁾Review location coordinates on Google map, longitude 40.429270, latitude 21.289510.

⁽²⁾From ancient times Taif locals used to name this wadi with its extensions by Corniche Road with regarding to the great quantity of rainwater drains into the valley from east and west mountains.

⁽³⁾For more details review, Bednarik, R., "Scientific Investigations into Saudi Arabian Rock Art": A Review, *Mediterranean Archaeology and Archaeometry*, Vol. 17, No 4, (2017),43-59; Bednarik, R., & Khan, M., "A chronology of Saudi Arabian rock art", XXVI Valcamonica Symposium ,Italy 2015,1-6;Woodard, R.D., *The Ancient Languages of Syria-Palestine and Arabia*, Cambridge 2008,p.183.

⁽⁴⁾The site of Jebel Al-Arfaa is nearly located close to the old and famous caravan route between Hijaz and the Levant, for archeological features technique on such rock arts at Rayna and Jebel Arfaa areas at Taif review: Zarins J., Walen, N., "The Comprehensive Archaeological Survey Program", *Journal of Saudi Arabia Archaeology*, Atlal IV, 1980,30-31

⁽⁵⁾About twenty rock art sites are known in Taif governorate, but so far there is no any scientific documented survey for the main corpus of such inscriptions at Taif.

⁽⁶⁾Bednarik, R.G. *Scientific Study of Saudi Arabian Rock Art*. *Rock Art Res.* 2005, 22, 49–81; It is worth mentioning that Zarins had wrongly named this site by Jebel Arfan review: Zarins, Atlal

Jebel Al-Arfaa site and its prominent wadi at Taif is quite similar to those from Shuwaymis or Jubbah at the northern Arabia⁽⁷⁾. The common denominator of all rock art inscriptions in different sites at Taif are usually associated with hunter-gathers or pastoralism⁽⁸⁾.

II-1- Plate 2: A-B (Figure 2):

This painting is badly damaged and has been drawn in red ocher on a rough stone texture at the entrance of the cave. The figure takes a circular shape with remains of two small circles appears on its midst. Twelve lines has been drawn in dotting form, all of which could be clearly seen coming out ends with a large circle surround the entire figure. It mostly represents a survived part of sun figure depicted in the shape of circle containing twelve sunbeams which refers to the daylight hours, the lower part is totally erased⁽⁹⁾.

Apparently, this missed lower part was consisted of another twelve lines in order to complete the painted shape of the circle⁽¹⁰⁾. According to the Thamudic religion the holy triad was consisted of the Moon as the father god, the Sun as the mother goddess and Venus planet as the son god⁽¹¹⁾. If this hypothesis is correct, it will be the first time in Arabian rock arts that the artist carried out the shape of the sun and the moon in a single disc. This new artistic style

IV, 1980,30-31; Khan, M., "Human Figures in the Rock Art of Saudi Arabia" ; International Rock Art Congress: Ripen, WI, USA. 1999, 48; Garrard, A., Harvey, C., "Environment and Settlement During the Upper Pleistocene and Holocene at Jubbah in the Great Nafud, North Arabia", *Atlat* I, 1977,137-156.

⁽⁷⁾For more details about some characteristic motifs and patterns of Taif rock art, one could compare with that inscriptions from Taif which Zarins published in 1980, review Zarins J, *Atlat* IV, 1980,30-31,pls 13-15;Bednarik,R., "Scientific Investigations into Saudi Arabian Rock Art": A Review, *Mediterranean Archaeology and Archaeometry*, Vol. 17, No 4, (2017), 43-59.

⁽⁸⁾Compare about the rock arts of Ranya town and Jebel Arfaa at Taif Zarins J, *Atlat* IV,30-31, pls.,13-16; Khan, M., Kabawi, A., Al-Zahrani, "A. Preliminary Report on the Second phase of Rock Art and Epigraphic Survey of Northern Saudi Arabia " *Atlat* 1986, 10, 465.

⁽⁹⁾It is worth mentioning that Taif province before the rise of Islamic was an important paganism capital for goddess Al-Lat where it worshiped in its temple by local people of Thaqif from at least 7th century BC, review S., Wang, *The Origins of Islam in the Arabian Context*, University of Bergen,2016,p.10-35.

⁽¹⁰⁾Review J., Safra, *Britannica Encyclopedia of world Religion*, Singapore, 2006, p.70.

⁽¹¹⁾For more elaboration about ancient Arabian religion before Islam review Kister, M. J. "Mecca and the Tribes of Arabia: Some Notes on Their Relations," in M. Sharon (ed.), *Studies in Islamic History and Civilization in Honour of Professor David Ayalon*. Jerusalem, 1986. p 42; R., Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs from the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam*, New York 2001, p.144.

actually reveals about an innovative motif with this metaphorical and unique technique⁽¹²⁾.

II-2 Plate 3: (Figure 3):

Unfortunately, this panel is totally damaged except for this survived part which mostly has been represented a hunting scene that comprise numbers of desert animals and human figures in different hunting interactions⁽¹³⁾. The rest part of this petroglyph consists of two pecked dogs depicted in stick style carved on the surface of this rock. The artist has used outline style to engrave the two dogs in profile in a steady position to hunt. The artist successfully depicted the right moment on which the dogs stopped to get ready after exploration hunting area before embarking in job⁽¹⁴⁾. In order to show this crucial moment of hunting the artist deliberately showed the ears and tails of the two dogs in a rising position⁽¹⁵⁾. As a result of this characteristic style in this perspective shape, one could only see two legs and one ear for each hunting-dog⁽¹⁶⁾.

II-3 Plate 4 (Figure 4):

This painted rock shelter figure is badly damaged and partly unclear, the rest part shows a hunting dog gets ready to hunt with the above-mentioned position, three human figures could be seen standing in red ocher⁽¹⁷⁾.

⁽¹²⁾Painted sun circle was used in different archeological sites in Arabia such as Jazan figures of human arms and hands. I would like to say without any doubt that this patterns of rock arts are strongly associated with sun religious doctrine in Arabian Peninsula where the ancient deities Al-Lat and Al-Uzza widely worshiped there, review Gawlikowski, M., "The Sacred Space in Ancient Arab Religions", *SHAJ* 1,1982, p. 301-303;Khan, M., "Rock Art of Saudi Arabia": *Arts* 2013-2, figures 27-28, p.467.

⁽¹³⁾Review for wild animal hunting rock arts at Hail: Khan. M., *An Introduction to the Rock Art of Saudi Arabia*, Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage 2017,27,54.

⁽¹⁴⁾For more details about hunting-dogs in rock art inscriptions in different perspective forms at Taif review: Zarins J, *Atlal* IV,30-31, pls.,14-15.

⁽¹⁵⁾For more elaboration review M., Guagnin7 others, "Hunters and herders: Exploring the Neolithic transition in the rock art of Shuwaymis, Saudi Arabia", *Archaeological Research in Asia* 4 ,2015, figs.6 p.8, fig.7 p.9 ,fig.8 p.10,fig.9 p.11.

⁽¹⁶⁾Compare other hunting rock art inscriptions on which dogs were usually used to help in such hunting activities in different sites: Khan, M., "Rock Art of Saudi Arabia", *Arts* 2013, 2, 453, figure 8.

⁽¹⁷⁾Red ocher consists of natural mineral mixture from local minerals in particular iron oxide and hematite For more elaboration about the use of the red ocher in caves art review: David, B. *Cave Art*; Thames & Hudson World of Art; Thames & Hudson: London, UK, 2017,

On the same perspective shape, the artist had drawn this uncomplete panel to refer to the human relationship on the desert community with domesticated animals on the one hand and to desert ones on the other.

Obviously, this painted rock art traditionally reflects the opposite relationship between the hunter and the prey that prevailed in Arabia from ancient times. One could hardly see two human figures to the left side of the panel, the upper one seems to be standing with exaggerated raised arms while the lower one is shown running after a hunting dog⁽¹⁸⁾.

For the second time, we can realize the artistic way on which the artist depicted the hunting-dog running and jumping with rising two ears which suggests that this was a basic part in the normally hunting process.

II-4 Plate 5 (Figure 5):

On the right corner of the cave, we could clearly find this petroglyph that represents two horsemen standing face to face in a normal stick style⁽¹⁹⁾. The artist took advantage of existence rock outcrops to incise apparent outlines of the figures. The right horse seems to go forward while the left horse is standing, and its neck is heading down probably for a meal.

The most distinguish motif in this simple panel is absolutely the remarkable writing of the Early Thamudic letter " ط " which is written to the leftmost of this image⁽²⁰⁾.

II-5 Plate 6 (Figure 6):

The light brown rough surface on the left corner of this rock shelter depicts two drawings executed in black thick color⁽²¹⁾. The

256;Henshilwood, C.S, " 100,000-Year-Old Ochre-Processing Workshop at Blombos Cave, South Africa", Science 2011, 334, 219–222.

⁽¹⁸⁾Khan, M., An Introduction to the Rock Art of Saudi Arabia.27,54.

⁽¹⁹⁾Khan, M., " Rock Art of Saudi Arabia",470-471, figures 32-33.

⁽²⁰⁾This letter represents the eighteen letter of the Early Thamudic alphabet which gives transliteration of " T", for more details about Thamudic grammar review Nebes, N., Stein, P., Ancient South Arabia in: The Ancient Languages of Syria-Palestine and Arabia ,Roger D., Woodard "ed.", New York,2008,144-176.

⁽²¹⁾Block ocher is one of the natural paints that has been used as a pigment since prehistoric periods and is perhaps the most widely used pigment for artists paints in many archeological

artistic style on this rock art has used outline design to paint animals and humans' figures⁽²²⁾.

The first picture to the right side comprises of a horseman stands facing right in front of an ibex with exaggerated long horns, the whole body of the animal was erased except for a little rest part from the neck on which the artist had painted in black color a tribal symbol which is mostly indicating to the name of a tribe or a person⁽²³⁾.

This Arabian tribal symbol has been drawn in black ocher with the shape of a circle divided into two equal parts⁽²⁴⁾. To the leftmost of this petroglyph, we can clearly see a camel rider stands facing left in front a human figure seems to be standing interactive with the camel-rider by raising his two hands⁽²⁵⁾. The animal's figures have been designed in a horizontal artistic style where each animal stands in a static state and its back to the other⁽²⁶⁾.

To the lowermost of this panel we could clearly read two Thamudic inscriptions, the first one to the right side represents the letter " d" the eight letter of the Early Thamudic Alphabet⁽²⁷⁾. Besides to this letter we could hardly see the normal vertical stick " I

sites at Arabia, review Siddle,R., Minerals Pigments in Archeology: Their Analysis and the Range of Available Materials, Minerals 2018, 8, 201,1-35.

⁽²²⁾For more views about the depiction of camels in Arabian rock art review R., Hoyland, Arabia and the Arabs.p.190.

⁽²³⁾Horsemen figures widely depicted in petroglyphs of Saudi Arabia, the horse figures are usually associated in Arabian thought with concept of courage and equestrian, in many petroglyphs one can find the names of horse masters written in Thamudic inscriptions review Khan. M., An Introduction to the Rock Art of Saudi Arabia, Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage 2017,53, 54,56,57,85; Khan, M., Rock Art of Saudi Arabia.,470-471, figures 32-33.

⁽²⁴⁾Compare for more views about tribal symbols Khan. M., An Introduction to the Rock Art of Saudi Arabia, p.24.

⁽²⁵⁾For more elaboration about depicting camels in rock arts at Saudi Arabia review, R., Jennings & others, "High-resolution geospatial surveying techniques provide new insights into rock-art landscapes at Shuwaymis, Saudi Arabia", Arab. arch. epig. 2014, fig.8, p.11; Khan. M., "An Introduction to the Rock Art of Saudi Arabia". p.44,46,50

⁽²⁶⁾It is well known So far, evidence coalesces to indicate that horses started to be tamed in both Eastern and Northern Arabia in the mid-1st millennium BC, review J., Schiettecatte & A., Zouache, "The Horse in Arabia and the Arabian Horse: Origins, Myths and Realities", Arabian Humanities, Arabique, 8, 1-34.

⁽²⁷⁾Nebes, N., Stein, P., Ancient South Arabia, New York,2008,147.

" which was normally used to separate between words in the Early Thamudic writing⁽²⁸⁾.

II-6 Plate 7 (Figure 7):

To the right corner of this cave near the entrance, one can hardly see a petroglyph has been drawn in black ocher. The rough surface of the cave and the weather and climate conditions severely affected on this rock art and eventually erased many of its details.

However, if we investigate carefully this panel, we can distinguish accurately the shape of an elephant standing to the left corner of this petroglyph. Elephants were known in Arabia from at least the sixth century AD⁽²⁹⁾. Unfortunately, the rest part of the panel was totally erased except for remains which can be seen in cross lines that has been drawn in black ocher as well.

II-7 Plate 8 (Figure 8):

This painted petroglyph is badly damaged and totally unclear. It has been drawn in black ocher on a rough stone texture to the left of the upper part of cave entrance. The only thing that we could easily distinguish from this painted panel is some depictions have been drawn with cross and interlaced graphics in black ocher. This artistic style was widespread in some sites at Arabia petroglyphs. The pattern of rock art is named art on art among the archeologists. This may be due to the scarcity of smooth stone surfaces that can be drawn and written on mostly in different archeological sites at Saudi Arabia.

III- Analyses & Conclusion:

In studying these rock arts several points can be noted:

1- The rock art constitutes one of the most distinguished elements of Saudi Arabia archeology and cultural heritage because it actually shows interesting social aspects and life activities of the ancient Arabs.

⁽²⁸⁾M., C., Macdonald, Ancient North Arabia, in: The Ancient Languages of Syria-Palestine and Arabia, Roger D., Woodard "ed." New York, 2008, 179-224.

⁽²⁹⁾In some rock art figures at Najran one can see elephant rider takes part in a dancing concert, see Khan. M., "An Introduction to the Rock Art of Saudi Arabia". p.50.

2- Many religious facts and beliefs about the planetary triad could be confirmed by the depiction of moon doctrine for the first time in archeological rock art (figure 2)⁽³⁰⁾. This documented evidence actually urges one to suggest that the nomadic people at Taif worshiped also this holy triad like Nabataeans at the northern Arabia in particular at Madain Saleh where they worshiped the planetary triad in merging the circle of sun and moon which was depicted on the facades of their tombs⁽³¹⁾. Accordingly, the decorated circles which inscribed above Madain Saleh tombs entrance certainly represent the merging circle of this planetary triad⁽³²⁾.

3- The simple typology of panels 2 and 3, the figures of camels, the writing of Thamudic letters and the limited themes incised suggest that it was executed by transhumant peoples who used to travel with Arabian merchants' trips⁽³³⁾. This theory is strongly supported by the fact that the site of Jebel Al-Arfaa is located in the limits of Wadi Wej valley where animals and humans could find seasonally water and different sources of food.

4- However, the depiction of wild animals and hunting dogs in Jebel Al-Arfaa petroglyphs mostly suggest that the site was used as a seasonal hunting area from locals as well as nomadic peoples accompanying trade caravans throughout the year.

5- Some of these rock art inscriptions are quite similar to those petroglyphs from Shuwaymis and Jubbah of Hail region in drawing method, themes and artistic style⁽³⁴⁾.

⁽³⁰⁾About ancient Arabian religious believes in particular moon worshiped review R., Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs*144; review footnote 9.

⁽³¹⁾It is worth noting that the pagan cults of Thaqif and other ancient Arabian tribes at Taif were basically diversified, but one of the most famous deity was the Goddess Al-Lat wherein its huge temple precinct were consecrated there review Gawlikowski, M., "The Sacred Space in Ancient Arab Religions"p.301;footnoots 9,10,11,12.

⁽³²⁾Review footnote 10,before this above-mentioned hypothesis, archeologists were used to say that this circle at the top of Al-Hijr tomb façade represents the louts flower, review supreme Commission for Tourism, *Al-Hijr Archeological Site (Mâdain Sâlih)*, Riyadh,2007 tomb numbers: 75 p. 138,92 p.159,93 p.160,100 p.168118 p.198.

⁽³³⁾The Thamudic scripts were used for more 1500 years from the Early First Millennium BC to the Sixth Century AD review: Macdonald, M., *Ancient Arabia and the Written Word*, in: *The Development of Arabic as a Written Language- Supplement to the Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies*, Oxford 2010, Vol. 40 pp. 5–27.

⁽³⁴⁾Compare A., Dhaifallah, Almulihiah: "A Rock Art Site in the Hail Region, Saudi Arabia, Arab". arch. epig. 2012: 23: 92–98 (2012); R.P., Jennings & others, "Rock Art Landscapes beside the Jubbah Palaeolake, Saudi Arabia", *Article in Antiquity* · September 2013, p.666-683.

6- The date of these rock arts could be definitely established with the beginning of the early stage of Thamudic writing (Musnad writing) in the seventh century BC, this date is supported by the writing of the early Musnad letters which were inscribed beside some of these petroglyphs on Jebel Al-Arafaa's cave⁽³⁵⁾.

⁽³⁵⁾Review footnotes 22,23.,27.

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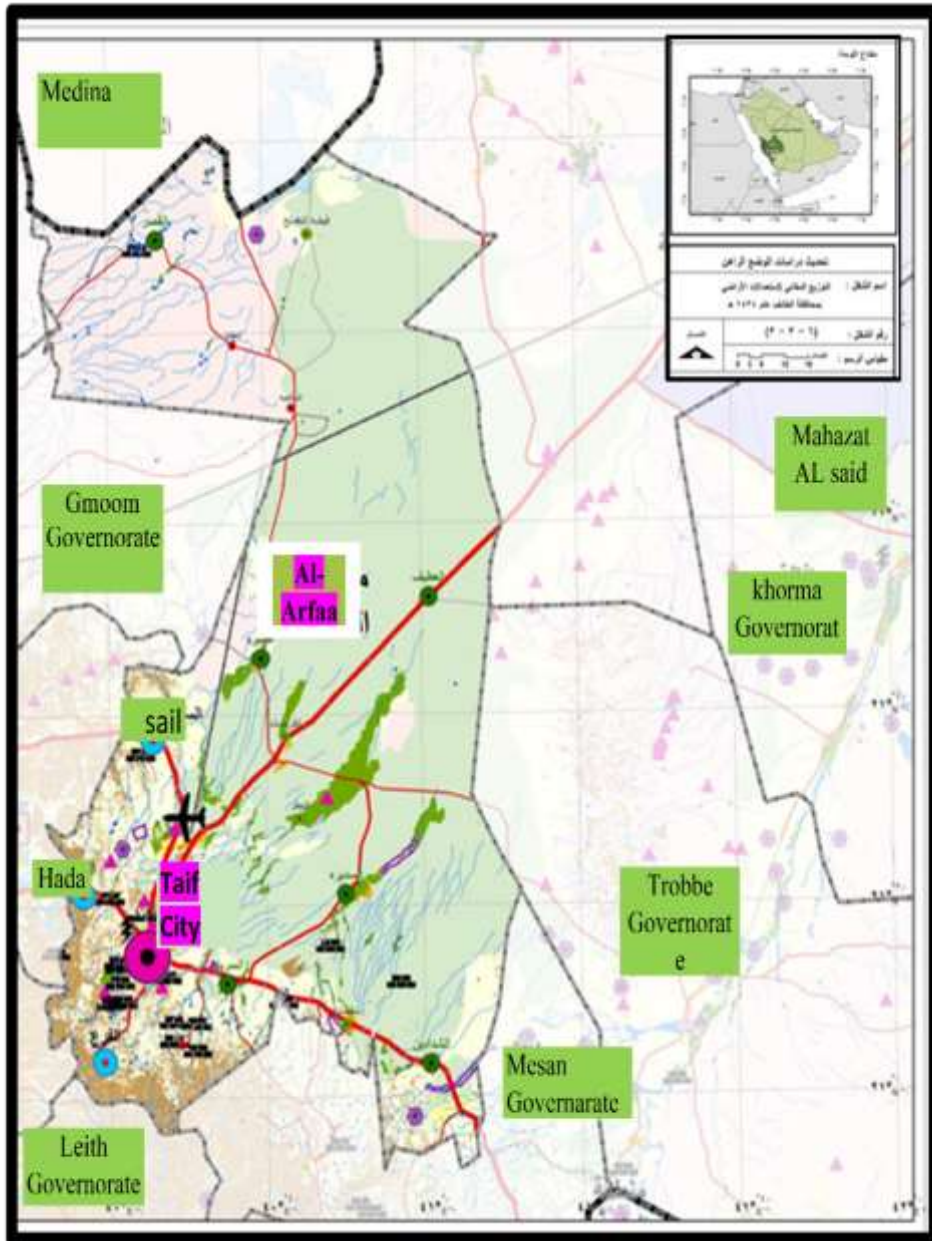


Plate 1: General view of the site.
After Taif Municipality



**Plate 2: Panel of the planetary triad.
Taken by the researcher**

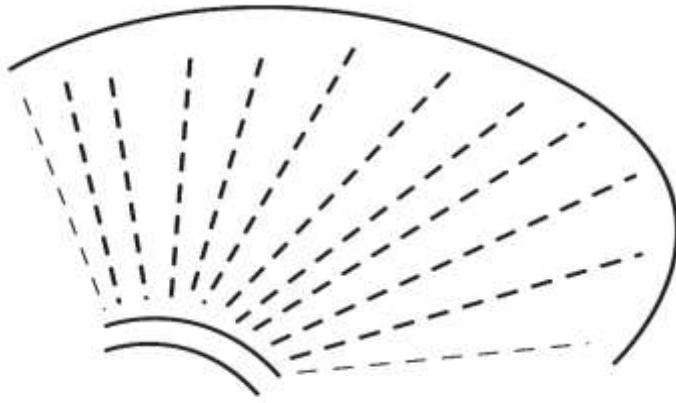


Figure 1: Panel of the planetary triad





**Plate 3: Survived part of two hunting-dogs.
Taken by the researcher**



Figure 3: Survived part of two hunting-dogs.



**Plate 4: Petroglyph of hunting scene.
Taken by the researcher**

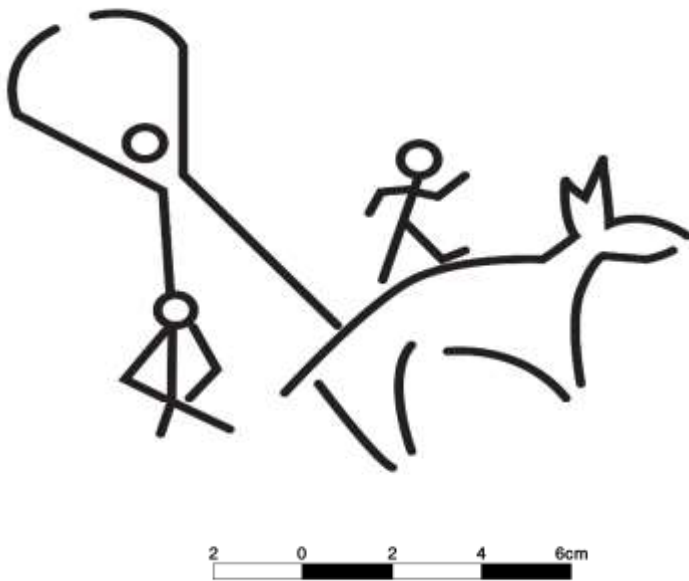


Figure 4: Petroglyph of hunting scene.



Plate 5: Two horsemen facing each other.
Taken by the researcher

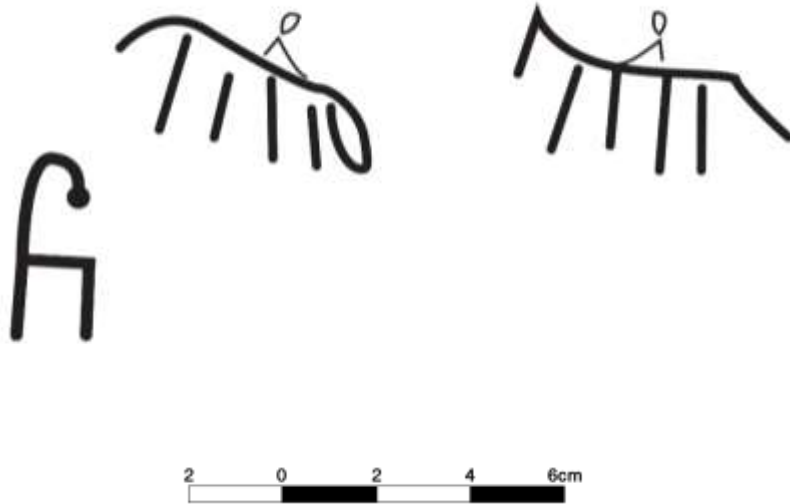
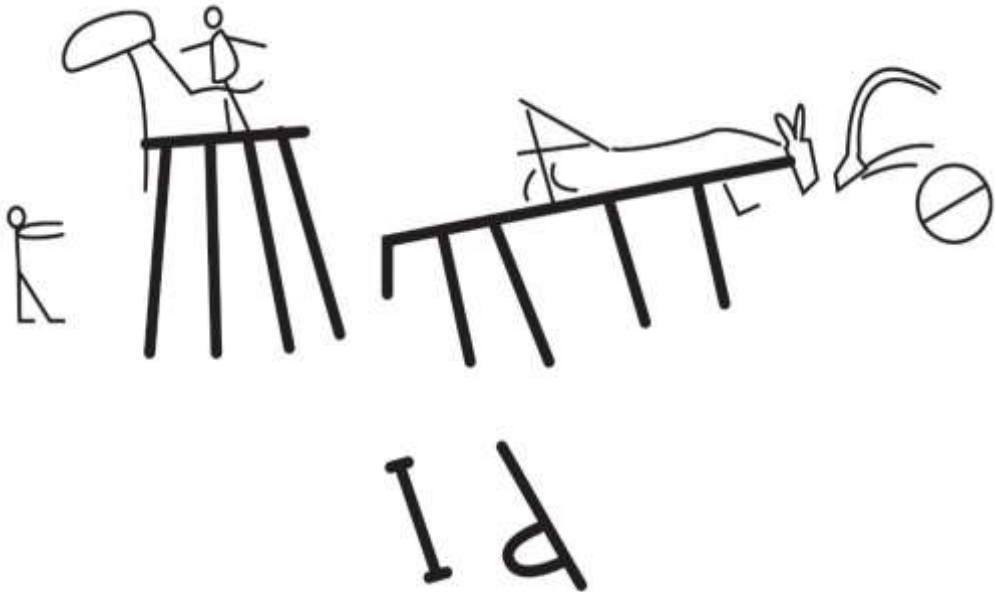


Figure 5: Two horsemen facing each other.



Plate 6: A part of hunting scene.

Taken by the researcher



2 0 2 4 6cm

Figure 6: A part of hunting scene.



Plate 7: Remains of elephant figure.
Taken by the researcher



2 0 2 4 6cm

Figure 7: Remains of elephant figure.



Plate 8: Mixed black drawings" art on art theme"

Taken by the researcher

دراسة أثرية لرسوم صخرية غير منشورة بالطائف

أ.د. محمد عبدربه التونسي *

الملخص:

يتناول البحث بالدراسة والتحليل نشر عدد سبعة رسوم صخرية تم العثور عليها في شمال مدينة الطائف السعودية وتعكس تلك الرسوم الصخرة المكتشفة الدلائل الواضحة على التواجد البشري وتفاعلاته البيئية والحضارية والتاريخية بين الترحال تارة والاستقرار والاستيطان الحضاري تارة اخرى، مما يؤكد على الدور الحضاري للإنسان الاول الذي عاش في الطائف منذ الالف الثاني قبل الميلاد.

الكلمات الدالة:

الرسوم الصخرية؛ النقوش الصخرية؛ مناظر الصيد؛ نقوش الطائف؛ النقوش الثمودية؛ تاريخ الطائف القديم؛ عكاظ.

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