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UMM QRAIEH, A STONE WITH ROCK ART SOUTHWEST OF PETRA

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents and discusses the archaeological evidence for Ancient rock art and Thamudic inscriptions from a site in al-Rajif south of Petra in southern Jordan. The site is a large sandstone called Umm Qraieh "Mother of reading" by the local people in the village of al-Rajif. Human and animal figures, inscriptions, footprints and other symbols were engraved on the upper surface of the stone during multiple periods. The paper includes a reading of the deciphered inscriptions and a discussion concerning rock art in general and the significance of Umm Qraieh in particular.

KEYWORDS: Umm Qraieh, rock art, ibex, Thamudic, al-Rajif.

1. SITE NAME AND LOCATION

The site name is well known among the local people, especially the elders, at the town of al-Rajif and the Bedouins who seasonally settle near the site. The site is a very large sandstone boulder inscribed with different subjects including wild animals, hunting scenes and inscriptions. For the local people all the drawings are readable and interpretable and therefore they call it Umm Qraieh (the mother of reading) not the mother of writing. Other names were not reported for the site.

The site is located ca. 5 km to the northwest of al-Rajif and approximately 10 km south of Petra (Fig. 1 and 2). Vehicular access to the site is not possible.

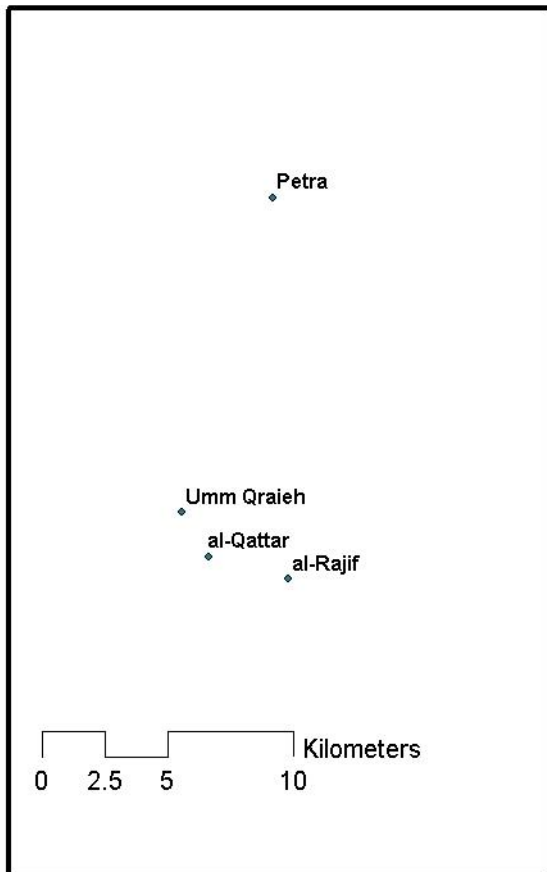


Figure 1 Map showing the location of Umm Qraieh.

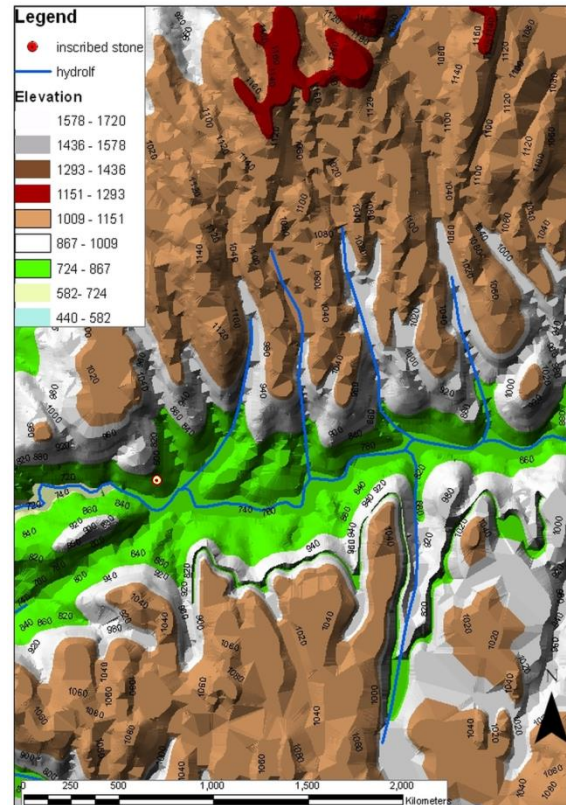


Figure 2 Map showing the topographic location of Umm Qraieh.

2. THE STONE

The semi-rectangular stone with irregular edges is made of sandstone (Fig. 3). Its length is about two and a half metres, its width is ca. one and a half metres and its height is about one metre.

3. THE DEPICTED MOTIFS

A variety of motifs are inscribed on the stone and none of them show consistency in terms of the orientation or even the size of the inscribed figures. Nevertheless, they erratically occupy the entire surface of the stone (Fig. 3).

The stone primarily depicts scenes of animals, mainly ibexes, and some inscriptions along with other things.



Figure 1 Umm Qraieh (the mother of reading).

3.1 Animal Motifs

The depiction of animals exists across each part of the stone. The ibex is repeatedly inscribed on the stone; however, the way by which this animal is depicted varies throughout the stone. In some places, the shape of the body is perfectly finished. In other cases, the horns are well carved while the body is elongated and little attention is given to the legs. In a few examples, the body of the ibex is simply a line. Generally speaking, more care is taken to the realistic drawing of the horns than the body or legs. The ibex is also depicted in different positions. Two ibexes are drawn in a fighting position; face to face. Some are posed in a grazing position while others are in stride or standing. Very few ibexes are surrounded by hunting dogs and hunters (Fig. 4). In terms of size, every single ibex is not as big as the other ibexes. One last important note concerning the ibex is the degree of patina. Many of the ibexes appear to have been carved onto the stone in a very early stage

whereas other ibexes are clearly from later phases.

3.2 Humans Motifs

Human figures are not common, but they appear in a few places where hunting of ibexes are depicted. It can be noted that these figures are naked and raising their hands upward.

3.3 Other Symbol Motifs

Several of the rock art motifs can be categorized as symbols. Among these there is a depiction of a human foot, a depiction of a key-like feature and other unknown symbols or letters (Fig. 4).



Figure 4 drawing of hunting scenes showing ibexes, dogs and human figures and other motifs, drawn by M. B. Tarawneh.

4. INSCRIPTIONS

Unfortunately, the area where the inscriptions were found has been weathered and most of the inscriptions are quite worn or completely effaced, making their decipherment difficult. Although seven inscriptions were recognized on the stone not all could be read because they are simply too worn to make out, although portions of some characters are visible. Only two inscriptions can be confidently deciphered. Four inscriptions can be safely identified as Thamudic; two of them cannot be deciphered, whereas the remaining inscriptions cannot be identified. The similar shape employed in these inscriptions suggests that they may have been engraved by the same scribes. The contents of the two texts are similar to other north Arabic inscriptions uncovered in the southern parts of

Jordan and the northern parts of Arabia. One of them is a memorial and the second is a prayer text. The two inscriptions belong to the north Arabic type (Thamudic E) which is commonly dated to the period between the first century BC and the third century AD¹.

4.1 Inscription 1 (Fig. 5a and 5b)

Reading

Lzdqm bn 'byn



Figure 5a photo of inscription 1.

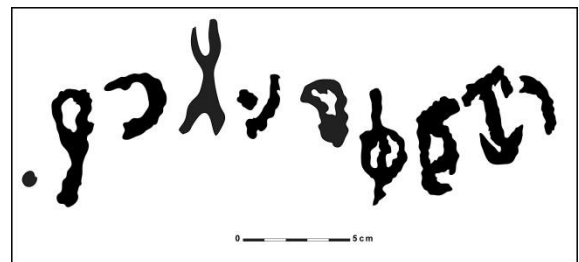


Figure 5b drawing of inscription 1.

Translation

By *Zdqm* son of *'byn*

Commentary

This inscription was crudely and carelessly engraved and is somewhat weathered. It is dedicated by *Zdqm* son of *'byn*. *Zdqm* is a common personal name in Pre-Islamic North Arabian inscriptions (Shatnawi 2003: 700) as well as in Nabataean inscriptions (Negev 1991: 26).

¹ For a discussion see al-Theeb 1999: the introduction

It appears in the discovered regional Greek inscriptions in the form Ζαιδοκιμαζ (Negev 1991: 26). The second personal name *'byn*, which may be vocalized as *'Ubaiyæn* (Winnett and Harding 1978: ns. 660, 1088), is derived from the Arabic root, bayyana and it either means “proud, scornful” or “Clearer, more eloquent” (Negev 1991: 9). This name is widely attested in Safaitic and Thamudic (Littmann 1943: 128; Harding 1971: 18), South Arabic (Hayajneh 1998: 67), Palmyrene (Stark 1971: 63) and Nabataean inscriptions (Negev 1991: 9).

4.2 Inscription 2 (Fig. 6a and 6b)

Reading

Ϸkr dār mry bn jr



Figure 6a photo of inscription 2.

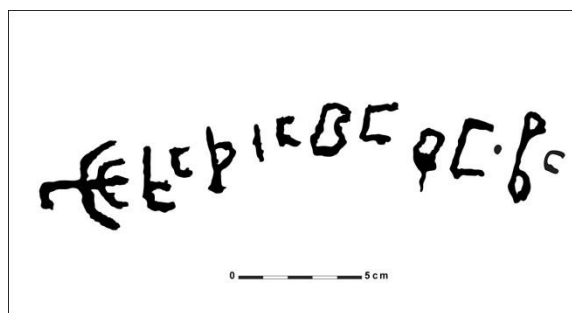


Figure 6b drawing of inscription 2.

Translation

May Dushara remember *Mry* son of *Jr*

Commentary

This inscription, which is dedicated by *Mry* son of *Jr*, was also carelessly engraved. The first word in the inscription is the verb ²*kr*, which is attested in north Arabic, Ara-

maic and other Semitic languages. It has two meanings "mention" and "remember". This verb is attested frequently in north Arabic inscriptions (King 1990: 684; Clark 1980: n. 1, 2, 3; Littmann 1943: n. 85). The verb is followed by the deity name Dushara. This god as well as other deities are beseeched in north Arabic inscriptions to remember the friends, companions and loved ones of the author, or to grant them peace and security (Corbett 2010:101). Remembrance and supplication of persons before gods and goddesses is a blessing act common to Semitic texts.

Dushara was the main deity worshipped by the Nabataeans. His name means “the one of the Shara mountains” (Healey 2001: 86-87) which are located not far away from Petra. His name is mentioned frequently in north Arabic and Nabataean inscriptions and was given many deific titles in the Nabataean writings: he was described as “Lord of the House “Temple”, “Lord of heaven and Earth”, “God of our lord (the king)” and “the one who separates night from day” (Zayadine 2003: 59).

Dushara is mentioned in the *Panarion* of Epiphanius of Salamis (c. 315-403) as being born to a virgin sun-goddess and this birth was celebrated at the winter solstice at Petra, Elusa and Alexandria (1994: 51). Dushara is described also in the *Souda* lexicon, which was compiled around the end of the tenth century based on earlier sources, as Theusares that is the god Ares at Petra in Arabia. “The god Ares is worshipped by them, for him they honour above all others. The image is a black stone, square and unshapen, four feet high by two feet broad. It is set on a base of wrought gold. To this they offer sacrifice and for it they pour forth the victims’ blood, that being their form of libation. The whole building abounds in gold and there are dedications galore” (Patrich 1990: 51).

The name Dushara is followed by the personal name *Mry* which may be vocalized as *Muraiy*. It appears in this form in North Arabic inscriptions (Winnett and Harding 1978: no. 510, 542; Harding 1971: 542) and also in Nabataean inscriptions (Negev

1991: 41). The second personal name in the text is *Jr*. This well-known north Arabian name may be vocalized as *Jær* or *Jýrr* and means "tyranny, injustice" (Littmann 1943: 305). It has been found elsewhere in north Arabian inscriptions (Winnett and Harding 1978: ns. 660, 1088; Corbett 2010: R 381. 21; R628.6; Harding 1971: 157).

5. DISCUSSION

Rock carvings in association with north Arabian inscriptions is a common occurrence in the desert of modern Jordan. Hundreds of rock-carving sites were recorded throughout the country particularly in the eastern, southeastern and southern deserts (Betts 1998). A considerable number of these sites reveal, beside the rock carvings, north Arabian inscriptions; Thamudic and Safaitic (Mahasneh and Gebel 2008: 41-46; Nabulsi 2008: 206). The former can be regularly found in the southern desert, namely in the Hisma area (al-Rousan 1992: 33-37) whereas the latter are commonly found in the northeastern desert (al-Rousan 1992: 209-214). Rock carvings in association with north Arabian inscriptions were also attested in other countries of the Middle East such as Saudi Arabia (Khan 2007), Syria and Palestine. However, very few sites of this type (rock carvings in association with inscriptions) were documented in the ancient urban centers of the above mentioned countries. It has been suggested by several scholars that this type of archaeology was produced by pastoral nomadic societies, and this may explain the intensive existence of rock carvings in primarily desert areas. In northern Jordan, north Arabian inscriptions were not reported from the cultural centers of the Decapolis like Jerash or Gadara while they were revealed at desert sites like Umm al-Rasas in central Jordan (Macdonald 1991: 423-428).

In southern Jordan, many north Arabian inscriptions (Thamudic) and rock carvings were found in the region of Hisma especially in Wadi Rum (al-Rousan 1992: 33-37; Drappeau and Zayadine 2004: 358-366). None were discovered in Petra, the later

urban capital of the Nabatean empire and arguably most important site in the region. The inscriptions recorded at Petra were primarily Nabataean, Greek and Latin. Thamudic inscriptions are very rare even in the vicinity of Petra. One inscription was reported from Fersh a few kilometers north of Petra (Beinert *et al.* 2000: 142). Abudanh (2006) also recorded an inscription in the area west of Ma'an and southeast Petra. In the 1980s, Killick (1987) documented about fifty inscriptions in the region of Udhruh. An inscription has been recently found on a block on the western side of the curtain wall of the Roman legionary fortress at Udhruh (authors' observation). No inscriptions of this type or rock carvings were discovered in the rocky area to the south of Petra before the discovery of Umm Qraieh.

The existence of such inscriptions in such area is very important as it may indicate the presence of the same pastoral nomadic society who was responsible for the production of thousands of inscriptions and rock carvings throughout the country. It may also point to the possibility that a certain type of script can be linked to a certain type of society. When the authors visited the site on March 2008 and 2009, they noticed the existence of Bedouin tents in the valley below the site. The Bedouins also utilized the natural caves and holes, which are available in the sand-stone rocks, to shelter their animals and to store their possessions when they migrate to other places during the winter months. Umm Qraieh overlooks a wadi running east-west called Wadi Tajrah (Fig. 2). The wadi itself appears to have been a natural corridor linking the eastern highlands with the Wadi Araba lowlands. At the bottom of the same valley there is a spring and traffic is naturally blocked, therefore, a footpath was constructed above the spring to give access to Wadi Araba. Rock-cut steps were also seen throughout a natural gorge running north-south and leading to a rock-cut cistern called al-Qattar. The Bedouins use Wadi Tajrah to easily move down to Wadi Araba or return to the highlands.

Seasonal grazing is also available in the valley and over the slopes. The terrain is quite hard; therefore, the Bedouins prefer to breed goats rather than sheep. The authors believe that the same situation use to exist in the valley for hundreds if not thousands of years. In 2009, the authors found two Bedouin tents near the rock-cut cistern and one tent in the valley. The local people, especially the elders at the modern village of al-Rajif, ca. five kilometers to the east of the site, are still familiar with the area and know the location of the stone. Modern Arabic names are also depicted on the stone itself and bear witness that the stone is well known to the Bedouins, especially the shepherds. The names of modern shepherds were engraved on the sides of the stone since there is no space on its surface to accommodate more writings. No attempts were made to write or engrave on the other stones although they are of the same type; sand stones. The stone was obviously detached from the nearby rocks due to natural factors and stood where it is. Its surface is almost flat and can be easily engraved. The shepherds can also relax and may have a nap on its surface. These factors collectively appear to have attracted shepherds in ancient and modern times to this location.

No datable materials were found at the site and the inscriptions cannot help in this respect since there is not a firm chronology to date the Thamudic inscriptions. However, despite the difficulty in dating this type of inscription, there have been some scholarly attempts to classify them according to the letters' shapes. One of the earliest attempts was made by Winnett (1937: 50-54) who categorized the Thamudic inscriptions into five groups. Winnett also proposed a time period for each group. Group A dated back to the fifth century BC, group B between the third and first centuries BC, group C to the first or second century AD, group D to the first or second century AD and group E to the fourth or fifth century AD.

The rock carvings cannot also be, generally speaking, dated to a certain time peri-

od. They could belong to prehistoric or even historic times. Anati (1999: 33) concludes that prehistoric rock carvings reflect "a well structures conceptual context" while the rock carvings from the first millennium AD were made to "wile a way the time". The majority of rock carvings are not associated with stratified and datable materials. In some areas, however, rock carvings were found in association with stratified materials. Alison Betts for instance found rock carvings "incorporated into Neolithic structures and sealed layers of ash and sand containing large quantities of Neolithic occupation debris" at a site called Dhuweila in eastern Jordan (Betts 1987: 214). Radio carbon dating evidence dated the materials at the site to the end of the seventh millennium B.C (Betts 1987: 214).

Elsewhere, Anati (1999: 25) through the huge number of rock carvings he found in the Negev, usually in association with other archaeological features, managed to establish a sequence of styles on the basis of the "superimpositions and the differences in the shades of patina" and the content of the rock carvings. He then linked each style to a time period and subsequently four periods of styles were identified in the Negev (Anati 1999: 25-28). The style of Period I was seen to be contemporary of the Neolithic age, the style of period II implausibly dates to the period between the seventh and the fourth millennium B.C and the style of period III dates to the fifth and to the fourth millennia B.C (Anati 1999: 25-27). The style of period IV incorporated sub-periods and spans from the fourth millennium B.C to the end of the first millennium B.C/beginning of the first millennium AD (Anati 1999: 27-29). The styles of the periods from V to VII range from the first century AD to the Islamic period (Anati 1999: 29). Anati based his stylistic classification on a significant amount of data collected from the Negev. The accumulated data comprised 200 sites with over 40,000 images of rock carvings (Anati 1999: 22). Although the data enable a stylistic categorization, the chronology to which each style is linked might be questionable.

Other scholars have criticized Anati's hypotheses. Achrafi (2006) for instance described Anati's view as outdated and opportunistic.

In Saudi Arabia, Khan (2007: 341-342) described the chronology he suggested for the rock art as 'tentative and relative'. His chronology is based on the style of human and animal figures and the earliest phase of his chronology goes back to the Neolithic age. He also explained the change in the depicted animal figures throughout the different periods as a result of climatic changes. The proposed climatic changes led to the domestication of new animals such as camels and consequently their existence in the rock art became quite frequent (2007: 341). In this respect, Betts (1987: 214) argues that the stylistic criteria can be applied if datable materials are not existent but truly pointed to the fact that where styles can be recognized "no dated parallels exist with which they might be equated".

The rock art of "the mother of reading" Umm Qraieh clearly exhibits different styles of patina; four at least can be recognized. The styles of patina may reflect a chronological distinction but the degree of patina is not the same over the entirety of the stone. Certain parts of the stone, on which the carvings were made, appear to have unequally responded to the weathering factors. Consequently some of the scenes may look older despite the possibility of being made at the same time like other scenes. Nevertheless, it should be stressed that there is a clear stylistic variation of the patina on the stone. The presence of north Arabian inscriptions on the same stone suggests that some of the carvings were made during historical periods; the first millennia B.C and AD. But the difficulty becomes determining which scenes are contemporary with the inscriptions since carvings covering almost the entire surface of the stone.

The recent carvings on the sides of the stone were dated; one is dated to 31. 12. 1996 and the other is dated to 22. 12. 2002. Both carvings were made during December

and this confirms that the area is a wintering place for the Bedouins in the period between October and March. In fact, certain tribes are familiar with that region whereas the majority of the Bedouins winter in the eastern desert. The Bedouins who live in the valleys in the vicinity of "the mother of reading" stone do not travel too far eastward. In the summer, they go further up east to avoid the intolerable heat. Therefore, it is not impossible that the ancient people had the same behavior. A close investigation to the surface of the stone clearly reveals that the later engravers respected the work of their predecessors. There is no attempt to overlap or to deface the existing carvings. Many of the carvings predate the inscriptions and the latter were engraved where there was space between the carvings. The fact that Umm Qraieh "the mother of reading" is the only stone with rock carvings in the area may indicate that the stone had social and religious value throughout time. This in fact may explain why there was no attempt to deface and to overlap the carvings and its existence in the memory of the people, especially the elders.

One of the many carvings on the surface of the stone is a human foot print. Footprints according to Anati (1999: 32) indicate devotion. In Saudi Arabia, foot prints were found in different places. Khan (2007: 221) noticed that foot prints in many cases were found in association with temples, idols and deities and this may suggest religious value. Meanwhile, foot prints were also found alone in association with no signs or motifs, which Khan (2007: 221) suspects to be memorial signs in this case. The foot print carvings, however, could not be linked to a certain time period despite their wide distribution and Khan (2007: 221) concludes that "it is almost impossible to imply any specific meaning to the foot prints in Arabian rock art".

6. CONCLUSIONS

The discovery of Umm Qraieh is significant since the presence of north Arabian

inscriptions, particularly the Thamudic, is quite rare in the vicinity of Petra. The rock art on the stone confirms the link between the existence of such art and writings and the lifestyle of the semi-sedentary groups who made this art. The area where Umm Qraieh exists allows seasonal grazing and offers camping for nomadic groups from prehistoric to present times. The stone itself appears to have probably gained social and religious value as it is the only inscribed stone and no rock art was noticed on other stones in the area. However, this could be

simply due to the nature of the stone which has a flat surface and enough space to accommodate more drawings. The stone, undoubtedly exhibits drawings and writings from different periods, but there is an obvious technical difficulty to designate each set of drawings or any of the inscriptions to a certain time of period. The fact that the stone is called Umm Qraieh (the mother of Reading) not Umm Ketabeh (the mother of Writing) among the local community in the village of Al-Rajif requires further research.

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