

Nabataean Rock Paintings at Higrā (Mada'in Salih) Flower Vase Painting of Jabal Ethlib

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Abstract: *This paper deals with interpreting a newly discovered vase painting on the façade of a Nabataean grave at Al-Higr - Madain Salih. The present study particularly discusses this kind of painting through the Nabataean art, the painting material, the relation of flower painting to the ceremonies of death, and finally the rock painted art in Saudi Arabia.*

Keywords: *Al-Higr (Higra), Flowers and Ceremonies of Death, Flower in Nabataean Art, Madain Salih, Nabataean Art, Nabataean Paintings, Painting Material, Painted Art in Saudi Arabia.*

Introduction

During the eighth excavation season (2010) of the Faculty of Tourism⁽¹⁾ and Archaeology at the site of Dadan⁽²⁾ in Al-Ula governorate in the northwestern area of Saudi Arabia, the researchers had the chance to look at different known and unknown archaeological sites of the Al-Ula governorate (Fig.1).

During short excursions to the surrounding area guided by some old people of the area⁽³⁾, we had the chance to visit the Nabataean site of Higrā (Madain Salih). The Site is well surveyed and studied by many scholars and missions, yet there remains much of this magnificent site to be discovered. The discovery of the vase painting is only a case in point. This monument is known to the people of the site as the vase of Jebal Ethlib. As one reaches the location of the painting and at the first sight, one cannot help but feel that he/she is in front of a very exceptional and magnificent piece of antique art. This is really true, because this kind of paintings is not to be found in the area, and not even surveyed or published before. This piece of art consists of a flower vase painting (Fig. 2).

The first look at the painting brings back to mind the famous paintings like the sun flower of Van Gogh and Gauguin (Fig. 3).

Location of the Painting

The painting was drawn on the uppermost façade of the Nabataea tomb Nr. 5 according to Jaussin and Savignac⁽⁴⁾ and H 3 according to J. F. Healey⁽⁵⁾ and IGN 11 (fig. 5-6)⁽⁶⁾ through the recent numbering of the French and Saudi archaeological mission at the site. One can reach the monument through the steps incised on the rock to the right side of the tomb and lead to the top of the mountain that hosts the Nabataea tombs at its bottom (Fig 4-5). The vase was drawn at the north-western part of the mountain exactly above the tomb Nr. 11 on a well prepared (perhaps by the artist himself) smooth and plane surface of the rock, (Fig. 2).

Description of the tomb

The Tomb underneath of the vase painting has been executed with great skill, as the case with the majority of other tombs of the site. It is one of the best preserved tomb façades at the site. The façade is rectangular decorated with crow steps rising up from the central point. Directly



Fig. 1. Map of the Nabataean Kingdom Showing the site of Hagra at the Southern Area of the Kingdom (Nehme – al-Talhi - Villeneuve, 2010: p.12, fig.1).



Fig. 2. Flower Vase Painting of Jebal Ethlib.



Fig. 3. Sun flower - Van Gogh ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sunflowers_\(Van_Gogh_series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sunflowers_(Van_Gogh_series))) and Gauguin (<https://niglip.com/2014/04/22/national-gallery-sunflowers>)

underneath lies a cornice with three architraves that rest on two columns with classical Nabataean capitals. The portal provides the entrance to the tomb and is engraved in the center of the façade. Two double columns with Nabataean capital embrace the entrance. The

architrave was engraved above the doorway and the frieze on top decorated with triglyph and six rosettes. The frieze is crowned by triangular pediment with two jars on both sides and a very fine eagle sculpture on its top. Above the head of the eagle, which is destroyed, in the center of the façade, engraved a Nabataean inscription of ten lines. (Fig.6). The inscription clearly dated the tomb to the month(s) of April to May A.D 31-32 of the King Haretat the fourth. The inscription reads as follows:

This is the tomb which Husayku son of Humaydu made for himself and his children and for Guzay'at and Salamu, his sisters, daughters of Humaydu, and for their children. And no-one has the right to write for this tomb any deed of entitlement or to bury in it any non-relative – other than by hereditary title.

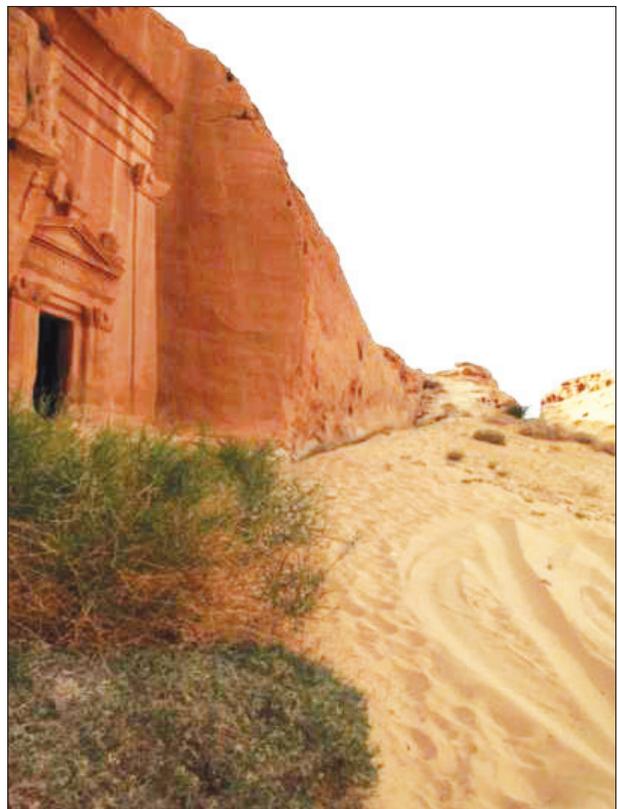


Fig. 4. (Tomb IGN 11), The step leads to the location of the vase and the façade of the tomb (Photo by Authors)



Fig. 5. Facade of the Tomb (Photo by Authors).

And whoever does other than this will have no valid portion. In the month of Iyyar, the fortieth year of Haretat⁽⁷⁾, King of the Nabataeans, lover of his people. Ruma and `Abd`obodat, the masons⁽⁸⁾.

This indeed makes it difficult to relate the exact date of the tomb to that of the vase

painting, but there should be a scientific method to be applied to date the rock drawings. Generally rock art can be dated through the descriptive, comparative and ethnographic analysis. The nearby archaeological remains and the spatial analysis help also date such material. All these mentioned factors indicate that the vase drawing is of a Nabataean origin,

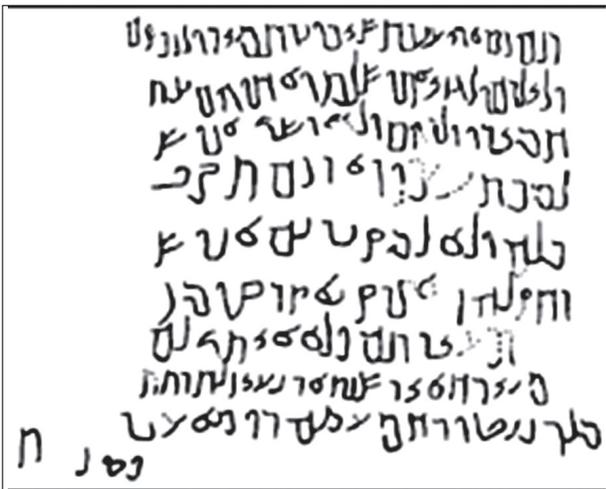


Fig. 6. Inscription of the Tomb (Guide to Al-Higr, 5).

but chronometric techniques or C14 method should be applied to get an absolute or relative dating for such remains. Discovering more paintings will surely encourage researchers to apply new scientific methods, if possible.

It is clear that various Nabataean arts can be found at the area of Jebal Ethlib at the north-western area of the site. The area of the Jebel is considered to be the cultic area where there are many rock-cut monuments such as the banqueting hall called Al-Diwan, cistern, niches and betyls, alters and basins. Several inscriptions that give the names of the deities of the Nabataean are also presented at the site. The French and Saudi team explored the area in 2008 and excavated also three wall structures built of sandstone blocks that clearly functioned as some open-air triclinia⁽⁹⁾. This discovery gives a particular importance to the religious practices (symposia) of the Nabataeans.

Description of the Vase

The Painting was drawn in dark reddish color that appears clearly after pouring the water on its surfaces (Fig. 2). Without pouring the water, the painting is hard to be distinguished, as its color is almost identical with that of the rock

itself. It measures 100 cm height, from the base of the pot to its upper part, and almost 100 cm in width. The vase is of a cuneiform shape that starts narrowing at the bottom and gets wider towards the top. The plant rises from the middle of the vase and expands up and down to the both sides of the vase in a symmetrical way. The lowest level of the flowers reaches almost to the lower edge of the vase, but the right side seems to be slightly higher than the left one and even the size of the left flower is somehow bigger than those of the right one. It consists of seven flowers of chamomile plants: a central one surrounded by three others on each side. The flower itself consists of ten petals: one is completely filled with color followed by the next one with only colored border to show the contrast between dark and light; the stalks and the leaves are identically filled with paintings.

The Material of the painting

Through interviews, the alive craftsmen of Al-Ula explained how they prepare the colored material that they used to decorate their traditional houses in the site of Al-Derah (Traditional Al-Ula). This used material looks apparently similar to the one used in the drawing of the vase. Iron oxide, the main part of the raw material, is first brought from the nearby mountains of the area. Then the craftsmen grind this material with mortars, and after that they pour the goat milk to it and leave it for some days to produce the reddish color. The mixture can be also boiled as the case was in the southern region of Saudi Arabia, particularly the in the experience of craftsmen of Tehamat Bani Gahtan⁽¹⁰⁾. The main color of the oxide affects the produced material; it can be dark to light reddish. The mixture gains its properties, which last for a long time, from the milk of goats, which gives the painted areas a

plastic surface that works as protection against weathering, particularly humidity and sunlight. It is very important to mention that the ground material of the paintings (the sand stone) absorbs the paint material, which is itself originally extracted from the sand stone; this explains the long survival of painted monuments, but its vanishing through bad weathering is surely unavoidable. This produced colored material is appropriate to dry areas as is the case in the inner lands of the Arabian Peninsula.

It is also essential to mention that the color that appears on the Nabataean pottery is identical to that of the discovered vase⁽¹¹⁾. Nabataean potters used such methods to produce such material to decorate their vessels (see as an example Fig. 7). This may emphasize why the authors date the vase to the Nabataean Era.

Using the iron oxide as a main mixture of the painting material was common since Palaeolithic ages⁽¹²⁾; it was used also as a pottery surface painting since the pottery Neolithic period and continued to be used in the following periods. It is also well known that animal fat, mixed with earth and charcoal, was used in cave painting. Mixing animal fat with iron dioxide was also common in rock paintings by the end of the so called Aurignacian art (40.000 – 25.000 BCE) and is still in use in traditional art⁽¹³⁾.

Art of the flower

Chamomile plants (fig. Nr. 8) widely grow in sandy soiled areas, mainly after rainy weather⁽¹⁴⁾. The people of Al-Ula used to be so optimistic to see this plant cover the landscape there. They get many benefits from it⁽¹⁵⁾. Among other things, they used it for medicinal purposes⁽¹⁶⁾, and it gives a favorable taste to the fresh milk as well. The chamomile flower is the most common of all rare plants there. This may explain its use as



Fig. 7. Nabataean Bowl decorated with floral and geometrical motifs from 20-70 A.D. (Gorgerat (2012) Abb.4, 277).

a decorative motif on the produced art material. The use of this plant during Nabataean death ceremonies as offerings is not to be excluded; therefore, it appears as a floral motif in engraved monuments and painted objects.

Rosette in Ancient Civilization

Almost in all dictionaries⁽¹⁷⁾, flowers are defined as the symbol of perfection, beauty, and love. Rosette was commonly used in antiquity. It was used as a decorative motif in the arts of the ancient world (the Mesopotamian and Egyptian arts). It also appeared frequently on ceramic vessels of all periods (particularly those of the Greek). It was common as an ornamental motif in architecture, metal works, textiles, mosaic, sarcophagi, and almost in all art products of the past⁽¹⁸⁾.

In antiquity flowers (especially chamomile) had been the most common motif in architecture. They appeared, for example, as the dominant



Fig. 8. Chamomile Flowers grow in the site and the surroundings (Photo by Authors)

decorative feature on the panels adorning Ishtar gate (Fig. 8) from the sixth century B.C (575 B.C.)⁽¹⁹⁾.

Another good example appeared on an exhibited piece in Sanna Museum from the Himyarite art.

Roses were of a significant meaning in Greece. They were associated with death and appeared in Greece funerary steles as well, mostly on epitaphs of girls⁽²⁰⁾.

In the Roman Empire there was a common festival of roses; it normally started in May and lasted till July. This festival was called Rosalia or Rosaria or the dies violae. In this festival flowers were placed at burial sites. For the Romans, this practice was one of the most important religious traditions to show their care for the dead⁽²¹⁾.

The decorating elements of the traditional houses at the ancient site of Al-Ula provide many

examples suggesting that the coloring material used in the case of the vase painting was widely used in decorating the walls of houses. Plants like palm trees, flowers and geometrical motifs were commonly present as well.

Analysis

Rock arts are common features in Saudi Arabia that started to appear since the Paleolithic period⁽²²⁾. Although its presence is not confined to any particular region; and is found almost all over the country, rock art major concentration appears the in the northwestern part of the country, especially in Al-Ula region. In this area, it is scattered on mountains, hills, sandstones and everywhere else. The consistency of subjects and contents shown in rock art in the area testify to the important roles it played in the social, cultural and religious lives and human interests of the inhabitants of the land⁽²³⁾.

The incised rock art is the most common among the archaeological records of the area. Human and animal figures like camel, deer, gazelle, Oryx, sheep, goat and lion are the most to be found through the assemblages known to scholars. On the other hand, rock paintings are



Fig. 9. Panel of Ishtar Gate, Pergamon Museum zu Berlin (Photo by Authors)

rare in the rock art known in Saudi Arabia today. A probable reason may be attributed to the disappearance of colors owing to weathering, erosion, and the extreme difference between day and night temperatures. Nevertheless, some examples are known from Jebal al-Lawz in Tabuk area in the north-western region and from al-Makhwa in south-western part. Other examples are known from Al-Kharj to the south-west of Al-Riyadh and from Al-Baha (Fig. 10) in the southern region⁽²⁴⁾.

The most common feature of the Nabataean art is the magnificent art of highly skilled and advanced tomb sculpturing carved on sandstone hills found in Madain Salih.

Earlier, façades artistically well executed raised the question of whether or not artists added nothing (colors and/or stuccos) to the outside surface of their finished work. Recent scientific testing methods appear to have settled the issue. Applied to test the possibility of the presence of colors, these methods proved that tomb façades and some plain architecture were partly painted (Fig. 11)⁽²⁵⁾.

Rock paintings are not common features in the landscape of the Nabataean Kingdom. On the other hand, they are more common on stucco covering the walls of the tombs and triclinia of the Nabataeans. The best example to mention in this case is that of the magnificent drawings of Al-Siq Al-Bared in Petra (fig 12).

These paintings, discovered some time ago, had been very difficult to see because they had been obscured by soot, smoke and other such things that accumulate over centuries. Now, thanks to the expertise of conservation specialists (from the London Courtauld Institute of Art), these paintings are brought back to their



Fig 10. Painted drawing from Baha region (Khan, 2007: 99).



Fig. 11. Reconstruction of the painted façade of grave Br. 826 in Petra (M. Shaer, in Petra 2013: Abb. 4, 245).

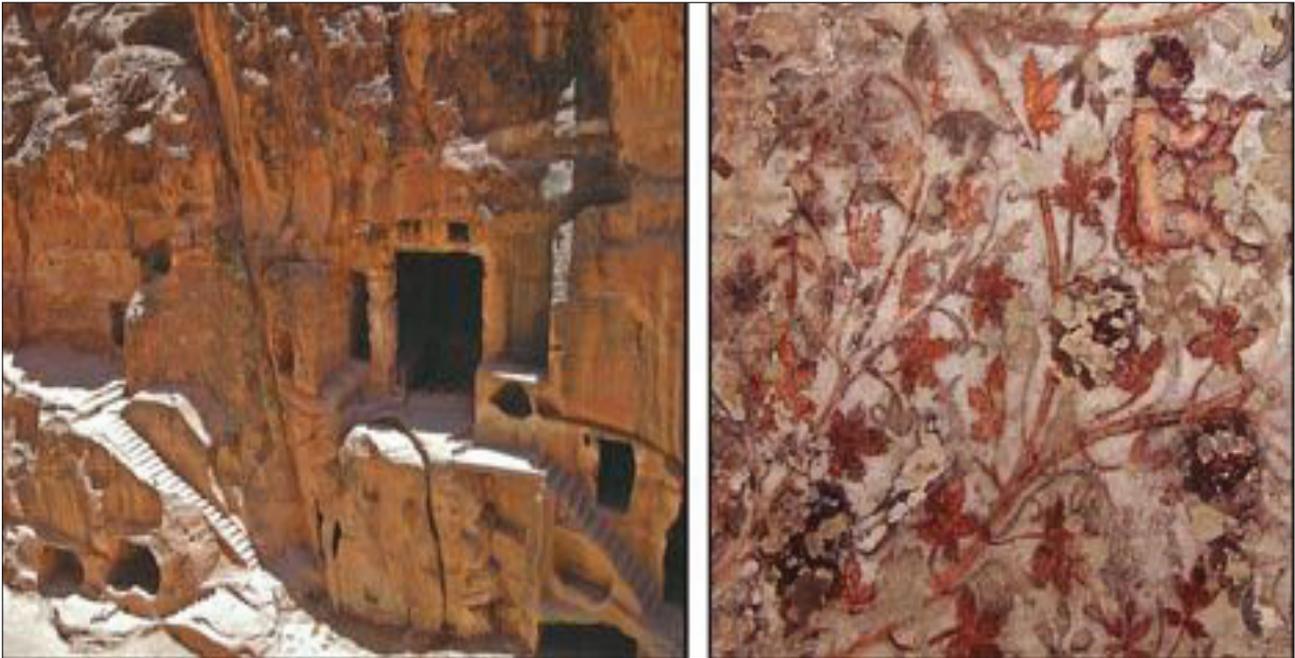


Fig. 12. Al-Siqe Al-Barid (Petra) Trichlinia flute player drawings (Guzzo –Schneider, 1997: 135).

full colorful glory.

Excavations in the rock-housing in Petra's city center show also that the walls were decorated with niches, ripped columns and pillars. These decorated elements were covered with stock decoration of a polychrome drawings of geometrical and floral motifs⁽²⁶⁾.

The use of the rosette in Nabataean arts was not uncommon. It appears as an engraved element on most of Nabataean façades in Madain Salih and elsewhere in the land of the Nabataean Kingdom.

Also common is the use of the flower motif in decorating the Nabataean art products as it appears on engraved stones. The best example which is almost identical to ours is the sculpture of Atargatis of Khirbet Al-Tannur and the sculpture of the star-symbol twin of Khirbet ed-Dharih, where the flower appears clearly engraved on the chest of the right twin (fig. 13)⁽²⁷⁾.

In the area of Jebal Ethlib, the authors



Fig.13. Star-symbol twin from Kirbet ed-Dharih, Bessac (2012) Abb. 6, 216.

also found some painted areas with the same technology used to produce the example we are dealing with, but the drawn motif is not easy to discern (Fig 14).

Conclusin

To conclude, we can say that the vase drawing is of Nabataean origin. Moreover, Nabataeans decorated, at least, some parts of the outer and inner walls of their sacral and profane architectures, but the used material vanished with time and the influence of weathering. More chemical analyses of the drawing material will give better dating of such drawings.



Fig 14: Painted drawing (vase) from Jebal Ethlib, Photo by Authors.

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ملخص: يركز هذا البحث على دراسة اكتشاف أثري مهم وتحليله، وهو رسم لمزهريّة على واجهة أحد القبور النبطية في موقع الحجر - مدائن صالح. يستعرض البحث هذا النوع من الرسومات كواحد من فنون الحضارة النبطية، كما يقدم دراسة للمادة التي استخدمت في رسم المزهريّة، التي كانت شائعة حتماً في الفن النبطي، كما يقدم البحث دراسة لعلاقة الرسوم بالفن الجنائزي. ويتطرق البحث كذلك للرسومات المماثلة في المملكة العربية السعودية، بشكل عام.

Notes

- (1) We would like to express our thanks to all members of the College of Tourism and Archaeology and especially to the Department of Archaeology and to the Research Center at the Faculty of Tourism and Archaeology at King Saud University for supporting, helping, giving us the chance to lead the field archaeological works at Al-Ula governorate. Our great thanks also go to the members of the Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities represented by his Royal Highness Prince Sultan Bin Salman Bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, the General President, for granting permission to publish this piece of art which gives more historical and artistic significance to the site of Al-Higr – Madain Salih.
- (2) For more excavations at the site, see Al Saeed and Al-Ghazzi (eds.), 2014; Book published in Arabic about the results of the seven seasons (2004 – 2010) of excavations at the site. See also, Al-Said, in Roads of Arabia (2010) p 252 ff; Abu Al-hasan, in Roads of Arabia (2010) p 260 ff.
- (3) We are greatly thankful to Shaikh Hazza' Al-Faqeer, who led us to the monument. Al-Faqeer informed us that he knew about the drawing from his grandfathers, and he led us there as he knew about our interest in studying the history of the region.
- (4) Jaussin and Savignac, 2007, Grave Nr. 5.
- (5) Healey, 1993, 86-95
- (6) Guide to Al-Higr, 2010, IGN 11.
- (7) This year of the King Haretat corresponds to the month(s) of April to May A.D 31-32.
- (8) Healey (ibid) 86.

- (9) For details about the excavation at the area, see L. Nehme (2010) in: First Excavation Season at Mada'in Salih (eds.: L. Nehme, D. Al-Talhi and F. Villeneuve): 265-286.
- (10) This was experienced through an anthropological study by Al-Aboudi (Author) in the region.
- (11) About the Nabataean Pottery and its technique, see Gorgerat (2012), 274-279
- (12) For more about using the colored material in prehistory, see <http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/artist-paints/prehistoric-colour-palette.htm>
- (13) Aurignacian Art describes the early phase of upper Paleolithic period in Europe. For more on the art of this period, see A-Z (Aurignacian Art) of Prehistoric Art, in: <http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/prehistoric/aurignacian-art.htm>.
- (14) This plant grown everywhere in Saudi Arabia, see i. g. Migahid (1989), 247–253, Plate 256; Migahid and Hammouida (1974), 346; Zoght and Al Alsheeks (1999) 90 - 91.
- (15) For the benefits of this plant see: Das (2015).
- (16) About the use of this plant see, Das (2015).
- (17) see under the German term “Blume” (flower), in: Heinz-Mohr, (1984), p. 54; *ibid.* under the term “Rose”, p. 248.
- (18) Ovadia, A. (1980), Geometric and Floral Patterns in the Ancient Mosaics: 176-177, see also the table pp. 177-181 that includes the most common uses of the rosette in ancient art; F. S. Meyer (1898), Handbook of Ornament.
- (19) About Ishtar gate, see Matson (1985).
- (20) Note that the Nabataean Grave (IGN-11) was used for the sisters and daughters of Husayku son of Humaydu. This might show the Greek influence of this tradition on the Nabataean world.
- (21) See Toohey, (2010), 366-367; Vissova, (1979): 1457.
- (22) There are a lot of studies about the rock art in Saudi Arabia, e.g. see: Abdul Nayeem, (2000); M. Anati, (1968 – 1974); Healey, (1993); Horsfield – H. Angnes – N. Glueck, (1983).
- (23) M. Khan, (2007): 9-10.
- (24) See Khan (2007): 92.
- (25) See details in M. Shaer, in: Petra, 2012, 244-247; see also a dissertation about the decoration of the architecture surfaces at Petra by M. Shaer, (2005).
- (26) More about this subject, see, Guzzo –Schneider 1997: 134-136.
- (27) Details about this sculpture see, Bessac (2012) 216-217).

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