

Rock Art Scenes from Wadi Fida, Oman

Ali Tigani EIMahi

Abstract: Wadi Fida is located in the northern parts of the Sultanate of Oman. This valley region is known to be bountiful throughout the year. Notably, on the wadi's bank, there is a conspicuous rock formation (a partial rock shelter), which contains rock scenes. This paper examines these rock scenes, which include men riding horses with long spears, a wolf chasing livestock and a six-pointed star depicted on the surface of the rocks outside the rock shelter. The paper scrutinizes the rock images of the horses and the stars and their significance in Arabia. Both are discussed with reference to the traditional pastoral groups and the oasis residents in Oman.

Keywords: Rock Art, Wadi Fida, Dhank Governorate, Oman.

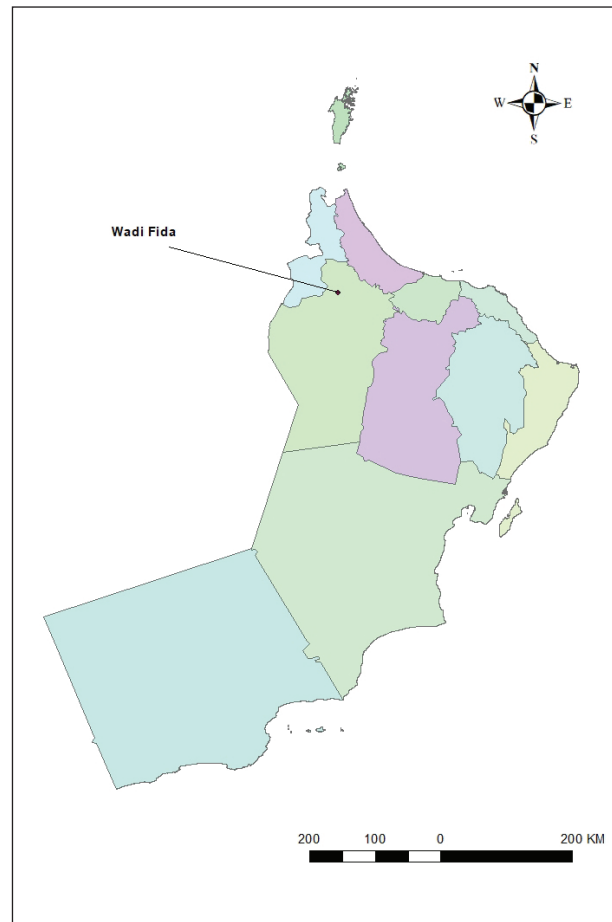
«Art is meant to disturb, science reassures».

Le Jour et la nuit: Cahiers 1917-52

Introduction

In ancient times, man portrayed depictions on the rocks surface in rock shelters, and various rock formations. These drawings are visual representation of persons, animals, scenes of actions or activities and symbols produced on rock surfaces. Leroi-Gourhan (1997:37) states that man started to do rock drawing as early as ca. 30000 BC. Around that early time, prehistoric groups were more dependent on random foraging of animals and plants, which was governed by or dependent on chance. At a later stage, hunting with specific tools became the main means of economy for these groups.

This paper examines the rock scenes in a rock formation (partially rock shelter) in Wadi Fida in the northern parts of the Sultanate of Oman (Map 1). In some prior time, the inhabitants around Wadi Fida fashioned drawings of various figures inside this partially rock shelter structure and outside in the open.



Map 1: The Sultanate of Oman.

At present, the inhabitants in the wadi's area reportedly state that these are ancient depictions and drawings made by early people who lived in the vicinity of the wadi. However, it would be useful to particularly explore Wadi Fida with its rock art and the rock art in Oman in general before examining the rock scenes of Wadi Fida.

Wadi Fida

Wadi Fida is a renowned wadi in Dhank Governorate, Sultanate of Oman (Map 1). It is about 380 km North of Muscat. The wadi is large and bountiful throughout the year. The wadi's inhabitants claim that it was named by the early Arabs migration led by Malik bin Faham in the beginning of 1009 AD. At present, the population in Wadi Fida do not exceed three thousand and the inhabitants are mainly engaged in agriculture (cf. <https://u097496.wordpress.com/2013/12/06/wadi-fida-2/>). This wadi contains water all year round and there are villages on both banks of the wadi.

Rock art

Being a territorial species, mankind must have observed and maintained a territory in all his activities. Therefore, territoriality must have been the ecological custodian of his economy and existence. Accordingly, prehistoric artists conducted drawings within the territory of their group. Principally, one of the objectives of the drawing was to indicate and draw attention to the presence of the artist group in that specific locality. In other words, one of the objectives of drawing in prehistoric times was to specify and designate the existence of a group in a certain territory. Hence, rock art can be very much associated with territoriality.

Thereof, in all phases of man's economic development rock art was conducted and present. Unequivocally, man's imagination and ingenuity has developed this skilled and

perceptive art before settling down or making pottery or farming and domesticating animals. In view of the foregoing, prehistoric rock art is a fine cerebral technical and artistic proficiency and not an archaic visual representation without any significance or thought or conceptions. In fact, it is not only an ancient intellectual expression of technical expertise and aesthetics, but also a significant source of information about the past.

Additionally, it is necessary to point out that prehistoric groups left behind material remains of two categories. The first, are pottery, tools, animal bones, etc. which they did not intend to leave behind, and the second are the graves and rock scenes, which were left behind as they simply cannot be carried or moved. The first category of these material remains had served its purpose and use, while the items of the second one were made to be left behind for others to see and for any cultural belief held by the artist and the associated group. In a sense, rock scenes are manifestations and imitations of their identity, culture, beliefs, economy and history. Indeed, it is a manifest of their existence, presence and nature, which is clearly revealed to the mind and perceptions.

As for the rock art in the Sultanate of Oman, it is rich and broadly distributed over a wide geographical range in the country. Pecking and painting are the principal techniques of rock art in Oman while engraving seems to constitute a minor part in the rock art in the country.

In Oman, the age of the rock art scenes is attributed to different prehistoric periods extending from the Stone Age and after. Therefore, the chronology of this ancient art consists of several major phases in the prehistory of Oman.

It is possible to assume that rock art can prove a record of prehistoric groups in

which they positioned and documented their experience, perception and cognitive vision. It is a reflection of prehistoric groups' power of creative imagination and ingenuity.

Significantly, rock art is the oldest means of storing information through the art of images and colours. When compared with other resources of archaeology, it proves to be inclusive since it encompasses and displays economic, social, spiritual and artistic interactions of prehistoric groups. Therefore, rock art can possibly be an inference of reasoning in drawing a conclusion and making a logical judgment on the basis of images depicted on the rocks (cf. Smith 1968, ElMahi 2000 & 2001, Fossati 2017 & 2019 and Degli Esposti et al. 2020).

Furthermore, rock art can contribute to the progress and growth of our knowledge and be more informative than archaeological items such as tools, pottery, bone material and architectural features. It sometimes offers the most unexpected data about palaeoecological conditions, interactions between man and the environment, subsistence practices, tools, hair style as well as ritual and magic-religious ceremonies.

Nonetheless, although rock art can be a useful informative source of information, there is a need for a reliable dating method. Up to the present, there is no method that can confirm an absolute date for rock art. The only available means for dating rock art is entirely dependent on relative dating. In archaeological investigations, relative dating is not dating, it is rather the comparative order of archaeological items. The archaeological items are compared to determine the relative order (age) of each item to the other and not to assess their absolute age (cf. ElMahi 2001, 2010, Bednarik 2010, Rowe 212, Steelman 2012, الماحي 1997، الماحي 2010، الماحي 2001).



Fig. 1: The rock formation (a partially rock shelter) along Wadi Fida.



Fig. 2: The partial rock shelter rock formation along Wadi Fida

Moreover, another limitation in studying rock art is the fact that the investigator does not know for certain whether the rock drawings represent the actual scenes around the prehistoric artists or they were merely dictated by their memory or imagination. Nonetheless, rock art remains to be an indispensable source of information in investigating and understanding prehistory. In essence, this ancient art is an entry to prehistory.

Rock scenes in Wadi Fida

On the wadi's bank there is evidence of weathering and erosion (Fig. 1). The rock formation is an isolated surface rock outcrop (Fig. 2).

In this partial rock shelter, there are few



Fig. 3: A rock scene of two men on horses with spears



Fig. 4: Rock scenes in the rock shelter.



Fig.5: A drawing of a wolf after some livestock.



Fig. 6: Rock scenes in the rock shelter.

rock scenes. All the scenes are done by drawing using two colours brown-reddish, white and dark brown. The scenes are all presented in the following:

Fig. 3: The well-defined and explicit scene comes in the drawing of two men riding horses. Each rider holds a long spear.

Fig. 4: In this scene, the drawing is not clear. There is a scene of a man with a horse and three other figures, which can possibly be horses or goats. These figures are drawn in white, while a fourth figure of a horse is in brown-reddish. There are also other unclear figures and shapes some of which might be men. These drawings are not clearly defined or easy to perceive or understand.

Fig. 5: This scene contains the drawing of three figures. It is possible that one of the figures is a wolf behind two animals, which can possibly be livestock (two cows).

Fig.6: This scene contains figures which are not well-defined and ambiguous. Unfortunately, the whole graphic representation of a visual percept is of uncertain nature and significance. Therefore, these figures do not allow any comprehensive evaluation or assessment of the figures and shapes in the whole scene in figures 6.

Fig.7: Outside the partial rock shelter and within its locale, there is a figure of a man or a woman. The ancient artist illustrated this figure on the rock by the action of pecking. The figure seems to have been made by repeated strikes.

Fig. 8: This figure lies just below Fig. 7. It is an image of a star with a noticeable circular shape in the center. The whole illustration is made by strikes on the surface of the rock. Pecking the rock surface here produces the white-coloured lines of both figures.

Fig.9: This figure lies within the same

vicinity of figures 6 and 7. Figure 9 is not coherent, but it can possibly be of a man or a woman. Again, it is made by pecking the rock, which made the white-coloured lines of the figure.

Discussion

Reading rock scenes indicates the possibility that these images are in fact snapshots. In this matter, ElMahi (2000 and 2001) proposed that rock scenes are snapshots of an extended activity or an action which captured place. The prehistoric artist depicts up one scene as a snapshot to represent the action and activity which took place. Hence, these rock scenes are snapshots representing the activity that took place. In essence, it is specifically to show a single moment of an extended activity by a conventional token.

In fact, ElMahi (ibid.) proposed the concept of the snapshot after he carried out an investigation among school and university students in Sudan. These students were asked to make a drawing of a football match by the national team, which took place two days prior to the investigation. Each participant was given a sheet of paper and a coloured pencil. All the papers were then collected and examined. It was found that the drawings represented a various wide range of activity scenes from the match. In fact, each student drew what they preferred from the match activities, which extended for 90 minutes in that precise stadium. Hence, each drawing was a certain scene representing the whole match, and the match itself was an activity that extended over a certain place and time.

Hence, ElMahi (ibid.) concluded that each student picked up a snapshot from an activity, which took place in a specific vicinity and over a span of time (90 minutes). Each snapshot represents the whole activity. Consequently, rock

scenes are what the prehistoric artists preferred and selected from an activity or an interaction, which took place in their environment. Again, what the prehistoric artist drew or depicted was familiar and known to his community.

In the process of examining Wadi Fida's rock scenes, it would be required to look into the approximate age of these prehistoric imitations,



Fig. 7: A figure of a man or a woman depicted on the rock surface outside the rock shelter.



Fig. 8: A six-pointed star depicted on the rock surface outside the rock shelter.

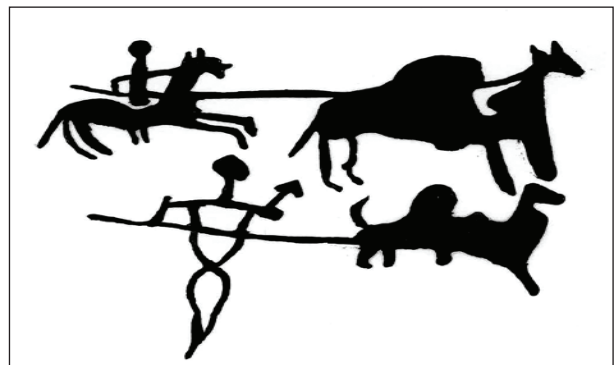


Fig. 9: A rock scene from Al Fau, Saudi Arabia. After 1981 الأنصاري

the ecological conditions that formed the setting of both arts, and the technical standards of the communities that produced these rock arts.

Comprehending the meanings and the date of the rock scenes in Wadi Fida requires a closer look at the three images present in these ancient scenes. The depicted horse (Fig. 3), the wolf (Fig. 5) and the star (Fig. 8) can possibly lead to a more understanding of these rock scenes and their significance.

Consequently, inspecting these images can potentially highlight and enable us to perceive with attention these two images and their implications. The images of the men riding horses and a star must have had a special meaning that is expressly stated by the work of art, and they bear information and meanings that can be inferred. Reasonably, the entire rock art is intended to convey meanings by drawing images and symbols. Indeed, the aim of the ancient artist was primarily intended to convey as many characteristics as possible of the culture and symbols by these drawn images.

The rock scene (Fig. 3) was carried out by drawing. The colour used in drawing this figure (3 and 5) is brown-reddish (brown with reddish).

While the other scene of a star (Fig. 8) is made by pecking the surface of the rock that produced the white colour. The pecking action was not carried out in a line, but making the whole image.

The horse (Fig.3)

This figure portrays two men armed with long spears and riding horses. This scene offers a significant indication and possibly shows that it must have had a worth and distinction in the life of the artist's group. The horse must have been a prominent and an esteemed animal

among the inhabitants of Wadi Fida and in the region as a whole. The horse must have had played a notable part in their life.

It is known that throughout history, the horse has occupied a significant status in all human societies. It has been continuously regarded as a prestigious animal of war and distinction. The earliest archaeological evidence that revealed the domestication of the horse comes from Ukraine in eastern Europe and Kazakhstan in Central Asia. The evidence was excavated in two sites dating to 3500-4000 BC (Outram et al. 2009 and Matossian 1997). Moreover, Evans (1990) indicates that the horse was unquestionably domesticated by 3000 BC.

Evidence of the horse in Arabia, comes from Bahrain and it is dated to the mid of the first millennium BC (Uerpmann and Uerpmann 1997:248). As for Oman, evidence of the horse comes from Dhofar in southern Oman and it is dated to the early Christian era (Uerpmann and Uerpmann 2013: 199-200 and Yule et al. 2007: 505).

Furthermore, Schiettecatte and Zouache (2007: Table 1 and 2) have summed up the evidence of the horse in Arabia in two tables. On the whole, these tables sum up and show succinctly the pre-Islamic terracotta figurines, copper alloy vessels, and copper alloy or lead protomes (the forepart of an animal represented decoratively, as in sculpture) showing horses in Eastern Arabia. As for the evidence of the horse in Oman, the tables of Schiettecatte and Zouache (2007) are summarized in the following table (Table-horse 1):

Table-horse 1

Evidence	Site	Date	Notes	Reference
Horse protome	Khor Rori (Oman)	c. 2nd BC- 3rd cent. AD	Area SUM03A, cat. 865	LOMBARDI ET AL., 2008, FIG. 31.6, 59.3
Bowl with a décor with horse	al-Fuwaydah (Oman)	c. 2 nd - 1 st cent. BC (?)	Grave Fu9 Bowl DA13335	YULE, 2016, Fig. 6.2
Bowl with a décor with mounted horse	al-Fuwaydah (Oman)	2 nd - 1 st cent. BC	Grave Fu11 Bowl DA13363	YULE, 2016, FIG. 6.1
Horse protome	Samad al-Shan (Oman)	1 st - 2 nd cent. AD	Site 20, Grave 2020	CLEUZIQU & TOSI, 2007, p. 299; YULE & WEISGERBER, 1988, FIG. 8.6
Bowl with a décor with mounted horse	Samāil/al-Bārūnī (Oman)	c. 3 rd - 4 th cent. AD	Grave Bar1 Bowl DA10617	YULE, 2009, FIG. 4; 2016, FIG. 6.3
Horse protome	Samāil/al-Bārūnī (Oman)	c. 3 rd - 4 th cent. AD	Grave Bar1	CLEUZIQU & TOSI, 2007, p. 299; YULE, 2009, FIG. 4

This is not a direct piece of evidence of the use of the horse by prehistoric societies in Oman. Simply, pieces of horse protomes and decorated bowls do not prove that the horse was present and used in Oman. These pieces could have come to Oman by trade prior to the introduction and the use of the horse in the country. Therefore, it is quite possible that these artefacts were not made or produced locally, but rather came to Oman through trade before the first appearance of the horse in the country.

At present, the dates are based on an indirect piece of evidence (artifacts) of the horse in Oman (cf. Table 1). Based on these dates, the evidence is between c. 2nd BC-3rd cent. AD (Khor Rori) and 3rd-4th cent. AD (Samāil/al-Bārūnī). The dates (cf. Table 1) are the only unearthed archaeological evidence of the horse at hand. Yet, it remains an indirect archaeological indicator for the horse.

The direct evidence of the horse in the region comes from Mehalia in the Emirate of Al Shariqa, United Arab Emirates. Two horse skeletons were unearthed in a grave together along with riding gear such as a rein and headgear for horse. These finds were dated to be between the second century BC and the first century AD (Uerpmann 1999: 102-118, fig. 2).

Another aspect that requires attention is the horse itself. Throughout the time, this equid has been valued by all human societies. It is regarded as prestigious and has a valued status when compared with other members of the Equidae family. Undoubtedly, the horse had a key role in war and peace.

Rock scenes of men riding horses with long spears has been reported from Saudi Arabia. Similar to Wadi Fida scenes, rock drawings from El Fau in Saudi Arabia portray men on horses and long spears chasing camels (cf.

Fig. 9: 1981 الأتصاري). Moreover, another rock drawing of a man on a horse with long spear chasing an ostrich is documented in Yatib, Saudi Arabia (al-Talhi 2017: fig 21). It is evident that ancient and traditional ways of hunting by using horses and long spears are well attested in Arabia and in Africa (7-20 2010 الماحي:).

In short, the horse must be an expensive animal at that early time and not everybody could afford it. Its keeping requires thorough care, and management is demanding compared with the other animals. Therefore, this animal cannot be owned and maintained by everybody in any society.

It is unequivocal that the early introduction of the horse in Oman was of limited numbers of animals. In addition, it took some time to be accepted by those who could afford and need such a significant animal in appearance or purpose. In Oman like in many other regions, the horse was a symbol of power and pride. The rock art has set up the horse by putting it directly in the various scenes when depicting warriors. Therefore, the horse must have been owned by very few people in Oman, such as the tribal chiefs and the exceptionally rich families.

A wolf (Fig. 5)

It is quite possible that this scene is of an Arabian wolf *Canis lupus arabs* and not a dog chasing two animals. The two animals can possibly be two cows. It is known that the Arabian wolf inhabits Oman and other countries in the Arabian Peninsula such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (cf. <https://thewolfintelligencer.com/arabian-wolf-canis-lupus-arabs/>).

The Arabian wolf must have been an effective constraint in the inhabitants' life of Wadi Fida. It constituted a serious life-threat to their livestock. Therefore, the depiction of a wolf chasing their livestock comes as an illustration and a manifested demonstration of

the encounters they face. This scene depicts the habitat life with some of its challenges.

The star (Fig. 8)

This scene of a depicted star as an icon, which must have been a well-known, widely venerated and admired sign by the artist's community. It is quite possible that the star was not an arbitrary sign (depicted), but it is of a conventional significance among the artist's community.

This scene of a six-pointed star must have been by the work of a creative imagination. It is a graphic representation of an ancient star's culture and tradition. And this tradition is created by a belief, which is an ancient culture of star observation, naming and firm convictions. In "Stargazing Network" Stargazing.net. and Kepple and Sanner. (1998) stated that:

"Very old star names originated among people who lived in the Arabian Peninsula more than a thousand years ago, before the rise of Islam. However, many Arabic language star names sprang up later in history, as translations of ancient Greek language descriptions".

Up to the present, traditional societies in Arabia maintain this culture and tradition of star naming and using in many aspects and sides of their life. For example, this tradition exists in Oman among the traditional pastoral societies and oasis residents. These traditional societies have specific practice of long-standing traditions of naming the stars and using it in marking the seasons and organizing the flow of water in man-made channels known as (falag) for farming, etc.

ElMahi (2011 and 2013) studied the Dhofari pastoral groups of cattle, camel and goat in southern Oman. These studies point out carefully and clearly the function and role of the stars in the life of these traditional societies. Certainly, ElMahi's studies are the

first documentation of these stars and their names and calendar in southern Oman. For this reason, the Dhofari pastoralists have divided the seasons of the year into “nugoom” stars. Each star “naghm” is a period of exactly thirteen days and each star has a distinct name (cf. Table 1). These traditional pastoralists, irrespective of the principal animal in their economy, adopted this traditional system (calendar) of determining the beginning, length, and divisions of a year and of arranging the season into thirteen days. This traditional calendar in Table (1) presents their various activities throughout the year. The pastoralists do not know when or who arranged the seasons according to the stars. Hence, it remains unknown when this system developed and came into existence to take on form and shape. Nonetheless, it continues to be a useful and practical system that defines the beginning and length and divisions of the year for these Dhofari pastoralists.

Al-Ghafri et al. (2003 and 2000) documented the full set of star names used in northern Oman. This documentation shows how water management and distribution is carried out through the falaj, which is a structure. The falajs are orderly organized day and night through the sighting and identification of certain stars (cf. Al-Ghafri et al. *ibid.*).

Similarly, it is interesting to find out that the traditional stars’ names in Saudi Arabia are similar to those in Oman. Moreover, a traditional calendar for agriculture is also well documented in Arabia and Yemen. Varisco (1997) reports on medieval folk astronomy related to agriculture in both countries.

The names of the stars in Omani, Saudi Arabian and Yemeni calendars are similar to a certain extent, but their timing is different. Nonetheless, there are certain minor differences such as the number of the stars and their duration (Table 2) (ElMahi 2011: Table 1).

Table 2: Traditional calendar in Dhofar (cf. ElMahi 2011: Table 1).

The season	Naghm or the star	Duration	Characteristics
<i>Kharif</i> or rainy season	Al nahaem النعائم	27 th June to 9 th July	Rainy
<i>Kharif</i> or rainy season	Al baldah البلدة	10 th - 22 nd July	Heavy rain
<i>Kharif</i> or rainy season	Sahail سهيل	23 rd July to 2 nd August	Heavy rain
<i>Kharif</i> or rainy season	Bala بلع	5 th - 15 th August	Sorghum season
<i>Kharif</i> or rainy season	Al zabha الذابح	18 th - 30 th August	Sorghum season
<i>Kharif</i> or rainy season	Khaba خباء	31 st August to 12 th September	Either heavy rain or no rain
A star shared by two seasons	Al monasef المناصف	A star of rainy and spring seasons	-----
<i>Al rabia</i> \ Spring	Al dalou الدلو	26 th September to 8 th October	Time of dry sardine
<i>Al rabia</i> \ Spring	Al hoot الحوت	9 th - 21 st October	Abundant fish
<i>Al rabia</i> \ Spring	Al natah النطح	22 nd October to 3 rd November	Storms

Al rabia \ Spring	البطين Al bateen	4 th - 16 th November	Best farming time
Al rabia \ Spring	السريا Al suryia	17 th - 29 th November	Farming
Al rabia \ Spring	البركان Al burkan	30 th November to 12 th December	No time for farming
Al sheta \ winter	الهنعا Al hana	13 th - 26 th December	North dusty wind
Al sheta \ winter	الهقعة Al hagah	27 th December to 8 th January	- - - - -
Al sheta \ winter	الذرع Al zarha	9 th - 21 st January	- - - - -
Al sheta \ winter	النثره Al nthasra	22 nd January to 3 rd February	The coldest of all
Al sheta \ winter	الطرف Al tarf	4 th - 6 th February	The coldest of all
Al sheta \ winter	الجببها Al jebaha	17 th February to 1 st March	Windy and cold
A star shared by summer & winter	الزبرة Al zabra	2 nd - 14 th March	Summer
Qhaez \ Summer	الصرفة Al serfa	15 th - 27 th March	Summer
Qhaez \ Summer	العوا Al awa	28 th March to 9 th April	Summer
Qhaez \ Summer	السماك Al samak	10 th - 22 nd April	Summer heat
Qhaez \ Summer	الغفر Al ghafr	23 rd April to 5 th May	Migratory birds
Qhaez \ Summer	الذبان Al zban	6 th - 18 th May	Summer heat
Qhaez \ Summer	الكليل Al khalil	19 th - 31 st May	Summer heat
Qhaez \ Summer	القلب Al galb	1 st - 13 th June	Peak summer heat

Conclusion

It is clear that depicting men riding horses with spears indicates that these scenes are made to show the pride and strength of the artist's community. Men riding horses with long spears is meant to reflect the community power and fame in the region. In essence, the scenes are exhibiting eminence particularly in standing above others in power and position.

The Arabian wolf is an unmistakable species in the ecosystem of Wadi Fida. It is a distinct element of ecological interaction in the habitat of this region. The wolf must have been a significant predator in the ecosystem of the wadi. It is quite possible that it was used to constitute a key threat to the goat herds. This is part of the challenges that were to come upon the life of the community and their herds. Being part of the community challenges that require full attention, these challenges would make the

artist portray this scene.

It seems that the stars have played a significant part in the life of human societies since prehistoric time. Its significance is evident in the life of the artist's community. It must have been the driving force to make them depict this star. It is known for certain that stars had a great meaning and cultural influence on ancient and traditional societies. It remains to be that the culture and traditional belief of these communities scoped stars as a cognitive factor that tends to have an effect on organizing their daily and seasonal activities.

To sum up, it remains to be emphasized that rock art is an ancient accumulated information and it has been an indispensable source of information in investigating and understanding prehistory. It is an access to prehistory and a record of ancient human activities, culture and their way of life through the depicted scenes.

Prof. Ali Tigani ElMahi: Khartoum, Sudan. tiganielmahi@hotmail.com.

ملخص: يقع وادي فدا في شمالي سلطنة عمان، وهذا الوادي الرطب، مزدهر على مدار العام. يوجد على ضفاف الوادي كهف صغير يحتوي على رسوم صخرية. يدرس هذا البحث هذه الرسوم التي تحتوي على مشهد لرجال يمتطون الحصان ومعهم رماح طويلة، كما أن هناك رسوماً لثقب يطارد بعض الماشية، وخارج الكهف وبالقرب منه يوجد رسم تم عمله بالطرق، وهو رسم لنجم سداسي الأطراف. هذا البحث يدرس هذه الرسوم، ويقدر بأن الحصان يمكن أن يؤرخ لهذه الرسوم الصخرية. أما النجم السداسي الأطراف فيقودنا إلى ثقافة المجتمعات التقليدية في الرعي، وسكان الواحات، وثقافتهم التقليدية التي تنظم حياتهم وأعمالهم.

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